



# What If Mom Went Back to School?

**Short- and long-term effects for both generations, with policy and practice implications**

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*May 2022*

**A large portion of college students have children—in 2016, 22 percent of all undergraduate college students were parents, and 28 percent of all female college students were parents (NPSAS 2016). This amounts to about 3.7 million parenting undergraduate students and 2.6 million student-mothers.<sup>1</sup> Many parenting students decide to return to school after a gap in their education. But little is understood about how they fare in the long run. In addition, parenting students are, by definition, part of families. This brief explores outcomes for female student-parents and their children in the two decades after mothers reenrolled in school overall and among mothers who completed a college degree. This research shows that completing either a two- or four-year degree resulted in stronger positive intergenerational impacts than simply reenrolling in college, though completion rates were low. I discuss opportunities to promote degree completion among student-mothers in college informed by qualitative interviews. A companion brief will explore inequitable outcomes for Black mothers and their children, who do not see the same level of economic payoff from college reenrollment as mothers overall.**

Using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79) to track family outcomes from a national sample of people who were adolescents in 1979 to up to 20 years after, I find generally positive results for mothers and children through young adulthood, though some mixed results appeared. Women who reenrolled in school after having children attained more educational credentials, worked

more, and earned more in the long run than similar mothers who did not reenroll. However, mothers who reenrolled were less likely than similar mothers who did not reenroll to be married; they had family incomes that were lower long term (perhaps related to lower marriage rates); and they experienced negative mental health effects later in life. Although mothers' reenrollment related to small, short-term gains in children's vocabulary and reading scores, their children also experienced more behavioral problems. In the long term, children of mothers who went back to school had higher academic attainment, including college completion. This did not result in earnings gains in their early careers.

For student-mothers who completed college degrees (two-year or four-year), the positive effects were much larger, and almost no negative effects appeared. Mothers did not have income declines or negative health effects, and their children saw earnings gains even in early adulthood. But less than one-quarter of mothers who went back to school without a college degree completed one. The positive impacts of completion and low completion rate point to the intergenerational importance of helping student-mothers enroll in school and achieve their degree goals to improve families' long-term outcomes.

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## BOX 1

### Focusing on Mothers

I focus on mothers' schooling—instead of parents' or fathers' schooling—for several reasons. First, data are better on mothers' schooling than on fathers' schooling, particularly because the primary data source for this brief only tracks the biological children of *women* in the original survey. Second, mothers are more likely to cohabit with or have custody of their children (Grall 2018; US Census Bureau 2016), and therefore their school enrollment is likely to have a more direct influence on children. Third, qualitative research has described how—even in heterosexual married-parent households where the father has higher educational attainment than the mother—education is more often the women's realm in childrearing (e.g., Rogers 2003). And, overall, women spend more time caring for children in two-parent households (US Department of Labor 2019). Fourth, student-mothers are a much larger share of student-parents in postsecondary institutions than student-fathers (Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen 2010; Institute for Women's Policy Research 2019).<sup>a</sup> Finally, mothers and their children are primary beneficiaries of a range of social programs, including cash assistance through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (Office of Family Assistance 2017), medical insurance through Medicaid (Lassman et al. 2014), food assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Cronquist 2021), and child care assistance through various public subsidies. Therefore, interventions to promote “self-sufficiency” for benefit recipients through education or employment interventions are often targeted most directly toward mothers.

In addition, decisions about school reentry while parenting fall particularly acutely on women. Women are more likely than men to complete high school and continue to college, regardless of if there is a gap in between high school and college enrollment (Baum, Kurose, and McPherson 2013; Denice 2017; Goldin, Katz, and Kuziemko 2006).<sup>2</sup> Women with low educational attainment are more highly penalized economically than men in the labor market (Dougherty 2005), motivating many women with less schooling to pursue higher credentials. Also, women may have experienced unplanned schooling interruptions because of childbearing (US Department of Education 2013).

<sup>a</sup> Student-parents are most likely to be female: According to the 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey, 33 percent of female first-year undergraduates (of any age) had child dependents in 2016 relative to 18 percent of male first-year undergraduates. In 2016, over two-thirds of first-year undergraduates aged 24 years or older with children were women.

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This brief is based on research published in Anderson (2020) with a slight update to some estimates. Detailed research methods appear after the discussion section.

## Who Are Student-Mothers?

As demonstrated in table 1, student-mothers are prevalent: among all female undergraduates in 2016, 28 percent had dependent children (this is the most recent year of available data from the NPSAS 2016 survey). Among white and Latina female students, 26 percent had dependent children in 2016, and 40 percent of Black female undergraduates had dependent children (NPSAS 2016). Looking longitudinally, 34 percent of all women in the US who were age 14 to 22 in 1979 were enrolled in school at some point after having a child (NLSY79). This rate was as high as 51 percent among Black women, 41 percent among Latina women, and 30 percent among non-Hispanic white women (NLSY79). The quantitative research in this brief focuses on mothers who enrolled in school at any level after a gap greater of at least two years and children with a mother in school after a gap of at least two years when the child was age 1 to 17. Table 1 shows that most mothers who enrolled in school did so after a gap of at least two years in their studies.

Student-mothers have strong assets. Research suggests they are motivated to succeed so they can set a good example for their children and better support their families (Freeman 2017; Lovell 2011). They also reportedly earn higher grades on average than other students (Reed et al. 2021; Reichlin Cruse, Holtzman, and Gault 2019).

But student-mothers, and student-parents generally, often struggle. Student-parents are much more likely than other college students to have low incomes and to work while in school (Huelsman and Engle 2013; Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen 2010; US GAO 2019). They are more likely to be enrolled part time and less likely to complete a degree, especially if they are unmarried (Huelsman and Engle 2013; Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen 2010; US GAO 2019; Reichlin Cruse, Holtzman, and Gault 2019). The federal government estimates that over half of student-parents leave school without a degree within six years, relative to about one-third of students without children (US GAO 2019). Navigating systems and balancing school, children, (often) employment, and other life responsibilities likely makes the experiences of parenting students more challenging than those of other college students.

TABLE 1

Prevalence of Student-Mothers across Populations and Data Sources

Concept	Cross-sectional/ longitudinal	Data source	Population for denominator	Overall prevalence (%)	Prevalence among racial/ethnic groups (%)		
					Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Latina
Households with mother enrolled, child age 0–17, 2016	CS	CPS 2016	US households with minor children, 2016	8			
College student mothers, 2016	CS	NPSAS 2016	Female undergraduate students, 2016	28	26	40	26
Mothers ever enrolled after having children	L	NLSY79	Mothers in NLSY79 (age 14–22 in 1979)	34	30	51	41
Mothers enrolled after 2+ year gap after having children	L	NLSY79	Mothers in NLSY79 (age 14–22 in 1979)	29	26	38	37
Children (age 1–17), mother in school	L	NLSY-CYA	Children in NLSY-CYA (biological children of women age 14–22 in 1979)	30	26	43	35
Children (age 6–14), mother in school	L	NLSY-CYA	Children in NLSY-CYA (biological children of women age 14–22 in 1979)	21	18	29	25
Children (age 1–17), mother in school after 2+ year gap	L	NLSY-CYA	Children in the NLSY-CYA (biological children of women age 14–22 in 1979)	26	23	36	32
Children (grades 1–8), mother increases educational attainment	L	ECLS-K98	Children (grades 1–8) from 1998 kindergarten class	21	19	25	24

**Sources:** Current Population Survey (CPS) 2016, National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey–Undergraduate (NPSAS) 2016, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79), National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979–Child and Young Adult Supplement (NLSY-CYA), and the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey–Kindergarten Cohort 1998 (ECLS-K98).

**Notes:** Grayed cells were not calculated or are not available. All values are weighted using each survey’s recommended weights. CS = cross-sectional; L = longitudinal.

Parenting students also often do not receive appropriate advising, struggle to afford tuition and costs in light of their other financial obligations, and lack social supports while in school (e.g., Dodson and Deprez 2019; Green and Galison 2021; UC Parenting Students Workgroup 2021). Those with younger children may struggle to find and afford child care and be challenged in balancing school and parenting responsibilities. A national (though not nationally representative) survey conducted in 2019

showed that 53 percent of parenting students experienced food insecurity (relative to 37 percent among nonparenting students), 68 percent experienced housing insecurity (relative to 42 percent among nonparenting students), and 17 percent experienced homelessness (similar to nonparenting students; Baker-Smith et al. 2020). The recommendations at the end of this brief identify some opportunities to address barriers identified in the literature and in this research.

## Why Would Mothers Want to Return to School?

Obtaining higher education, including returning to school after having children, may make good economic sense. The opportunity gap between adults with college degrees and those without has grown in recent years. Adults over age 24 with a high school diploma earn about 50 percent more in their lifetimes than those without one, and those with a bachelor's degree make about 75 percent more than those with only a high school diploma (Baum 2014). Of the 30 occupations the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects will see the most growth in between 2020 and 2030, 12 require at least some college, and 8 require a four-year degree for entry. In contrast, among the occupations with the largest projected declines in number of jobs, only 3 out of 30 require at least some college for entry.<sup>3</sup>

People may also return to school for nonmonetary reasons. A growing body of research has demonstrated positive effects on physical health (Baum, Kurose, and Ma 2013; Grossman 2006; Hout 2012; Lochner 2011), some mental health outcomes (Heckman, Humphries, and Veramendi 2017; Yakovlev, Leguizamon, and Hall 2012), job satisfaction (Fabra and Camisón 2009; Vila 2005), job quality (Baum, Kurose, and Ma 2013), and social capital (Hout 2012).

Recognizing the economic benefits of higher education, policymakers are encouraging adults—including parents—to continue school through a range of programs, opportunities, and incentives, including career pathway programs, career training initiatives, adult apprenticeships, lifetime learning tax credits, nontraditional student support services, and adult education programs. Women (often mothers) are targeted beneficiaries of some interventions, including two-generation efforts such as Community Action Project Tulsa's Career Advance program, federal grants such as the Health Profession Opportunity Grants program, and interventions focused on welfare-eligible families such as New Chance.

## What about the Children?

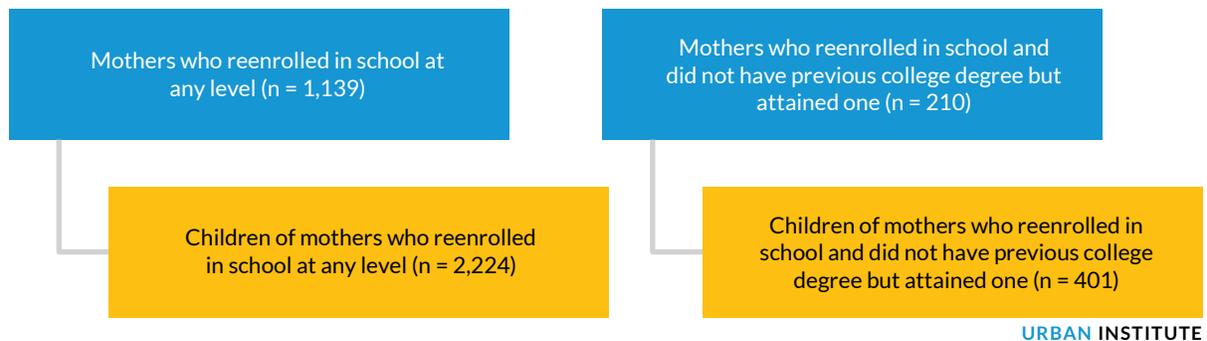
When mothers return to school, the reenrollment decision likely also has important effects on their children. Generally, more parent education is associated with better child outcomes (Grossman 2006; Haveman and Wolfe 1995; Lochner 2011; Wolfe and Haveman 2001). Only a small body of research has addressed children's experiences and outcomes if their mothers continue education after having children, but increasing mothers' educational attainment should have positive effects on children (Amin, Lundborg, and Rooth 2015; Augustine and Crosnoe 2010; Black, Devereux, and Salvanes 2005; Currie and Moretti 2003). To the extent that mothers are reentering school at a relatively high rate, more research is needed to understand what this means for child development, children's achievement, and

their well-being in the short and long term. This research contributes to the limited existing evidence base.

## What Are the Impacts of School Reenrollment on Mothers and Their Children?

Based on analysis of 35 years of data from the NLSY79 and 28 years of data from the NLSY79 Child and Young Adult Supplement, I tracked intergenerational outcomes for up to 20 years after reenrollment for mothers and their biological children. Mothers who returned to school, at any level of education, were matched with others who did not return and had nearly identical baseline characteristics, allowing for a comparison of their outcomes. Similarly, children and their mothers were matched with other mothers and children (respectively) who had nearly identical baseline characteristics. In this brief, I report findings for mothers who reenrolled in school at any level and for a subgroup of mothers who did not have a college degree before returning to school and who completed a two-year or four-year college degree.<sup>4</sup> I also report on children of mothers in these same groups. Figure 1 summarizes the four populations included in this analysis (treatment groups) and the sample size. Each group was matched with a comparison group of similar mothers and their children in which the mothers did not reenroll in school.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Treatment Groups and Sample Sizes**



**Source:** NLSY79 and NLSY79 Child and Young Adult Supplement.

**Note:** Each group was matched with mothers and children (respectively) who were very similar except that the mothers in the comparison group did not reenroll in school.

I also describe insights from 20 in-depth qualitative interviews conducted in fall 2018 across a diverse group of student-mothers at two-year and four-year colleges. These discussions help expand and explain the findings and inform my policy and practice recommendations. These mothers represented a range of higher education levels and schooling experiences, family structures, racial and ethnic backgrounds, ages, and other characteristics.

## Short-Term Effects on Children

Positive academic effects appeared for children when their mothers returned to school, but some undesirable behavioral effects appeared as well. Children experienced gains on verbal scores in the year of and in the year following reenrollment relative to children whose mothers did not reenroll. These gains were larger for children of mothers who ultimately completed a college degree than for children of mothers who reenrolled overall. Children also gained on reading scores in the year of the mother's reenrollment in the overall group and for most of the four years following reenrollment in the completer group.

However, there were relatively small but consistently undesirable effects on children's behavior. In the overall group, children received significantly worse behavior problem index scores (a standardized measure included in the survey) in the five years after the year their mothers reenrolled in school compared to children of mothers who did not reenroll. Children of mothers who completed college degrees did not have higher behavior problem scores than children whose mothers did not reenroll, but children of mothers who completed a degree were more likely to be suspended from school at some point (11.2 percent versus 5.7 percent, a 95 percent increase).

These findings suggest transition costs of mothers' educational enrollment for children may exist, though some benefits appear as well. The persistence of negative behavioral effects suggests there may be a slippery slope: once children begin to have behavioral problems, they persist. However, it is important to note that the behavioral scores were based on mothers' reports of their children's behavior on various scales. It is also possible that mothers' *expectations* for children increased as the mothers gained more education, resulting in worse behavioral assessment scores. Ongoing behavioral issues did not appear among children of mothers who ultimately completed a college degree, though that group did face an elevated rate of suspension.

Interviewees from my qualitative research expressed concerns about the quality and quantity of time they could spend with children while they were in school. The qualitative interviews provided some suggestive support for two explanations. First, children may have had more unsupervised time or have been in lower-quality care environments while their mothers were in school. Second, children may have perceived they were not their mothers' top priority as the mothers struggled to make multiple ends meet.

## Long-Term Education Attainment for Mothers and Children

It is unsurprising that mothers who returned to school achieved higher educational attainment, but the pattern of gains is notable. Overall, completion was low: only one-third of mothers who returned to school earned a higher credential than they had when they started. Among mothers who did not have college degrees, less than one-quarter completed one. By the last year of data analysis (in 2014, when they were age 54 on average), mothers who reenrolled were 4 percent more likely to have a high school credential, 95 percent more likely to have a college degree, 74 percent more likely to have a four-year

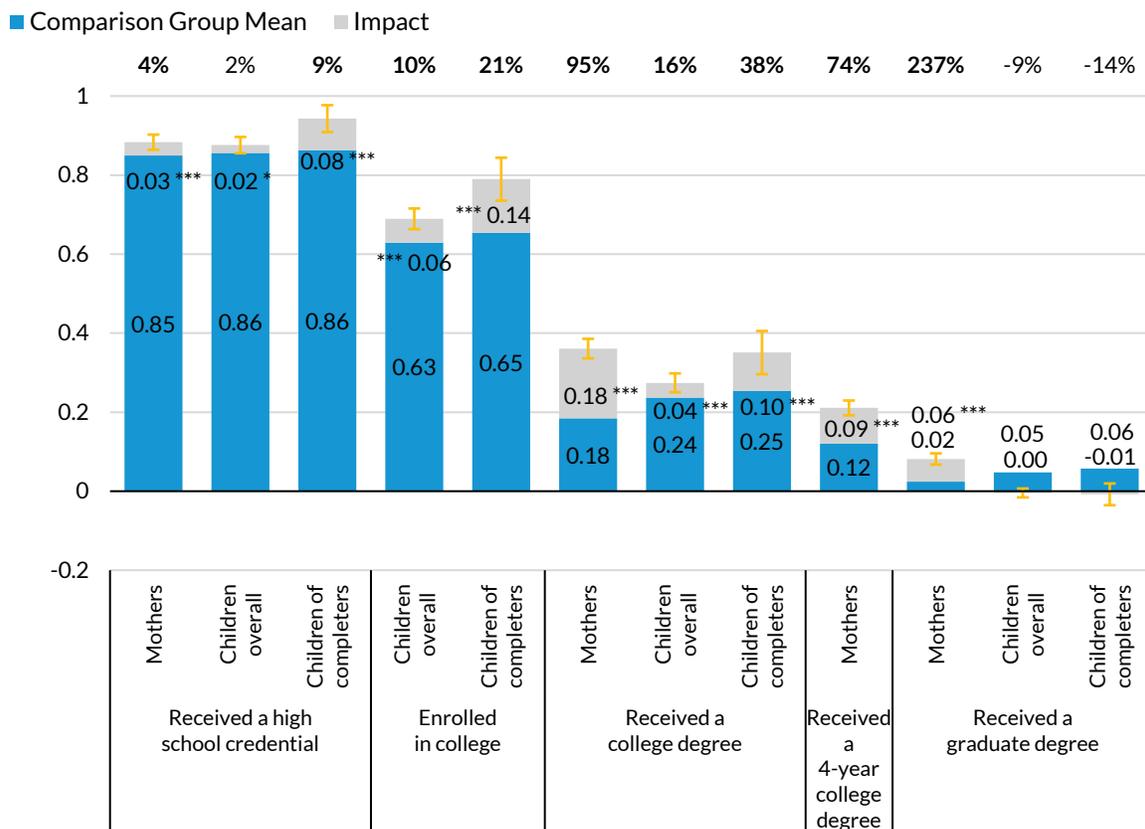
college degree, and 237 percent more likely to have a graduate degree relative to the matched comparison group, on average. All of these gains were statistically significant.

Mothers' reenrollment also related to better education outcomes for their children. Compared to children of mothers who did not reenroll in school, children whose mothers reenrolled were 2 percent more likely to eventually earn a high school credential, 10 percent more likely to enroll in college, and 16 percent more likely to get a college degree. The impacts on high school and college outcomes were larger for children whose mothers did not have a college degree before but who reenrolled and completed a college degree: these children were 9 percent more likely to complete high school, 21 percent more likely to enroll in college, and 38 percent more likely to earn a college degree. There were no significant impacts on children earning a graduate degree, though the data analysis ended when the children were 28 years old on average, so this outcome may not have had enough time to manifest.

Figure 2 summarizes the outcomes for mothers, children overall, and children of mothers who completed college (who did not have a college degree before). Some outcomes are only analyzed for one or two groups. The light gray bars show the rate of attainment for the comparison group (well-matched mothers and their children who did not reenroll in school), and the blue bars show the impact on each outcome for the treatment group, with yellow up-down bars showing the 95-percent confidence interval on the impact estimates. The magnitude of the impact is noted in the value labels, with asterisks indicating the level of statistical significance. The percentages at the top indicate the percent impact relative to the comparison group mean; significant impacts at 90-percent confidence or greater are bolded.

FIGURE 2

Impact of Mothers' School Reentry on Educational Attainment by the Last Year of Data Collection



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**Notes:** Some outcomes are only analyzed for one or two groups. The light gray bars show the rate of attainment for the comparison group (well-matched mothers and their children who did not reenroll in school), and the blue bars show the impact on each outcome for the treatment group, with vertical bands showing 95-percent confidence interval on the impact estimates. The magnitude of the impact is noted in the value labels. The percentages at the top indicate the percent impact relative to the comparison group mean; significant impacts at 90-percent confidence or greater are bolded.

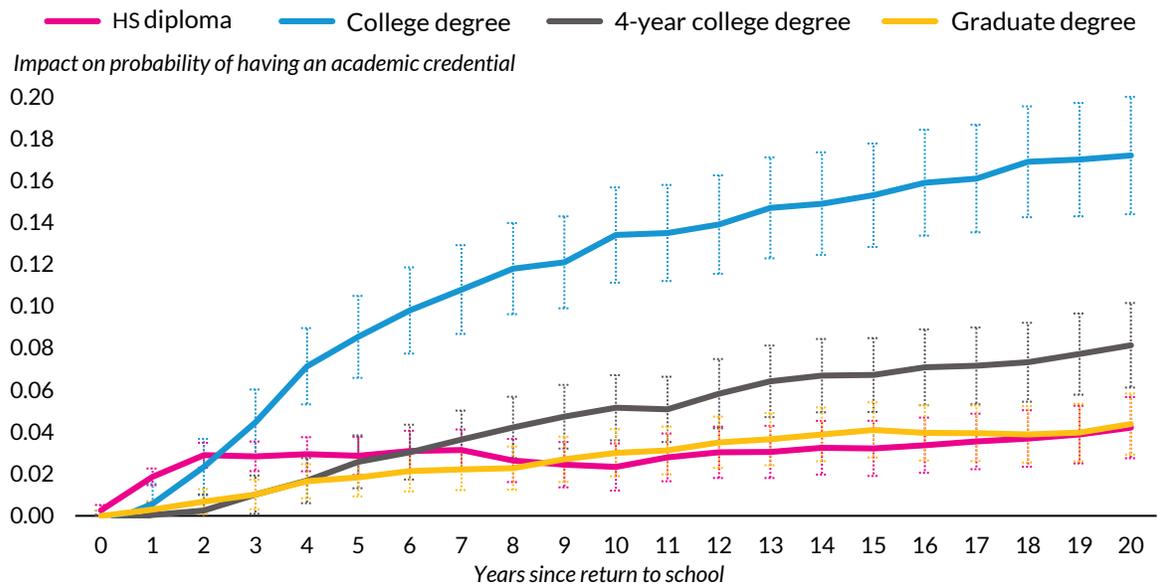
\*/\*\*/\*\*\*:  $p < 0.1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $p < 0.01$

Positive role-modeling and concerted cultivation (purposeful parenting for academic or personal growth) may explain the positive longer-term education outcomes among children of mothers who reenrolled in school. Evidence of this was clear in the qualitative interviews, as mothers emphasized that they felt their academic dedication made an impression on their children and stated the importance of helping their children meet their academic potential.

Figure 3 shows the trajectory of impacts on mothers' credential attainment after first reenrolling in school. These represent gains for the overall treatment group relative to the overall comparison group. There are a few notable patterns. First, high school diploma attainment increased for about two years and then leveled off. Meanwhile, college degree attainment increased sharply until four years after reenrollment, but then continued to climb throughout the two-decade period. A large share of these

degrees were two-year degrees, as demonstrated by the gap between the college degree line and the four-year degree line. Four-year degree impacts climbed steadily over the entire period without much inflection after four years. Graduate degrees also saw steady increases over the timeframe but with a lower rate of gain. This shows that mothers were not progressing on traditional timeframes. Instead, as found in previous research on educational trajectories for teenage mothers who left school, their education journeys often took decades (Rich and Kim 1999).

**FIGURE 3**  
**Impacts of Mothers' School Reentry on Educational Credential Attainment in Each Year after Return to School, Overall**



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**Note:** Vertical bands show 95-percent confidence on the impact estimates.  
 \*\*/\*\*: p < 0.1, p < 0.05, p < 0.01

### Employment and Earnings for Mothers and Children

Mothers who returned to school worked more and earned more on average than similar mothers who did not return to school. Overall, after reenrolling in school, women were employed an average of 0.9 years more than the comparison group (a 5 percent increase) and worked on average 5.7 hours per week more (a 27 percent increase) through the end of the observation period in 2014. Mothers who completed college degrees did not significantly increase the number of years worked (which were higher than the overall group) relative to similar mothers who did not reenroll, but like mothers overall, mothers who completed college degrees worked more than the comparison group by 7.5 hours on average per week (a 34 percent increase). Likewise, mothers who reenrolled in school overall earned an average of \$2,072 more per year (a 9 percent increase) than the matched comparison group who did not reenroll. Mothers who completed college degrees saw much larger increases in earnings, averaging

\$6,776 more per year (a 28 percent increase). A companion brief will explore the disparate outcomes for Black student-mothers and their children who did not see the same level of labor market payoffs.

Children of mothers who reenrolled in school overall did not see significant changes in their work effort or gains in earnings in their early careers. But children of reenrollers who completed college did see average earnings gains of \$4,096 per year (a 17 percent increase) after age 25 relative to children of mothers who did not reenroll (as noted previously, children were age 28 on average in the last year of analysis, though the oldest children were in their early forties).

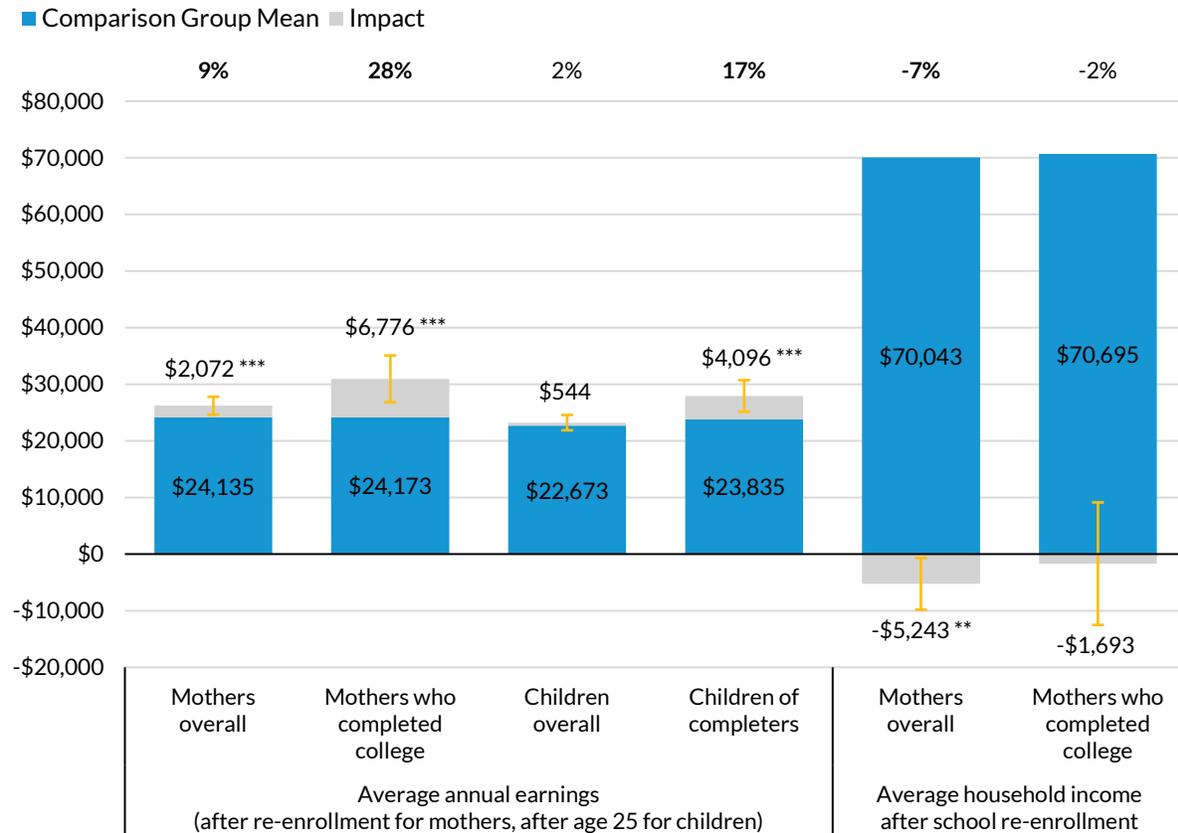
Given the positive themes around child development in the qualitative work and the positive effects on education outcomes discovered in the quantitative analysis, it is surprising no positive impacts on children's longer-term employment and earnings emerged. That said, the children were still in early adulthood, so it is possible that positive effects had yet to manifest. It is also possible that "stickiness" in intergenerational mobility takes more to overcome than mothers' delayed additional educational attainment.

Increases in mothers' earnings did not necessarily mean the household had more resources. Households with mothers who reenrolled in school experienced a *decrease* in average annual household income of \$5,243 per year (a 7 percent decrease) relative to households of mothers who did not reenroll. As will be described below, the decrease in household income may relate to lower marriage rates. Mothers who completed college did *not* experience a significant decrease in household resources relative to their comparison group. Figure 4 shows the impacts on earnings for mothers and children and impacts on household income for mothers.

FIGURE 4

**Impact of Mothers' School Reentry on Earnings and Household Income by the Last Year of Data Collection**

In 2014 dollars



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**Notes:** Percentages at the top of the plot area show the percent gain (or loss) for the treatment group relative to the comparison group mean. Significant impacts at 90-percent confidence or greater are bolded. Vertical bands show 95-percent confidence intervals on the impact estimates.

\*/\*\*/\*\*\*: p<0.1, p<0.05, p<0.01

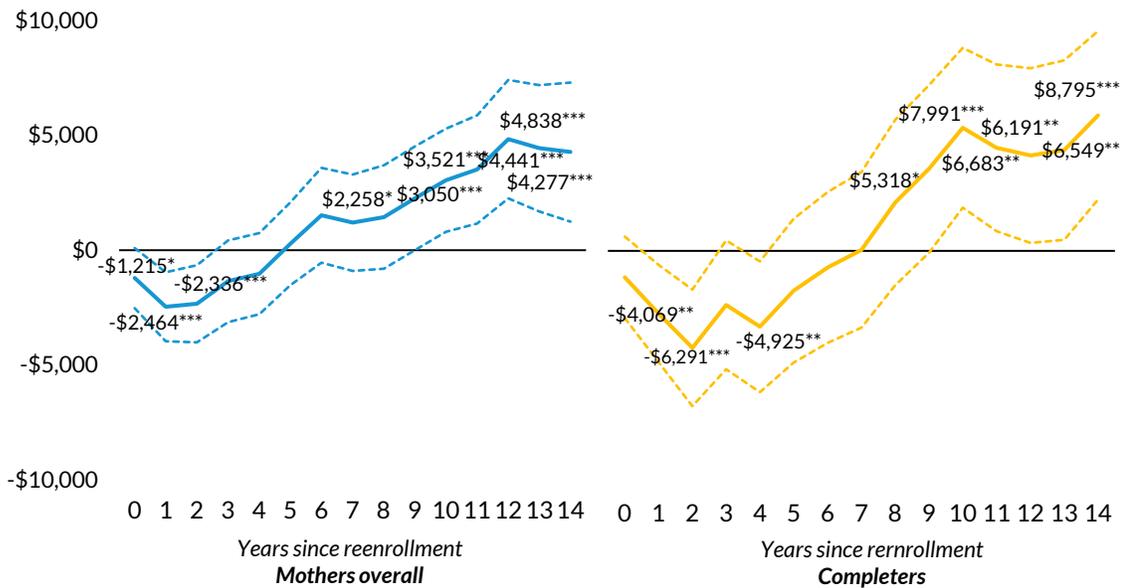
**OPPORTUNITY COSTS**

Because of opportunity costs associated with education or job training, which are well documented (e.g., Abel and Deitz 2014), mothers who reenrolled in school reduced their work effort and had lower earnings for several years relative to mothers who did not reenroll. For the overall group, earnings losses persisted from the year of reenrollment through five years later. Earnings did not become consistently significantly higher for mothers who returned to school until nine years after reentry, as shown on the left side of figure 5. This figure shows the annual impacts 14 years after reenrollment (with zero representing the year of reenrollment); the results are reported for as long as 75 percent of the sample was retained.

For completers, the pattern was similar, but opportunity costs in foregone earnings were about twice as large as the overall group. It also took nine years for earnings to become consistently significantly positive relative to the comparison group that did not reenroll. The earnings gains for completers, once they saw gains, were also approximately twice as large as the overall group, meaning completing a college degree had substantially larger payoffs relative to only reenrolling in school.

**FIGURE 5**  
**Impact of Mothers' School Reentry on Annual Earnings for Each Year Following School Reenrollment for Mothers Overall and Completers**

*Impact on annual earnings in 2014 dollars*



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**Notes:** The impact is the value for the treatment group relative to the matched comparison group. Only statistically significant values are labeled, and value labels are in reference to the solid line. Dashed lines show 95-percent confidence intervals on the impact estimates.

\*/\*\*/\*\*\*: p<0.1, p<0.05, p<0.01

The opportunity costs of education were not accidental; many women shared in interviews that they made explicit decisions to decrease their work effort and earnings to accommodate their schooling and try to retain some time with their children. They recognized these income losses as part of the cost of education, but they anticipated the tradeoff would pay off financially in the long run.

## Marriage and Well-Being

The discrepancy between mothers' individual earnings gains and the decline in household income may have related to a lower marriage rate among mothers who returned to school. On average, women who reenrolled in school were married for two fewer years than comparison mothers. Mothers who went back to school were less likely to be married than their matched counterparts in the 16 years after

school reentry by 3 to 6 percentage points, a statistically significant gap, though the gap started closing in years 17 and 18 (after which too much of the sample was lost to continue tracking). Mothers who completed college saw similar patterns.

There are three possible explanations for this marriage pattern, each of which found some support in the qualitative research: (1) some women returned to school during or following a separation or divorce, (2) school reentry put pressure on some relationships, and (3) women who were not married at reentry were less likely to subsequently marry. In the qualitative interviews, some mothers explained that they decided to return to school shortly after the failure of a marriage or relationship; others said the stress and pressure of their schooling put new demands on continued partnerships. In addition, some women said they found they developed new self-identities through their education that clashed with their husbands' ideas about family roles. These various dynamics show that causality is muddled. Therefore, it would *not* be accurate to say that school reenrollment *causes* marriage rates to decline, but there is an understandable association. The qualitative research gave less perspective on whether unpartnered mothers who increased their education were less likely to find a marriageable partner in the longer term, but the quantitative results show negative marriage effects even for mothers who were not living with spouses or partners in the year of reenrollment. This would be consistent with the theory of "assortative mating" in economics in which people marry others with similar social and educational backgrounds as them. Women who increase their educational attainment while they are unmarried after having children may have more difficulty finding well-matched partners, or they may be less likely to marry as they gain more financial and personal independence.

Despite the negative effects on mothers' marriages, there were no significant effects on children's probability of getting married or number of years married overall. There were also no significant effects among children of completers. The mothers' continued education also did not affect children's standardized self-esteem score or their likelihood of being convicted of a crime.

## Health

There were some negative health effects in the long term associated with mothers reenrolling in school. School reenrollment related to higher depression scores at age 50 among mothers. On average, women who returned to school scored 10 percent higher on a 21-point depression scale than mothers who did not. But mothers who completed a college degree did *not* exhibit negative long-term mental health outcomes on average relative to their matched comparison group.

Mothers interviewed discussed mental health challenges and immense stress while they were in school. This suggests that women may need more support to promote self-care, access necessary medical interventions, and address mental health challenges.

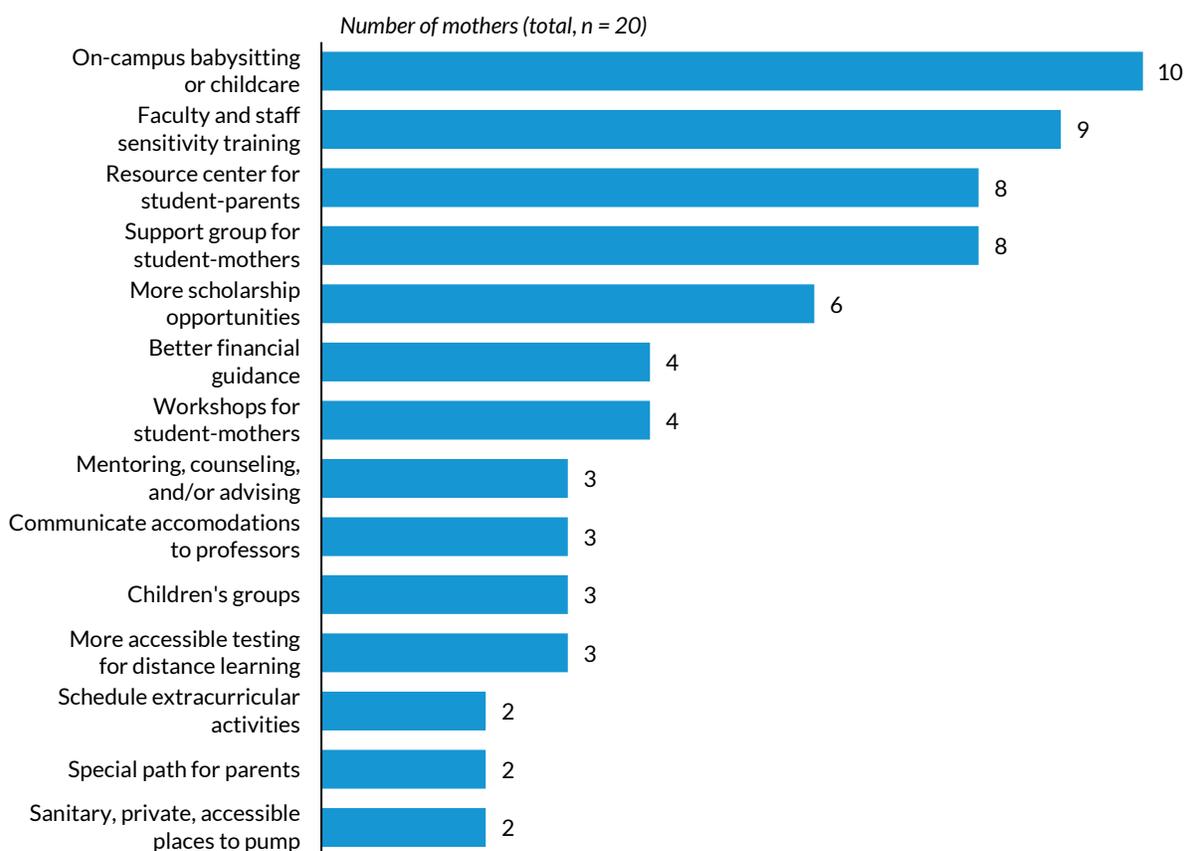
Children of mothers who went back to school also were 3 percentage points more likely to have a serious physical health limitation (a 19 percent increase), though children of college completers did not have significantly worse health. Neither children of the overall group nor children of college completers had significantly higher depression rates than children in the matched comparison groups.

## Policy Insights from Interviews with Mothers

Given these findings, it is clear that promoting college completion has important payoffs for women and their children, but some challenges remain. The 20 student-mothers I interviewed gave various constructive recommendations about how colleges and public policy could better support their progress toward completion. Common suggestions appear in figure 6.

FIGURE 6

Common Recommendations to Support Student-Mothers on Campus from Qualitative Interviews



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Source: Qualitative interviews completed by the author.

A frequent recommendation, made by half of interviewees, was to have subsidized on-campus babysitting or child care, especially during evening and weekend hours. One of the colleges some of the mothers attended had recently closed the child care center on one of the campuses, which several student-mothers regretted. Some of the mothers also said they wanted more or higher public child care subsidies and additional programs or resources to provide support for pregnant or new mothers.

Many of the mothers interviewed thought institutions should offer more financial support for students, especially in particular eligibility categories: students who are parents, middle-aged, from other countries, and who held previous degrees in other fields. Several noted existing financial supports for low-income single mothers exist, but that the availability of resources for student-parents should be broadened to include married parents and those who are closer to middle income. Several interviewees had concerns about the structure of federal financial aid, particularly restrictions on the number of credits required to qualify for aid, the number of times a course could be repeated, the ineligibility of students with previous professional degrees, and penalties for students based on academic histories. Several interviewees wanted more public supports for specific training programs and financial support for student-mothers (or mothers in general).

The largest number of interviewee recommendations related to instructional policies and practices, such as coursework, assignments, faculty and staff engagement, and scheduling. Nearly half of interviewees expressed that faculty and staff should be better trained to work with student-parents, which they hoped would affect the instructor's late work policies, expectations within and outside of class, assignment of group work (which was particularly challenging for several mothers), and other practices. Several interviewees also said they had trouble with testing in distance-learning courses and thought the practices could be streamlined to accommodate students with nontraditional schedules or household situations.

Interviewees also wanted better general advising, mental health counseling, or mentoring specifically tailored to student-mothers. One innovative recommendation was that colleges establish a mechanism for students to go through an office to request reasonable accommodations from professors related to their family status, perhaps akin to processes that exist for students with disabilities (or, on some campuses, for active-duty military students and student-athletes). This way the student would not have to ask for dispensation from every professor for every necessary accommodation, such as taking exams early, making up missed assessments, alternative testing conditions, excused absences when children are sick, and reasonable adjustments for other common issues that come up for parents in school.

Interviewees also sought a way to share resources and information, such as through a resource center or workshops for student-parents. A few also recommended drop-in children's groups for socialization while parents could work on their homework.

Offering a support group for student-mothers was another common recommendation. While several interviewees indicated that it might be hard to fit this into their schedule, a hybrid in-person and virtual support network might be a low-cost and effective way for colleges to support student-parents.

Finally, providing sanitary, private, accessible places with sinks to pump breast milk on campus was a recurring recommendation. Colleges that did have pumping rooms often did not provide suitable facilities for the needs of breastfeeding mothers.

# Potential Policy Interventions

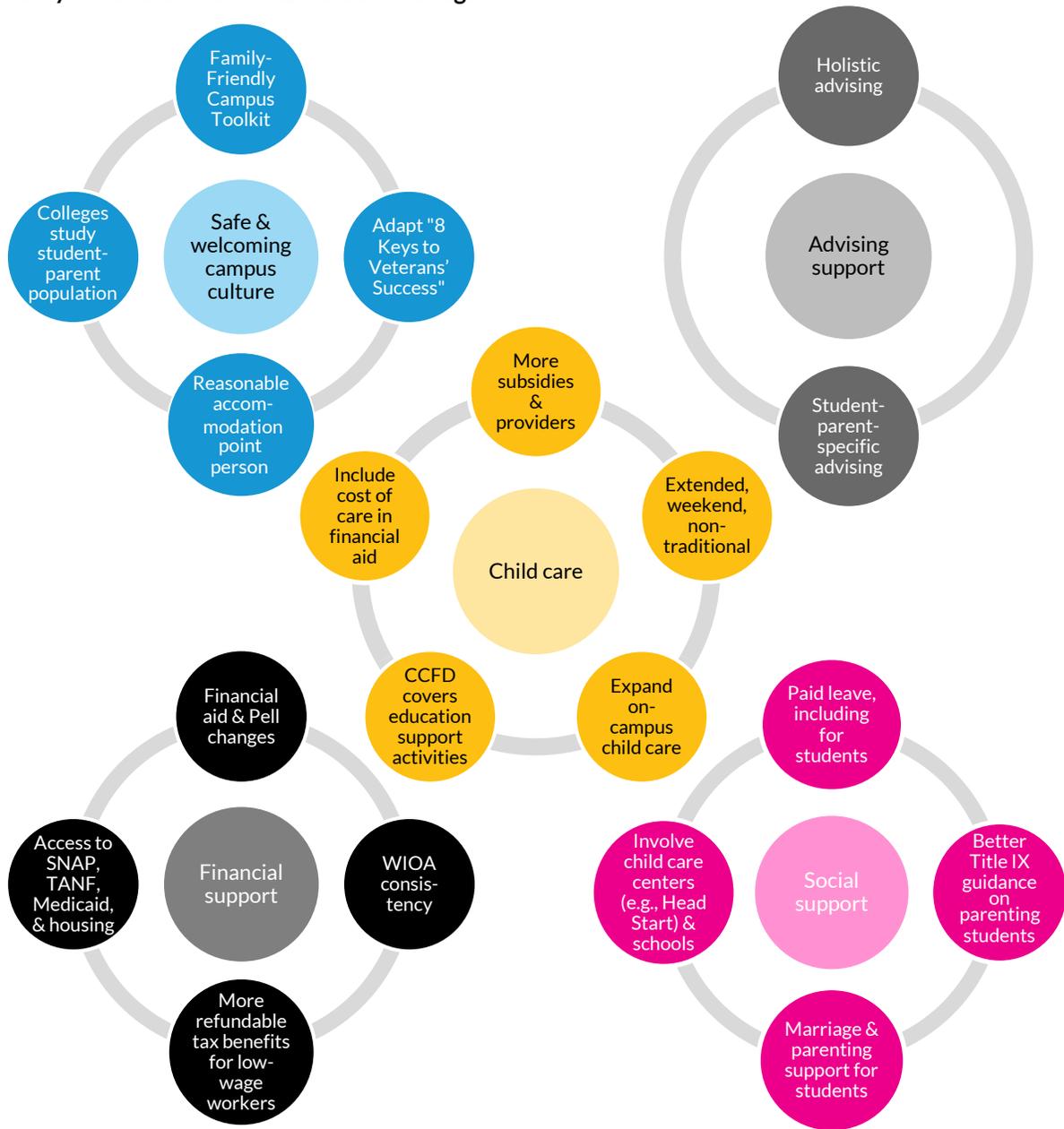
Based on the recommendations and insights from this work, as well as a general review of policy issues, opportunities for schools, institutions, and federal policy to improve experiences for student-mothers enrolled in college are described below. These were developed before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the themes persist, even if execution needs to be modified postpandemic. Summarized in figure 7 are five areas, labeled “policy wheels,” that could make a difference for parents.

## Safe and welcoming campus culture

- Colleges can use the Family-Friendly Campus Toolkit from PERG Learning, which focuses on helping institutions assess how they can help students meet basic needs, build community, and obtain funding (Karp, Osche, and Smith 2020).<sup>5</sup> This effort would also include committing to course and instructional practices that are sensitive to and appropriate for parenting students, a major recommendation from the qualitative interviews.
- Colleges can look at the “8 Keys to Veterans’ Success,” identified by the Obama administration,<sup>6</sup> which could easily be adapted for parenting students.
- Colleges can identify a point person that assists with or requests reasonable accommodations for student-parents, similar to structures that already exist for students with disabilities—and active-duty military and athletes at some schools.
- Colleges can better address issues on campus when they understand the size and characteristics of their student-parent populations. Data and measurement challenges and limitations on disaggregating student data by parenting status are issues at the college level (Gault, Holtzman, and Cruse 2020).<sup>7</sup>
  - » If the US Department of Education required colleges to report on student-parents as part of the mandatory Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (also known as IPEDS), all colleges would have to code this in their data systems. Because pregnant students (and possibly parenting students—see below) are legally protected under Title IX, the federal government has a legitimate interest in ensuring equitable educational opportunity and outcomes for this population, so these data may be valuable to support better federal oversight.

FIGURE 7

Policy Wheels for Parents Enrolled in College



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## Advising support

- College advising can look beyond academic issues to support holistic needs, as emphasized in recent literature (Love 2019; Goodwin 2014; Stephens and Kaz 2012). A holistic advising approach is often viewed as a necessary strategy to support nontraditional students, and research has shown that it can have significant positive effects on student outcomes (Anderson et al. 2017; Bettinger and Baker 2014; Sommo et al. 2012; Ratledge et al. 2019; Scrivener et al. 2015).
- Schools can implement advising specific to parenting students, or at least explicitly train all advisors on common issues student-parents face, such as child care, which is an advising oversight highlighted by the US GAO (2019).
  - » Advisors can direct student-parents to programs they are likely to complete because the programs are suited to their schedule and interests. They can also emphasize programs that might lead to high labor market payoffs by preparing students for high-demand and high-wage jobs or having good connections with quality employment opportunities. Directing students to programs in which they are likely to succeed academically and economically can improve family outcomes in the long term.

## Child care

- Child care is a major area of focus for the student-parent population. Increasing the number of subsidies and the supply of available providers is an important broad step.
- More support to cover the cost of care during extended, nontraditional, and weekend hours would help student-parents, who often work while going to school. This may require subsidies to be flexible about licensure and accreditation requirements for nontraditional providers.
- An expansion of on-campus child care options would be directly beneficial. In 2018 and 2019, the Child Care Access Means Parents in School program received an infusion of funding to do just that, though the impact results are not yet known.
- If states took advantage of Child Care and Development Fund flexibilities to provide care during education support activities—such as homework and education-related activities—instead of only counting hours in class or work as eligible, this would help parenting students succeed in school. One analysis estimated that expansions to CCDF for parenting students could increase college enrollment by over a quarter-million parents, increase completion by 20 percent, increase family earnings substantially among those who complete, and ultimately decrease child poverty (Adams et al. 2022).
- Federal policy can address how to increase dependent care allowances as part of financial aid to fully account for the cost of child care, as well as other family-related costs necessary for educational progress. This was the focus of the US GAO (2019).

## Financial support

- Financial aid and Pell grants are the primary tuition supports for student-parents. But income protection and allowance calculations, as well as certain Pell Grant restrictions, penalize working students (Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen 2010). In addition, this population, like many others, would benefit from simplification of the FAFSA application process and increased availability of grants over loans.
- The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) can provide tuition support and help support child care costs for student-parents, though it is funded at a much lower level than federal financial aid programs (Adams, Spaulding, and Heller 2015). WIOA lists single parents and young parents as a priority service population, but less than half of local workforce boards explicitly prioritized parents as a service population in a 2017 survey (Spaulding and Gebrekristos 2018). Because the allowance for tuition support varies by component of WIOA, state policy, and local autonomy, it is not always straightforward for parents to use WIOA for education and training—or for institutions to know how to partner with workforce agencies to support students. Smoothing these processes and making eligibility criteria more transparent, with an eye toward parents seeking WIOA services, would substantially help WIOA become a more viable source of support.
- Student-parents get some benefits through the tax system as parents, students, and workers. Researchers have suggested reforms that would increase the benefits (especially for very low-wage earners), spread out the administration of the benefit over the year to create more reliable income support, and make the child tax credit larger and fully refundable (e.g., Maag, Marron, and Huffer 2019; National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine 2019). Also, making the Lifelong Learning Tax Credit refundable or merging it with the American Opportunity Tax Credit would provide more stable and valuable supports.
- Increasing availability and lifting work requirement restrictions on supports for basic needs like SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, and housing, would benefit student-parents. These programs are limited in the types of education and training they will support or allow.
  - » Many of these policies are motivated by a desire to minimize “dependence.” But student-parents with low incomes are exactly the population that many policymakers likely want to help because they are seeking to become more self-reliant. More supports or parents pursuing educational credentials would likely allow those parents to concentrate on succeeding in their studies instead of facing a heavy pressure to concurrently work.

### **Social support**

- Social support can be hard to provide through policy, but there are some avenues. Paid family leave, including for students, would be a valuable first step and would likely help many parents continue their education after having a new child. This would primarily apply to students who are working on campus. It may also relate to ongoing financial support, even while students are on a reasonable parental leave.

- While Title IX provides relatively explicit guidance about how institutions should support pregnant students, the rules are not always evenly applied, especially by individual faculty members. Additional guidance or training for postsecondary educators may make a difference. And more explicit federal guidance about if and how Title IX applies to parenting students would help institutions and students.
- Marriage and parenting support could be strengthened for student-parents.<sup>8</sup> Although federal marriage and parenting programs have existed for many years, they are rarely oriented toward student-parents or located on campuses. These types of resources might mitigate some of the negative marriage and child behavior effects documented in this research.
- Child-serving education centers and schools could provide supports for families with a parent in school. Head Start programs have an explicit two-generation mission, and they have often been the jumping-off point for targeted two-generation interventions (Chase-Lansdale and Brooks-Gunn 2014). While some public schools have taken on a similar role (Chase-Lansdale and Brooks-Gunn 2014), little is known about the approaches, best practices, and effects. Helping families be more educated and stable should help children and advance the mission of public education institutions, which includes promoting equal educational opportunities and involving families in education.<sup>9</sup>

Many of these interventions would take substantial resources. But the family-friendly campus measures, which overlap substantially with interviewee recommendations, would require relatively few resources and almost all could be undertaken within a college's existing purview. Therefore, reviewing and strengthening family-friendly policies and resources on campus would likely cost the least and perhaps be the most promising short-term solution. Advising and financial supports would require more resource investments. Child care is an area of acute need but is likely the costliest recommendation. The social supports identified here are more structural, which makes it more difficult to characterize the costs.

## Discussion

Overall, going back to school was beneficial for mothers and their children's educational and economic growth, but with caveats. There were negative associations with marriage and therefore family income, negative long-term mental health impacts for mothers and physical health impacts for their children, and some signs of behavioral issues among children. Many of these negative effects did not appear for mothers who completed college degrees. Although the analysis of degree completion was exploratory, it suggested that helping parents complete their college degrees can have important intergenerational benefits. I discussed some supports within higher-education institutions and broader policy that could promote college completion for parenting students.

Notably, some effects take time to manifest. For example, mothers' earnings did not recover from negative labor market opportunity costs until four years after reenrollment on average. The earnings gains did not become consistently significantly positive until nine years after reenrollment. This has

implications for families' budget planning and also for research because most formal program evaluations do not follow outcomes for a decade and would therefore not observe these significant earnings gains.<sup>10</sup> Mental and physical health effects may also take time to present, which means that supports should likely not focus only on the short term, or they should give parents and families tools to address issues if they emerge later. Telling parents to “just get through it” is not sufficient.

A follow-up question not yet explored involves the actual cost of mothers' education in individual out-of-pocket expenditures and debt, as well as in broader social expenditures, and how these costs compare against benefits. One cost-benefit analysis explored a related issue, but it only looked at the benefits for college completers, which are a minority of student-parents (Gault, Milli, and Reichlin Cruse 2018). Without a better sense of tradeoffs in costs and benefits, it is difficult to answer the natural follow-up question, “Is going back to school worth it for mothers and their families?”

This study also did not disaggregate outcomes by the types of institutions student-mothers enrolled in or what programs or credentials they pursued, which were not available in the survey used for the quantitative analysis. Variations in individual and family outcomes may have stemmed from institutional or program structures, education quality, relative labor market values of credentials pursued, and programs' connections with high-quality employment. Future research that connects student-parents with specific colleges, programs, and credentials may illuminate if there are certain education pathways that lead to better outcomes for families.

Additional research into the experiences of children would provide a complementary perspective and may reveal additional opportunities for effective interventions. A study could also look at children's schools to see what, if anything, is being done to support children and families who have parents in school.

Applied program evaluation research on interventions tailored to student-parents—located at postsecondary institutions or other settings—would help build the field's understanding of what policy and programmatic interventions move the needle on family well-being. Any similar research would benefit from a mixed methods approach, treating qualitative data collected from student-parents and relevant stakeholders as a source of critical insights, complementary to necessary quantitative measures of program impact. Such research should document intervention costs and estimate the benefits to students, institutions, and society at large.

Finally, there are important differences in outcomes and experiences for different groups of student-mothers. In particular, Black mothers, who are the plurality of student-mothers, did not see the same level of economic payoffs as the overall group analyzed in this brief. A companion brief will dig into those findings and explores structural reasons for racial disparities in payoffs of education for Black women and their children.

# Methods

## Quantitative

This study explored the trajectory of well-being indicators for mothers and children for up to two decades after school reentry using data from the NLSY79 and the NLSY79 Child and Young Adult Supplement. I examined well-being indicators that extended beyond traditional economic and academic measures to include physical health, behavior and mental health, and social indicators (such as marriage). I used propensity score matching for the analysis, as well as an individual-level difference-in-difference model for mothers' outcomes measured repeatedly over time.

Propensity score matching was completed for mothers using single nearest neighbor with replacement and a caliper limit of 0.1 standard deviations. A wide range of characteristics were used for matching.<sup>11</sup> The joint matching balance test for the overall match resulted in a  $p > \chi^2$  of 0.999 with a mean bias of 2.4 and a median bias of 2.2, which is an excellent match. Among completers, the match resulted in a  $p > \chi^2$  of 0.970 with a mean bias of 5.1 and a median bias of 4.5, which is also an excellent match.

Children were matched using nearest-three neighbors with replacement and a caliper limit of 0.1 standard deviations. They were matched on the same characteristics of their mothers, plus some additional child characteristics.<sup>12</sup> The joint matching balance test for the overall match resulted in a  $p > \chi^2$  of 0.927 with a mean bias of 2.3 and a median bias of 1.9, which is an excellent match. Among completers, the match resulted in a  $p > \chi^2$  of 1.000 with a mean bias of 3.1 and a median bias of 2.3, which is also an excellent match.

## Qualitative

I also conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews with 20 student-mothers recruited from two-year and four-year colleges in the National Capital Area in spring 2018 and interviewed in fall 2018. Interviewees were recruited using a screening survey that I fielded electronically in April 2018 through listservs for student-mothers at a two-year college and at a public four-year university and to parents involved in a national group for student-mothers. I also spent four days recruiting in person in public areas of a two-year community college and left flyers in parent mailboxes at the child care center at a public four-year university. Those who completed the survey received \$10 for their participation.<sup>13</sup> Receipt of the incentive was not contingent on interviewees agreeing to additional research activities, but 94 of the 103 survey respondents (91 percent) indicated they would be willing to participate in a 60- to 90-minute follow-up interview.

In September 2018, I reached out to 29 women who said they might be open to a follow-up interview, 20 of whom completed interviews in fall 2018. Because of an oversight in the initial sample selection, I reached out to some women who had not returned to school but instead had their first child while they were a student and continued their schooling. I realized this error after completing the first

few interviews, so I supplemented the sample with additional women who had returned to school. Therefore, the final sample is a mix of women who returned to school and those who had children as students but did not have a gap in schooling. Though unintended, this turned out to benefit the study, as it helped me understand more about women's decisions to continue or not continue their schooling after becoming mothers.

Because of purposeful sampling, the 20 interviewees ranged in race, nativity,<sup>14</sup> age,<sup>15</sup> and level of schooling.<sup>16</sup> They also were diverse in other characteristics, including marital status,<sup>17</sup> age at first birth,<sup>18</sup> number and ages of children,<sup>19</sup> academic focus and schooling trajectory,<sup>20</sup> and previous education experience.<sup>21</sup> Interviewees received \$40 for participating.

Interviews were semistructured and covered a range of topics derived thematically from the literature. Analysis was iterative using NVivo qualitative coding aiming to illuminate and expand on themes from the literature and also to provide insights that might help explain the quantitative findings. In this way, the modalities of the research were mutually informative, even though the populations represented in the quantitative and qualitative analyses were distinct.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> These estimates are derived by multiplying the rate of students with dependent children reported in the NPSAS 2016 by the fall undergraduate student enrollment reported by the National Center for Education Statistics 2017, Table 303.65, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18\\_303.65.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_303.65.asp).
- <sup>2</sup> Contrarily, Roksa and Velez (2012) find that women are more likely than men to enroll in college immediately following high school but that men are slightly more likely to experience delayed entry, based on analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (probability of male delayed reentry is 0.505).
- <sup>3</sup> Analysis by the author using the US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics' occupational projections data, 2020–2030.
- <sup>4</sup> Note that matching mothers who completed degrees selects on an intermediate outcome, so these findings are suggestive—though the comparison group is well matched, which lends confidence to the findings. The subgroup of mothers who reenrolled and completed college degrees looked somewhat different from the overall group of mothers who reenrolled in school: the subgroup of mothers who completed were less likely to be in poverty in adolescence, had somewhat higher educational expectations in adolescence, and had somewhat higher standardized intelligence scores. They were more likely to be employed before returning to school and worked somewhat more hours per week (though they earned a similar amount). They were more likely to hold a high school diploma two years before reenrollment, but (by definition in this sample) they were less likely to have a college, graduate, or professional degree before reenrollment. They returned to school one year earlier on average than the overall group (in 1990 versus 1991).
- <sup>5</sup> “Family-friendly campuses,” a term coined by Karp, Osche, and Richardson Smith (2016), characterize institutions that have student-parents in mind when considering campus resources and priorities. Family-friendly campuses help students meet basic needs (housing, food, child care, and emergency assistance), build community (as parents, as families, through courses, in special spaces or programs, and at events), and obtain funding (through the state, institution, or child care subsidies; Karp, Osche, and Smith 2020). This might also involve considering pedagogical approaches and classroom policies to maximize the success of student-parents and other nontraditional students.
- <sup>6</sup> The “8 Keys to Veterans’ Success” include creating a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community to promote well-being and success for veterans; ensuring consistent and sustained support from campus leadership; implementing an early alert system to ensure all veterans receive academic, career, and

financial advice before challenges become overwhelming; coordinating and centralizing campus efforts for all veterans, together with the creation of a designated space for them (even if limited in size); collaborating with local communities and organizations, including government agencies, to align and coordinate various services for veterans; utilizing a uniform set of data tools to collect and track information on veterans, including demographics, retention, and degree completion; providing comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to veterans; and developing systems that ensure sustainability of effective practices for veterans. See US Department of Education, “8 Keys to Veterans’ Success Sites,” Accessed March 13, 2020, <https://www.ed.gov/veterans-and-military-families/8-keys-success-sites>.

- <sup>7</sup> Some colleges, like Monroe Community College in Rochester, New York, added a short, semiannual survey to the student information system to track student-parents on campus, but they are the only institution to implement regular supplemental data collection on parenting students (Monroe Community College 2019; personal communication).
- <sup>8</sup> At least one college used its Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program funds to develop evening parenting workshops for student-parents, facilitated by a marriage and family counselor (US GAO 2019).
- <sup>9</sup> For more information, see US Department of Education, “Mission,” October 20, 2011, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/mission/mission.html>.
- <sup>10</sup> On the other hand, some evaluations that have followed groups for longer have observed convergence in earnings between treatment and comparison groups (e.g., Schochet, Burghardt, and McConnell 2008), to the point that many cost-benefit analyses that rely on projections beyond the observed follow-up period build in an assumption of decaying earnings impacts over time (e.g., Albert et al. 2012; Economic Modeling Specialists International 2009; Hollenbeck and Huang 2006; Kuehn et al. 2017).
- <sup>11</sup> Characteristics used to match mothers included year of birth, race and ethnicity, being born in the US, living in the South two years before returning to school, living in an urban area two years before returning to school, her parents’ highest educational attainment, her poverty status in 1979, her educational expectations in 1979, the age she expected to marry in 1979, the number of children she expected to have in 1979, her religion in youth, a standardized measure of intelligence, a standardized measure of self-esteem, a standardized Rotter locus of control measure, whether she was employed two years before returning to school, average weekly hours worked two years before returning to school, job satisfaction two years before returning to school, annual earnings two years before returning to school, net family income two years before returning to school, if she had any health limitations two years before returning to school, age at first birth, marital status at first birth, number of children in the households two years before returning to school, if her spouse or partner was in the household two years before returning to school, her educational attainment two years before returning to school, and the year she returned to school.
- <sup>12</sup> Child-specific matching variables included the child’s year of birth, sex at birth, birth order, whether or not the child was low birthweight, their standardized math and reading scores one year before the mother’s school reenrollment, their standardized behavioral problems index score one year before the mother’s school reenrollment, the child’s standardized vocabulary score one year before the mother’s school reenrollment, and the child’s age when their mother reenrolled in school. (The year the mother reenrolled in school was excluded because it directly related to the difference between the child’s year of birth and the child’s age when their mother reenrolled in school.)
- <sup>13</sup> All data collection procedures were reviewed and approved by the George Washington University Institutional Review Board (IRB# 031839).
- <sup>14</sup> Interviewees were stratified into the following racial or ethnic and nativity categories: not-US-born Black/African, non-Hispanic; not-US-born Latina; US-born Black/African-American, non-Hispanic; US-born white, non-Hispanic; and other race. Those coded as “other race” identified as Asian, American Indian or Alaska native, native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, other race, or did not specify their race. They may have been born in the US or abroad.
- <sup>15</sup> Interviewees were stratified into the following age categories: under 25, 25 to 29, 20 to 39, and 40 or older.
- <sup>16</sup> The interviewees came from a two-year college or a graduate school. None of them were pursuing a four-year degree at the time of survey completion. However, by the time I interviewed them in the fall 2018 semester, three interviewees from a two-year college had progressed into bachelor’s degree programs at

four-year colleges. One of the two-year-college students was taking a break from school in the fall semester. Two of the graduate students had completed their programs by the time of the interview.

- <sup>17</sup> Four were never married, four were divorced or separated, two had a significant other who was incarcerated, one was widowed, and the remaining nine were married and cohabiting with their husbands.
- <sup>18</sup> Four had their first child before age 20, and another four did not have their first child until they were age 30 or older.
- <sup>19</sup> They ranged from having one to three children, who were age 0 to 35.
- <sup>20</sup> Their enrollment status varied, as did their concentration or major, though many were pursuing a credential in the health field. Eleven were returning to school for the first time after a gap of at least two years, while three others had left and returned to school multiple times. The remaining six became mothers while in school and continued their education.
- <sup>21</sup> Five held a previous degree that was equal or higher to the one they were pursuing at the time of the interview, often in a different field or earned abroad.

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## Acknowledgments

This brief was funded by the Urban Institute's Freeman Hrabowski grant. The views expressed are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at [urban.org/fundingprinciples](http://urban.org/fundingprinciples).

Additional thanks go to Demetra Nightingale for her helpful review, to Shena Ashley and Ofronama Biu for their input on this work, and to Alexandria Dallman for her copyediting support.



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