



# Considerations for Postsecondary Data on Student Parenting Status

## With Recommendations for the Field

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Parenting students make up a substantial portion of US college students, representing nearly a quarter of undergraduate students and nearly a third of graduate students, totaling at least 5.4 million students. Despite juggling school with caregiving responsibilities and oftentimes employment, student parents have been shown to academically equal or outperform their nonparenting counterparts in the first semester of college.<sup>1</sup> However, parenting students graduate at lower rates and would benefit from additional supports, whether financial, logistical, or academic. These supports are often undersupplied, largely because colleges and other supportive service providers struggle to characterize the extent of student-parent need. This issue could be remediated with improved student data, but very few sources of student data allow parents to identify themselves or be counted at the college, state, or federal level. Few institutions of higher education are required to collect or report on their students' parenting status. Without a way of identifying or counting parents at postsecondary institutions, the burden is on parenting students themselves to identify and seek out available (and often limited) supports. A few states have passed laws or implemented rules to capture students' parenting status, but many issues in the field are not settled. Quality data can help student parents be designated as a priority service population who can receive sufficiently resourced, allocated, and targeted supports to meet their academic and career goals while supporting their families.

This brief examines the current state of data collection relating to parenting students. We also discuss limitations in the questions that have been used to ask students to identify their parenting status or to flag these students in data systems. We give a recommendation for a future definition of student-parenting status and discuss some of the challenges in expanding data infrastructures to identify parenting students. The goal of this brief is to take stock of the changing landscape and to lay the groundwork for upcoming efforts to help higher-education stakeholders identify, track, and better serve parenting students.

## Background

Parenting students comprise a substantial portion of all college students. In the 2015–16 academic year, at least one in five (22 percent) undergraduates were parenting students.<sup>2</sup> A 2021 estimate found that 3.6 million college students had at least one dependent child ages 12 or younger (Adams et al. 2022). More broadly, using available rates of student parenthood from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) and published education enrollment counts, we estimate that as many as 5.4 million students have dependent children,<sup>3</sup> with 4.0 million at the undergraduate level and 1.4 million at the graduate level.<sup>4</sup>

Parenting students comprise a subset of the “new majority” of learners (formerly called “nontraditional” college students), who represent at least 70 percent of all students.<sup>5</sup> New majority learners include parenting students, adults returning to school, students from low-income or marginalized racial or ethnic communities (including Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic or Latinx students), returning citizens, and other groups.<sup>6</sup> Parenting students are often heads of low-income families, people of color, immigrants, women, first-generation students, veterans, and single parents (Nelson, Froehner, and Gault 2013; Reichlin Cruse, Holtzman, and Gault 2019). Compounding challenges make it harder for parenting students to achieve their education goals because of structural racism, sexism, and exclusion related to their intersectional race, gender, and parenting status (Lewis and Haynes 2020). The US postsecondary education system currently does not adequately serve parenting students and other new majority learners (Duquaine-Watson 2017; Green, Johns, and Anderson 2022; Green and Galison 2021; Green and Haghghat 2021; Green, Parsons, and Galison 2021; Green, Pham, and Katz 2021).

Parenting students are highly motivated. They balance college with family responsibilities and often paid employment. They earn higher grades, on average, than their nonparenting peers in the first semester of college (DeMario 2019).<sup>7</sup> But the college completion rate of parenting students is substantially lower than that of nonparenting students.<sup>8</sup>

Anderson and Green (2022) identify a range of other practices and policies that also affect student parent success.<sup>9</sup> Inadequate child care is one reason student parents are performing well but not completing college. A survey of mothers attending Mississippi community college found that almost half (47 percent) could not get the quality of child care they would have wanted because of the cost, and more than half (53 percent) said that paying for child care was a challenge (Goldrick-Rab, Welton, and

Coca 2020; Hess et al. 2014). Nearly half of student parents (45 percent) paid for child care in 2015–16, and the average monthly cost after subsidies was \$489.<sup>10</sup>

A lack of data about student parents relates directly to these challenges. For example, colleges and service providers do not have data to characterize the extent of student parents' needs for child care, housing, academic accommodations, and other supports. In addition, institutions cannot conduct targeted outreach to parenting students to ensure they are aware of available services and supports without a way to identify them. Institutional research offices and state or federal education oversight agencies cannot characterize differential academic opportunities for student parents without tracking them in data systems. Improved data collection at all levels is an early and important milestone to meaningful positive change in practice, policy, research, and investment to support parenting students (see Anderson and Green 2022).

## Current Efforts to Identify Parenting Students

Some states, colleges, and organizations have made localized efforts to collect parenting student status, but definitions of parenting students have been applied inconsistently. Those inconsistencies make it difficult to compare findings from different sources, leading to varying estimates of how many students are currently parenting (both nationwide and by state or locality). As student-parent data collection expands, those inconsistencies could lead to inequities—for example if some students are identified as parents at one college but not at another or if large subgroups of student parents are routinely underidentified. In addition, research into student-parent issues and opportunities to strengthen supports becomes more challenging when data sources are misaligned. And educational institutions may struggle to benchmark their population or outcomes over time or with other entities or geographies when definitions are mismatched.

### Federal Policies and Data Sources

Currently, few federal sources provide student-parent data:

- The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) routinely runs several nationally representative surveys to track information about postsecondary students and their families. Those surveys include the NPSAS, the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS), and Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B). Across these instruments, NCES collects data on whether a student has a dependent child, the number of dependent children, the age of the youngest child, and monthly expenditures on child care.
- The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is the national financial aid application form. It asks for the number of dependent children an applicant has, their marital status, and other dependents in the household.<sup>11</sup> The data are limited only to students who submit and complete the FAFSA form.

- Various nationally representative surveys collect respondents' parent status and education enrollment status and can therefore be used as sources of student-parent data. These include the Current Population Survey (CPS), the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), among others. These robust surveys often include valuable household, demographic, and financial information but usually lack details of parenting students' education enrollment.
- The College Equity Act of 2021 (S.2301) was introduced to fund colleges to conduct internal reviews to aid in identifying any equity gaps among students, though it was not passed.<sup>12</sup> The bill would have required colleges to look at parenting student status, as well as many other demographic and family characteristics.

## State Policies

Policy change at the federal level can take time. Some states have begun responding to the need for data on students' parenting status by passing bills requiring higher-education institutions to track this data item.

- In 2021, the State of Oregon passed Senate Bill 564,<sup>13</sup> requiring the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) to create questions for postsecondary institutions to ask their students annually to self-identify as a parent or person acting as a parent or legal guardian. The state HECC receives and reports on students' parenting status, which is to be collected alongside other student demographic data and stored at the student-record level.
- In 2021, the state of Illinois passed the Student Parent Data Collection Act (SB0267).<sup>14</sup> The act requires public colleges and universities to collect information from students to assist with resources, including on-campus child care, to support parents in completing their education. The Illinois Board of Higher Education must create a question for public institutions to identify parental or legal guardian status of their students, disaggregated with other demographic data. Institutions must also report on the total number of children being served at their on-campus child care centers on a semesterly basis.
- In 2021, the state of California passed the California Cradle-to-Career Data System Act (also known as C2C).<sup>15</sup> Once implemented, C2C will serve as a statewide longitudinal education data system spanning early education to postsecondary education and the workforce. Beyond the initial implementation, a stated future goal of C2C is to collect the parental status of postsecondary students. To that effect, Assembly Bill 2881 (chapter 935, statutes of 2022) requires the implementation of priority registration for parenting students and that student-parent data be reported to C2C when the C2C system is established.<sup>16</sup>
- In fiscal year 2020, Michigan education appropriations legislation required colleges to report the number of students with dependent children enrolled per semester as part of Section 275i.<sup>17</sup> The request also asked colleges to report the number of students with dependent children enrolled; the number of students with dependent children living in university residence

halls, dormitories, and apartments; the names of programs and resources available to students with dependent children, as well as offices that support those students; and identified barriers to certificate or degree completion for students with dependent children. The state asked colleges to collect demographic information from students with dependent children through a method best determined by the institution using best practice research methodology. Subsequent appropriations legislation dropped these requirements.<sup>18</sup>

## Institutions Collecting Data on Student Parents

A handful of higher-education institutions have routinely collected data on parenting students independently. These institutions, including community colleges, public universities, and college systems, have usually fielded questions through forms or surveys of enrolled students.

- Monroe Community College (MCC) in Rochester, New York, has been collecting data on the marital and parenting status of students semesterly since 2003 through their Registration Data Entry Survey.<sup>19</sup> The data have allowed MCC to identify parenting students, connect them to support, and evaluate the effects of those supports. MCC created a data file of student parents who had been enrolled at the college at any point from 2006 to 2014. The file contained information on parents' children's age groups. An analysis of the data showed that the student parents of young children (under age 6) who used the campus child care center had a persistence rate that was more than one-and-a-half times the rate of the parents of young children who did not use the center (DeMario 2021). The former group also had a three-times higher on-time graduation rate than the latter group.
- Oregon State University began surveying incoming students in the fall of the academic year 2019–20 to determine their family status (Gault, Holtzman, and Reichlin Cruse 2020). The data are used by the university's family resources center to connect incoming student parents with supports.
- The Technical College System of Georgia has a voluntary question about single-parent status on its entrance surveys (Gault, Holtzman, and Reichlin Cruse 2020). The information is used by the college staff to share information on any supportive services catered to their needs. The single-parent status of the student is also recorded in each college's student record system.
- The Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges asks students a combined question about their parent and partner status on registration forms (Gault, Holtzman, and Reichlin Cruse 2020).
- The California State University at Fresno fields a voluntary student survey within their student record system that collects student-parent status along with other key information, such as the number of children, their ages, and the percentage of care and financial support provided by the parenting student.

- Sacramento State University uses FAFSA data to identify, track, and support parenting students and has also developed additional data collection processes through a partnership between their Parents and Families Program and the Office of Institutional Research.<sup>20</sup>
- We are aware of several other postsecondary education institutions and systems that are collecting or tracking student-parent data, but we do not have explicit documentation. Additionally, some colleges have implemented intermittent or one-off survey efforts, which we do not list here.

No single definition for parenting students has yet emerged as preferred across the field. In table 1, we identify 21 data sources that have defined or asked about students' parenting status. This table shows all parenting student questions and possible answers (or "allowable values"). Furthermore, data sources also differ in whether they condition parenting status on other circumstances, such as the age of their children or their partnership status.

TABLE 1

## Questions and Answers Used to Identify Parenting Students

Organization	Type of Data	Question Text	Allowable Values or Definitions	Number of Criteria
The Technical College System of Georgia <sup>a</sup>	College data system	Single parent: Are you a person who has primary or joint custody of a dependent minor child?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Check if yes</li> </ul>	3 (custody; dependent; age)
Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges <sup>a</sup>	College data system	With whom do you live?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ No one, I live alone</li> <li>▪ I share an apartment, house, or residence hall room with at least one other university student</li> <li>▪ I share an apartment or house with peers who are not university students</li> <li>▪ I live with at least one family member</li> <li>▪ I am a single parent living with children</li> <li>▪ I live with my spouse or domestic partner and children</li> <li>▪ I live with my spouse or domestic partner without children</li> </ul>	1 (household)
DOE – FAFSA Application <sup>b</sup>	Federal administrative data	Do you now have or will you have children who will receive more than half of their support from you between [date] and [date]?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Yes/No</li> </ul>	1 (amount of support)
NPSAS – NCES <sup>c</sup>	Federal survey	Do you have any children who received more than half of their support from you between [date] and [date]?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Yes/No</li> </ul>	1 (amount of support)
Institute for Women’s Policy Research <sup>a</sup>	Research Report	Students who provide most of the care for a child or children. They may be biological parents, stepparents, adoptive parents, foster parents, grandparents, or siblings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ N/A – authors’ definition</li> </ul>	1 (amount of support)

Organization	Type of Data	Question Text	Allowable Values or Definitions	Number of Criteria
California State Government <sup>d</sup>	Legislation	“Student parent” means a student who has a child or children under 18 years of age who will receive more than half of their support from that student.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ N/A – legislative text</li> </ul>	2 (age; amount of support)
Illinois State Government <sup>e</sup>	Legislation	“Parent” means the parent or legal guardian of a child who is under the age of 18 years.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ N/A – legislative text</li> </ul>	1 (age)
Oregon State Government <sup>f</sup>	Legislation/ Rulemaking	Are you a parent, are you serving as a parent, or are you a legal guardian of a child/children while you are enrolled at <insert college or university name>?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ No, I am not a parent, serving as a parent, nor a legal guardian</li> <li>▪ Yes, I am a solo/single parent or guardian</li> <li>▪ Yes, I am a parent/guardian and share parenting responsibilities with someone who lives with me</li> <li>▪ Yes, I am a parent/guardian and share parenting responsibilities with someone who does not live with me</li> </ul>	0
Institute for Women’s Policy Research – Survey of Mothers in MS Community Colleges <sup>g</sup>	Student survey	“Parent” means having a child or children younger than 18 years of age who the respondents are responsible for and who live in their households.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Unknown</li> </ul>	2 (age; household)
Oregon State University <sup>h</sup>	Student survey and admissions form	Are you a parent of dependent children?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Yes/No</li> </ul>	1 (dependent)
Monroe Community College <sup>a</sup>	Student survey	Which one of the following statements applies to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ I have children who are age 5 and younger and/or I’m expecting a baby</li> <li>▪ I have children who are age 6 to 18</li> <li>▪ I have children who are in both of the above age groups</li> <li>▪ I don’t have children in the above age groups</li> <li>▪ Prefer not to answer</li> </ul>	1 (age)
The Family Friendly Campus Toolkit <sup>i</sup>	Student survey	Are you pregnant, a parent (with at least part time custody) or guardian (officially or unofficially) of a dependent child?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Yes/No</li> </ul>	1 (dependent)



Organization	Type of Data	Question Text	Allowable Values or Definitions	Number of Criteria
The University of Texas at Austin – Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) <sup>j</sup>	Student survey	Do you have children who live with you and depend on you for their care?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Yes/No</li> </ul>	1 (household)
The Hope Center for Community, College, and Justice - #RealCollege Survey 2020 <sup>k</sup>	Student survey	Are you the parent or guardian to any biological, adopted, step, or foster children who live in your household?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Yes/No</li> </ul>	1 (household)
The Hope Center for Community, College, and Justice - #RealCollege Survey 2019 <sup>l</sup>	Student survey	Are you the parent, primary caregiver, or guardian (legal or informal) of any children?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Yes/No</li> </ul>	0
The Healthy Minds Network – Student Survey <sup>m</sup>	Student survey	What is the current number of children or other dependents living in your household, for whom you are responsible?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ None</li> <li>▪ 1</li> <li>▪ 2</li> <li>▪ 3</li> <li>▪ 4 or more</li> </ul>	1 (household)
American College Health Association – National College Health Assessment <sup>n</sup>	Student survey	Are you a parent or guardian of a child under the age of 18 or do you have primary responsibility for someone else’s child/children under the age of 18?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Yes/No</li> </ul>	1 (age)

Organization	Type of Data	Question Text	Allowable Values or Definitions	Number of Criteria
Paying for College Survey <sup>o</sup>	Student survey (of preidentified parenting students)	Who do you currently live with? Check all that apply.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Nobody, I live by myself</li> <li>■ A roommate or several roommates who I am not related to</li> <li>■ My romantic partner or spouse</li> <li>■ My romantic partner or spouse's parents</li> <li>■ My child(ren)</li> <li>■ My mother</li> <li>■ My father</li> <li>■ My stepparent</li> <li>■ My sister or brother or half/step siblings</li> <li>■ Extended family (grandparents, cousins, nieces and nephews, etc.)</li> <li>■ Other</li> </ul>	Unknown (parenting students identified before survey)
Penn State University – Center for Collegiate Mental Health's Standardized Data Set (SDS) <sup>p</sup>	Student survey (counseling intake center)	With whom do you live? (check all that apply)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Alone</li> <li>■ Spouse, partner, or significant other</li> <li>■ Roommate(s)</li> <li>■ Children</li> <li>■ Parent(s) or guardian(s)</li> <li>■ Other family</li> <li>■ Other (please specify)</li> </ul>	1 (household)
The California State University, Fresno <sup>q</sup>	Student survey	A dependent is broadly defined as a child or adult for whom you provide care and/or financial support. The dependent does not need to be a biological relative.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ N/A – respondent adds dependents</li> </ul>	0 (refers to “dependent” but defines term broadly)
University of California Office of the President - UC Undergraduate Experience Survey <sup>r</sup>	Student survey	Do you have dependent child(ren) who currently reside with you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ No, I do not have children</li> <li>■ Yes, I have child(ren) who reside with me full-time (50% or more of the time)</li> <li>■ Yes, I have child(ren) who reside with me part-time (less than 50% of the time)</li> <li>■ Yes, I have child(ren), but they do not currently reside with me</li> </ul>	2 (dependent; household)

<sup>a</sup> Gault, Barbara, Tessa Holtzman, and Lindsey Reichlin-Cruse. 2020. *Understanding the Student Parent Experience: The Need for Improved Data Collection on Parent Status in Higher Education*. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research.

<sup>b</sup> “2023-24 FAFSA,” Federal Student Aid: An Office of the US Department of Education, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://studentaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-24-fafsa.pdf>.

- <sup>c</sup> Wine, Jennifer, Peter Siegel, and Rob Stollberg. 2018. "2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey (NPSAS:16): Data Collection Instruments." Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- <sup>d</sup> Public Postsecondary Education: Students with Dependent Children, California Assembly Bill 2881, Ch. 935, Stats 2022 (2022).
- <sup>e</sup> Student Parent Data Collection Act, 102nd Illinois General Assembly, Senate Bill 0267 (2021).
- <sup>f</sup> Permanent Administrative Order HECC 1-2023, Chapter 715, Oregon Secretary of State Higher Education Coordinating Commission.
- <sup>g</sup> Hess, Cynthia, Sylvia Krohn, Lindsey Reichlin, Stephanie Román, and Barbara Gault. 2014. *Securing a Better Future: A Portrait of Female Students in Mississippi's Community Colleges*. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research.
- <sup>h</sup> Oregon State University Student Survey Results; personal communications, March 13, 2023.
- <sup>i</sup> "Family Friendly Campus Toolkit," Family Friendly Campus, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://familyfriendlycampus.org/the-toolkit/>.
- <sup>j</sup> "Community College Survey of Student Engagement," University of Texas College of Education, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://www.csse.org/aboutsurvey/aboutsurvey.cfm>.
- <sup>k</sup> Goldrick-Rab, Sara, Carrie R. Welton, and Vanessa Coca. 2020. *Parenting While in College: Basic Needs Insecurity among Students with Children*. Philadelphia: The Hope Center for College Community and Justice, Temple University.
- <sup>l</sup> The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. 2021. "#RealCollege 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity During the Ongoing Pandemic." Philadelphia: The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.
- <sup>m</sup> "The Healthy Minds Study – Student Survey," Healthy Minds Network, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://healthymindsnetwork.org/hms/>.
- <sup>n</sup> "National College Health Assessment II – Survey," American College Health Association, accessed March 9, 2023, [https://www.acha.org/NCHA/About\\_ACHA\\_NCHA/Survey/NCHA/About/Survey.aspx](https://www.acha.org/NCHA/About_ACHA_NCHA/Survey/NCHA/About/Survey.aspx).
- <sup>o</sup> Unpublished survey, personal communications, January 6, 2023.
- <sup>p</sup> "Center for Collegiate Mental Health Standardized Data Set (SDS)," Pennsylvania State University Center for Counseling and Psychological Services: Center for Collegiate Mental Health, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://ccmh.psu.edu/assets/sds/SDS%20Manual%20v7.2022.pdf>.
- <sup>q</sup> Unpublished survey, personal communications, March 15, 2023.
- <sup>r</sup> "UC Undergraduate Experience Survey – UCUES 2022 Survey Instrument," University of California Office of the President, accessed March 20, 2023, <https://www.ucop.edu/institutional-research-academic-planning/services/survey-services/UCUES.html>.

No two definitions are the same, and they rely on varying conditions:

- **Six definitions** specify that the child must be **under age 18 or a minor**.<sup>21</sup>
- **Six definitions** depend on the **amount of time** a person cares for a child or children. This is expressed as “most” or “more than half” of the time, or as being the “primary” caregiver or parent.
- **Five definitions** indicate that the parent and child must **live in the same household**.
- **Four definitions** depend on a **legal dependent status**.
- **Three different words** are used to describe **what parents do for their children** (as a condition to be satisfied), including the following:
  - » **“Support”** (used generally by two federal definitions and in a third definition as “financial support”)
  - » **“Responsible for”** (used by two definitions)
  - » **“Care for”** (used by four definitions, including in the forms “depend on for care,” “provide care,” and “caregiver”)
- **Three definitions** allow the student respondent to **self-identify** as a parent, with none of the above qualifications or criteria.<sup>22</sup>
- **Three definitions** include people who are **pregnant or expectant**.<sup>23</sup>

We believe conditions common in these definitions have several drawbacks:

- Using a threshold of the **amount of time** a person cares for a child may exclude parents who have a substantial share of care responsibility but do not consider their contributions to meet the threshold of “more than half” or “most of the time.” Parenting students may be especially susceptible to exclusion criterion (compared with parents who are not in school), because they might be less involved in caregiving because of their postsecondary enrollment. Student fathers might also be less likely to identify with this criterion, even if they cohabit with their children and coparent. Nevertheless, parenting students who are responsible for less than half of caregiving might still benefit from being identified as a parent and connected with campus or community supports (which might help them create space to devote more time and attention to parenting).
- Definitions that depend on **legal or dependent status** might be overly narrow, confusing, or intimidating to parenting students who fall into gray areas. Generally, terms like “dependent” may cause confusion or raise concerns about legal or tax implications and tend to exclude parents, parental caregivers, and guardians who are unable to claim their children as their tax dependents (Maag, Congdon, and Yau 2021). For example, the unmarried partner of a person with a child may be acting as a parent and may even be committed to caring for that child long term. Though they probably should be identified as a parenting student eligible for supports, if the child is not a legal dependent, they would not be counted. In another common scenario, a

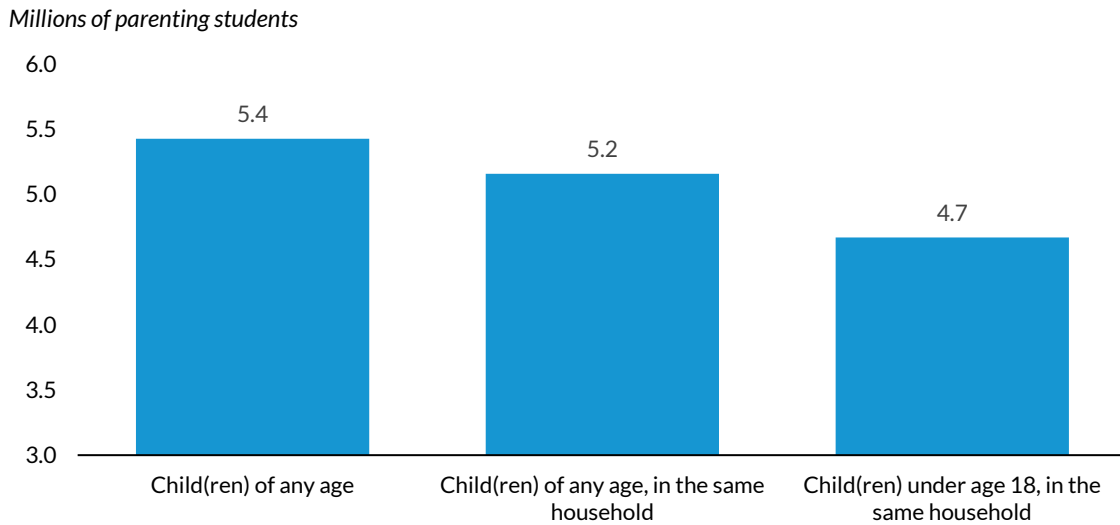
parent who is separated or divorced may not claim a child on their tax documents for whom they provide substantial care.

- Specifying that the child must **live in the same household** may exclude several common scenarios, such as shared-custody arrangements and parents who do not currently live with their child but plan to live with them soon. For example, in some social and cultural groups, it is common for a parent to temporarily leave their child or children with a family member while they attend school. Or parents who do not consider themselves the head of the household where they reside may not identify with definitions that refer to “your household.”
- The condition that children are **legal minors** (under age 18) might reflect the fact that parents of children ages 5 or younger often have greater needs than parents of older children. However, parents may still have substantial responsibilities when caring for older children, including those who are legally adults, especially if the children are unable to care for themselves.
- Some definitions include both parenting students and students who are **pregnant or expectant**. A person who is pregnant or expectant is likely to soon be a parent and therefore will shortly need parenting supports. Female students who are currently pregnant also receive extra federal legal protections from discrimination under Title IX, and they are allowed accommodations.<sup>24</sup> But pregnancy or expectant status may be sensitive to collect – not all pregnancies come to term and not all people who bear children retain responsibility for them. There may be legal and personal implications regarding how a pregnancy ends and who parents a child after they are born.

Because of the sometimes substantial variation across definitions, different approaches would lead to very different student-parent population counts, with implications for the funding, design, and implementation of policies or supports targeted toward parenting students. Figure 1 shows the approximate number of parenting students who would be identified in the US with different definitional restrictions using the nationally representative Survey of Income and Program Participation. The most inclusive definition identifies 5.4 million parents with at least one child of any age, who either shares their household (and is custodial) or lives elsewhere (noncustodial).<sup>25</sup> We identify 5.2 million parents with a child who shares their household, and 4.7 million parents with a child under 18 who shares their household. The additional categories (such as the amount of time a parent spent with their child or legal dependent status) are not available in this survey, but including additional conditions would likely reduce the estimates further. Including students who are pregnant or expectant would increase the estimates.

FIGURE 1

Estimated Number of Parenting Students in 2017, by the Conditions Used to Identify Them



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Source: Authors' calculations using the 2018 Survey of Income and Program Participation. Data are nationally representative as of December 2017.

## Our Preferred Definition

In an earlier review, the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) defined parenting students as "students who provide most of the care for a child or children" and note that "they may be biological parents, stepparents, adoptive parents, foster parents, grandparents, or siblings" (Gault, Holtzman, and Cruse 2020). We favor a similar definition, but one that does not qualify parents as those who provide "most" of the care for a child or children. Our preferred definition follows:

**A parenting student is someone who is enrolled in any level of education or training and is concurrently responsible for (or imminently will be responsible for) providing for a child of any age. They may be a biological parent, stepparent or unmarried coparent, adoptive parent, foster parent, guardian, grandparent, extended family member, or sibling caregiver.**

We came to this definition based on a review of current practices. This definition is highly inclusive by relying on as few conditions as possible, which aligns with the main goal of collecting parenting status to connect students with available assistance and supports. It also supports a secondary goal of tracking the overall numbers of parenting students and learning about their characteristics, both locally and nationwide, to understand representation, experiences, and opportunity gaps. Excluding conditions on the amount of time the parent cares for the child, the age of the child, the legal status of the child, or where the child lives at the time the question is asked best satisfies both goals. An inclusive definition may identify some parents who are not in need of support, but that can be determined by counselors, caseworkers, and through eligibility criteria for assistance and supports.

This long-winded definition can be translated into a relatively straightforward question for students along the lines of, “**Are you parenting a child?**” In the appendix, we suggest several ways to combine this question with other information to understand more about a student parent’s family structure.

The definition we propose does not include students who are “caregivers,” more broadly defined, which includes students responsible for the care of adults, including people who are elderly, physically unwell, disabled, or in other circumstances. In national data, only 1.4 percent of undergraduate students only had dependents other than children in 2016, though an additional 2.8 percent had both dependent children and other dependents (and another 19.2 percent had only dependent children). The very small share of students who have caregiving responsibilities for adults may benefit from accommodations and supports, but the nature of these may differ from student parents. Additional study is needed to determine how their needs compare with student parents.

## Other Cross-Sectional Statuses

Student parents are not a monolith, and some subgroups face systemic barriers that are higher than others. A student parent’s gender identity, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, income, housing status, public assistance and/or program usage, and other demographics, statuses, or identities may affect their experiences and what they need to succeed in meeting their academic goals.

An advantage of collecting parenting status at the student-record level is that it can be cross-tabulated with other demographic and social data that appear in students’ records, such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, and in some cases housing status, sexual orientation, and veteran status. Other characteristics that may be useful to consider collecting that would not be part of routine data collection include the following:

- **Pregnancy or expectancy status**, for reasons described above
- **Children’s ages**, primarily to assess child care needs
- **Number of children**, because a parenting student with more children may have greater needs, both logistically and financially, and it can help a college or government count not just the number of student parents but also the number of children who may need appropriate services, such as child care
- **Relationship or partnership status**, because parents without a coparenting partner may face more challenging circumstances. However, a person’s relationship status and their coparenting status can be complicated, fluid, and personal; challenges exist with devising clear categories, because marital status does not necessarily align with partnerships status when it comes to parenting. Terminology such as “solo parenting” or “lone parenting” may be preferable over “single parenting,” because someone might not consider themselves to be “single” in terms of their relationship, but they could be the only person with parenting responsibilities for their child (who might or might not be the child of their partner)

# Considerations for Effective Student-Parent Data Collection

Colleges and other organizations leading data collection efforts will need to consider how to effectively implement new student-parent data collection efforts. The following questions may inform this process. We follow each with our recommendations:

- What definition should be used to identify parenting students?
  - » We indicate our preferred definition above. Regardless of the definition used, states or institutions that are implementing new student-parent data collection should try to coordinate definitions with other entities or data collection efforts whenever possible and be consistent over time.
- How many cross-sectional statuses should be collected alongside parenting status?
  - » We recommend that the cross-sectional statuses identified above (pregnancy or expectancy status, children’s ages, number of children, relationship or partnership status) be collected alongside parenting status, wherever possible. The appendix includes examples of how to ask about multiple statuses concurrently. States in which abortion may have legal ramifications may choose not to include questions about pregnancy status to protect students, though the US Department of Education has issued clarifying guidance about how such information should be treated if it is collected.<sup>26</sup>
- When (and how frequently in a student’s education) is it best to ask for the information?
  - » Colleges may have different preferences about how frequently to update the students’ parenting status and cross-sectional identities, which will have implications for the number of parenting students identified. We would recommend updating the information at least annually and ideally semesterly. Legislation in Illinois and Oregon require annual updates.
- Which students should be asked this question? For example, should noncredit students, lifelong learners, graduate students, short-term credential seekers, and other groups of students be asked?
  - » We recommend that postsecondary institutions give all students an opportunity to identify themselves as parenting. For example, even though students seeking short-term credentials (such as in career and technical education) have less time to interact with policy systems, they may still benefit from supports to complete their programs and move into career pathway that are appropriate for their family responsibilities.
- In what form, system, survey, or interface should the question be asked? And how can student-parent data be linked to other records in the student information system?
  - » Ideally, student-parent data should be collected through a robust web-based application that students interact with on a regular basis, and which can be securely linked to course-



level, administrative, and student support data at the student-record level. Enterprise resource planning software is often used by colleges to manage student academics, registration, supports, financial aid, and more. Students are sometimes required to intermittently interact with those systems, such as to verify information or to register for courses or services, so these interaction points can be opportunities for data collection.

- How can the information about student parents be stored, analyzed, and shared with stakeholders, such as service providers, oversight agencies, and researchers?
  - » Student-parent data have many potential uses. College support staff can reach out to parenting students with information on available supports, including referrals to community or public supports. Instructors can use the information to ensure their courses are flexible for and welcoming to parenting students. Administrators can allocate resources to campus resources, such as child care centers, or build partnerships with appropriate community resource providers. Schools and researchers can combine parenting status with other demographics and characteristics, academic outcomes (at all degree levels), and employment outcomes to better understand how parenting students are represented in college programs, how they are faring, and how to reduce opportunity gaps. Colleges should treat student-parent data securely, in accordance with the law and with respect to parenting students' privacy per the Federal Education Records Privacy Act.<sup>27</sup> The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators provides guidance on how these data can be used.<sup>28</sup>

Considering relevant issues and making changes to data collection procedures requires personnel time and sometimes direct financial outlays for data infrastructure modifications or changes to reporting practices. Some learning management systems and student information systems are more onerous to change than others, and colleges have varying levels of resources to engage in system modifications. Therefore, data collection requirements without resources can become unfunded mandates or result in lower-quality data. Policymakers and administrators should consider how to ensure that colleges have sufficient resource to collect student parent data in a high-quality and useful way.

## Discussion and Next Steps

This brief has described several important considerations for student-parent data collection, including the following:

- As of this publication, at least two states (Oregon and Illinois) have mandated that colleges collect data on the parenting status of students, one more plans to implement additional student-parent data collection (California), and another collected parenting status for one year (Michigan).

- At least 21 data sources have collected (or propose to collect) the parenting status of students, but no two sources use the same definition. It would be challenging or impossible to directly compare or combine counts of parenting students across those sources.
- At least six conditions have been used to define what it means to be a parenting student, including the age of the child, the amount of time a child spends with the parent, whether the parent and child live in the same household, the legal or dependent status of the child, the degree of “caregiving” responsibilities, and whether the student is pregnant or expectant. Some definitions use up to three of those conditions, while some use none.
- Imposing conditions of cohabitation and child age in a definition can result in a discrepancy of at least 0.76 million parenting students nationally, a reduction in the national estimate of 14 percent, which has large implications for supports and investments.
- We favor an inclusive definition, relying on few or no conditions.

These findings show that policy changes are trending toward an expansion of student-parent data collection. Our team has developed a framework which places student parents at the center of many policy systems,<sup>29</sup> as well as a roadmap for parenting student policy change (Anderson and Green 2022). We have also launched the Data-To-Action Campaign for Parenting Students with institutions and systems that are operating under an annual request or mandate to collect student-parent data in 2023.<sup>30</sup> The goal of that campaign is for colleges to sustainably implement student-parent data collection and use those data effectively, while drawing lessons from early state-level efforts that will inform future data-collection initiatives.

Below is a list of next steps to strengthen student-parent data collection:

- In the absence of federal policy change, state legislatures could mandate or strongly encourage student-parent data collection. They could do so in a way that allows colleges to collect and use the data effectively and that is consistent with best practices identified in the literature.
- As colleges and systems implement those changes, they could coordinate and learn from others and replicate successful strategies.
- The federal government could standardize the collection and reporting of student-parent data, ideally including parenting status in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and other connected data sources, such as the College Scorecard.
- Colleges, researchers, and policymakers could use student-parent data to design, improve, and expand support systems for parenting students and remediate policy and practice barriers (see Anderson and Green 2022).

# Appendix

To minimize the data collection burden and maximize the available information, we recommend combining pregnancy or expectant status, child age, and the number of children into one or two questions. This could look like the following two questions:

**“Are you currently pregnant or expectant? Check if yes.” [check box]**

**“For each of the following categories, indicate the number of children you are parenting:”  
[numerical fields]**

- Children ages 0 to 2**
- Children ages 3 to 5**
- Children ages 6 to 12**
- Children ages 13 to 17**
- Children ages 18 or older**

Or the following one question, which omits an exact count of the number of children:

**“Check as many of the following categories as apply to you:”**

- I am currently pregnant or expectant**
- I am parenting a child or children ages 0 to 2**
- I am parenting a child or children ages 3 to 5**
- I am parenting a child or children ages 6 to 12**
- I am parenting a child or children ages 13 to 17**
- I am parenting a child or children ages 18 or older**
- None of the above**

In this second example, only a lower-bound of the number of children can be determined.

Given the complicated and fluid nature of relationship or partnership status, we recommend allowing single or solo parents to self-identify their status, such as in the following question:

**“Are you currently a single, solo, or lone parent to any of the children you are parenting?” [Yes, No, or Prefer Not to Say]**

In these examples, it is possible to capture the key pieces of information relating to parenting status in three questions: (1) parenting student status, (2) pregnancy/expectancy status and child age, and (3) partnership status. Alternatively, four questions can provide a count of the number of children: (1) parenting student status, (2) pregnancy/expectancy status, (3) child number and age, and (4) partnership status. Those statuses can then be cross-tabulated with other characteristics tracked in student academic records.

# Notes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this work, we have chosen to use common terms interchangeably, especially “student parents” and “[pregnant and] parenting students.” When writing about policy areas that use other language in official documentation, we use those specific terms. More information about the terminology appears in Autumn Green, “Student parents or parenting students? Why terminology matters,” *Women Change Worlds* (blog), February 1, 2022, <https://www.wcwoonline.org/WCWBlog-Women-Change-Worlds/entry/Student-parents-or-parenting-students-why-terminology-matters>.

These statistics come from the 2012/2017 Beginning Postsecondary Students Survey. We obtained these data from the National Center for Education Statistics’ DataLab tool available at <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/>.

<sup>2</sup> These statistics come from the 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: Undergraduate. We obtained these data from the National Center for Education Statistics’ DataLab tool available at <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/>.

<sup>3</sup> Data from the NPSAS are cross-sectional, meaning that they represent the estimated number of enrolled students with dependent children in a given year. This should not be confused with population demographics representing every person who has experienced parenting while pursuing postsecondary education at some point in their lives.

<sup>4</sup> Undergraduate statistics come from the 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: Undergraduate table. Graduate statistics come from the 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: Graduate table. We obtained these data from the National Center for Education Statistics’ DataLab tool available at <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/>.

<sup>5</sup> Alexandria Walton Radford, Melissa Cominole, and Paul Skomsvold, “Demographic and Enrollment Characteristics of Nontraditional Undergraduates: 2011–12,” RTI International, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2015025>.

<sup>6</sup> “Who Are New Majority Learners?” Education Design Lab, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://eddesignlab.org/newmajoritylearners/>.

<sup>7</sup> These statistics come from the 2012/2017 Beginning Postsecondary Students Survey. We obtained these data from the National Center for Education Statistics’ DataLab tool available at <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/>.

<sup>8</sup> These statistics come from the 2012/2017 Beginning Postsecondary Students Survey. We obtained these data from the National Center for Education Statistics’ DataLab tool available at <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/>.

<sup>9</sup> “Student Parent Families at the Center,” Urban Institute, December 2022, <https://www.urban.org/projects/student-parent-families-center>.

<sup>10</sup> These statistics come from the 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: Undergraduate table. We obtained these data from the National Center for Education Statistics’ DataLab tool available at <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/>.

<sup>11</sup> “2023-24 FAFSA,” Federal Student Aid: An Office of the US Department of Education, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://studentaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-24-fafsa.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> *College Equity Act of 2021*, S.2301, 117th Congress (2021–22).

<sup>13</sup> *Senate Bill 564*, 81st Oregon Legislative Assembly, Regular Session (2021).

<sup>14</sup> *Student Parent Data Collection Act*, 102nd Illinois General Assembly, Senate Bill 0267 (2021).

<sup>15</sup> *California Cradle-to-Career Data System Act*, Stats. 2019, Ch. 51, Sec. 14. (SB 75) Effective July 1, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> *Public Postsecondary Education: Students with Dependent Children*, California Assembly Bill 2881, Ch. 935, Stats 2022 (2022).

Recent conversations between the authors and members of the California public postsecondary education system suggest that student-parent status may not be available from current C2C implementation plans.

- <sup>17</sup> [Senate Bill 927](#), State of Michigan 100th Legislature, Regular Session (2020).
- <sup>18</sup> [No. 72 Journal of the Senate](#), State of Michigan 101st Legislature, Regular Session (2021).
- <sup>19</sup> Authors' conversations with Monroe Community College administrators.
- <sup>20</sup> Personal communications, March 9, 2023.
- <sup>21</sup> Monroe Community College is counted here but allows parents to indicate that they “have children who are age 6 to 18.”
- <sup>22</sup> Those three include Oregon legislative text, the Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges data system, and the #RealCollege Survey fielded by Temple University.
- <sup>23</sup> Many of these data sources also collect information on pregnancy status in separate questions; however, it is important to distinguish sources where parental status and pregnancy status are combined in one question.
- <sup>24</sup> “Discrimination Based on Pregnancy and Related Conditions: A Resource for Students and Schools,” US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2022, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/ocr-pregnancy-resource.pdf>.
- <sup>25</sup> The estimates in figure 1 are independent from the estimates cited in endnote 2 and in Adams et al. 2022. National estimates of the number of parenting students will vary depending on the instrument and year of the data.
- <sup>26</sup> “Discrimination Based on Pregnancy and Related Conditions: A Resource for Students and Schools,” US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2022, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/ocr-pregnancy-resource.pdf>.
- <sup>27</sup> “Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA),” US Department of Education, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>.
- <sup>28</sup> “Financial Aid Data Sharing,” National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 2019, [https://www.nasfaa.org/uploads/documents/June\\_2019\\_Data\\_Sharing\\_White\\_Paper.pdf](https://www.nasfaa.org/uploads/documents/June_2019_Data_Sharing_White_Paper.pdf).
- <sup>29</sup> “Student Parent Families at the Center,” Urban Institute, December 2022, <https://www.urban.org/projects/student-parent-families-center>.
- <sup>30</sup> “Data-to-Action Campaign for Parenting Students,” Urban Institute, March 2023, <https://www.urban.org/projects/data-action-campaign-parenting-students>.

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# Errata

This brief was updated on April 24, 2023. On page 14, the definition of *parenting student* was changed to “someone who is enrolled in any level of education or training and is concurrently responsible for (or imminently will be responsible for) providing for a child of any age. They may be a biological parent, stepparent or unmarried coparent, adoptive parent, foster parent, guardian, grandparent, extended family member, or sibling caregiver” to reflect the researchers' further refinement of an all-encompassing definition of the term that underpins the wide efforts to collect parenting student data. A previous version used a different list in the second sentence: “biological parents, stepparents, adoptive parents, foster parents, unmarried partners in a relationship, grandparents, extended family, or siblings.”

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