Insights and Opportunities
Student Parents & Behavioral Science

Obtaining a college degree can have significant benefits for economic well-being, but far too many students don't graduate. This leaves them facing decreased earning potential from their lack of a degree, as well as debt from their years of enrollment. The college completion problem is especially burdensome for students who care for dependent children. When these students are unable to obtain college degrees, it affects not only them but also their children, perpetuating economic inequality across generations.

While not typically seen as the "traditional" college student, a full 22% of all undergraduates (3.8 million students) are parents.[1] And yet, despite greater motivation and generally strong academic performance,[b] only 17% of student parents who are enrolled in four-year programs will earn their bachelor's degree within six years.[2] In comparison, about 60% of all students enrolled in a four-year postsecondary institution will complete that degree within six years.[3]

To assist these students, some institutions are experimenting with 2Gen ("two generational") programming, which focuses on supporting the holistic needs of student parents and their children inside and outside the classroom. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and ideas42 have partnered to learn more about effective 2Gen programming and the barriers facing student parents.

In particular, we wanted to explore the potential behavioral barriers that may prevent student parents from persisting through college, and to better understand the interaction of behavioral barriers with other, more structural barriers. Behavioral barriers occur when contextual features interact with human psychology in a way that prevents people from making optimal decisions or taking actions. This perspective builds upon an extensive body of ongoing research by Ascend, IWPR, and other organizations; we believe that a behavioral perspective may provide complementary insights that can help drive forward efforts to support student parents.

> ## » Effectively serving student parents requires an intersectional approach to meeting their needs:[a]
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> - 49% of student parents are first-generation (compared to 29% of non-parents)
> - 78% of single student parents are considered low-income
> - 51% of student parents are non-white (compared to 46% of students without dependent children)

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[a] These statistics come from IWPR's 2013 report #C405 on student parents; definitions and methodology can be found in that report.

[b] Student parents have higher GPAs than non-parents: 33% of student parents have GPAs over 3.5 compared to only 26% of dependent students without children. IWPR #C481.

Through ideas42's work in postsecondary education, we have uncovered a number of behavioral barriers that students face throughout college. We anticipate that there are specific contextual features about pursuing a college degree while caring for children that may make some barriers more pertinent, and there may be additional barriers altogether that we haven't yet considered.

To start to unpack some of these insights, CAEL and ideas42 spoke with stakeholders at a diverse set of educational institutions to learn about their efforts and challenges in supporting student parents, with particular interest in 2Gen approaches that provided concurrent programming for their dependent children. We also reviewed behavioral science research and policy work to identify potential gaps. Through our research, we learned that while there are many promising practices in the field, there remains a gap in understanding what behavioral barriers may get in the way of college persistence and graduation, as well as what kind of additional supports student parents may need. Our goals with this paper are to highlight some of the work and research that has already been done, and to advocate for continued research that includes a behavioral perspective.

> **» Examples of behavioral barriers facing college students:**
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> - **Hassle factors**: I have to track down last year's tax returns to complete the FAFSA—I'll do it later.
> - **Identity:** I didn't do well on that midterm exam; I must not be college material after all.
> - **Mental model:** In high school, I only spent a couple hours a week studying outside of class; that schedule worked for me then, so it should work for college, too.

Student parents face structural and systemic barriers

Behavioral research and interventions should augment, not displace, efforts to address systemic and structural barriers facing student parents. Our review of the literature highlights several of the many structural barriers that get in the way of student parents' academic success:

1. **Insufficient access to quality childcare:** Students with young children spend a significant amount of time each week on childcare, and research suggests that these time demands from childcare are the primary reason why student parents have lower graduation rates. And yet, on-campus childcare services are rare, overly restricted, and expensive.[c] Student parents also often struggle to find services that offer extended hours for when they might be taking night classes, working evening shifts, or studying.

2. **Lower financial resources:** Paid childcare is an added expense that student parents don't always have the resources to manage; student parents are twice as likely as their peers to live in poverty[4] and are less likely to receive financial support from their families.[5] To meet their financial needs, student parents take on significantly more debt than their peers.[d] And yet, many sources of student loans have work requirements, despite research showing that working even part-time hurts academic performance and degree completion.[6]

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[c] Only 5% of estimated need is met by existing childcare services, and the majority (89%) of centers maintain waiting lists that are nearly as long as their total enrollment (wait times of up to two years are not unheard of). IWPR #C378.
[d] The median debt among student parents is 2.5 times the debt load of non-parents. IWPR #C481.

3. **Insufficient data tracking of student parents:** In our interviews, we repeatedly heard postsecondary institutions mention the need for improved data and tracking. Many colleges simply don't have systems in place to identify which students are also parents of younger children—even the federal government struggles to disaggregate outcomes for this population.[7] This makes it hard for postsecondary institutions to justify increased spending to support student parents, to show the benefits of existing 2Gen programming, and to conduct targeted outreach to student parents.

4. **Lack of conducive organizational structures:** Institutional transformation and change management is a challenge for any organization, including those in higher education. To accommodate the development of new 2Gen programming, schools often need to realign their internal infrastructure or create new positions specifically dedicated to the task. We also learned from our interviews that it's easier for institutions to get buy-in from leadership when they have independent funding from external partnerships, but managing multiple different funding sources can increase complexity and coordination challenges.

Despite limited resources, many colleges are doing good work to try and address these issues. The Family Resource Center at Los Angeles Valley College offers not only an on-campus, child-friendly space but also parenting workshops, flexible emergency funds, drop-in childcare, and more. Central Georgia Technical College offers onsite childcare centers that benefit from a strong collaboration between the state's early education and postsecondary education agencies. Central New Mexico Community College leveraged a local elementary school's "Homework Diner" program to offer special classes to parents in financial literacy, as well as access to the college's courses in ESL and early childhood education. And some institutions, like Hostos Community College, run a survey each year to identify student parents' needs and to design programming to specifically address those needs. Programs like these and others are critical in supporting student parents on their path to graduation.

Even so, there may be room for behavioral design to improve the efficacy of these and other similar efforts: quality, affordable, on-campus childcare should not only be available but specifically at hours when student parents need it most; in some cases, available funding is left on the table due to lack of awareness or hassle factors; and a behavioral perspective on organizational change can highlight opportunities to facilitate buy-in, accountability, and effective implementation.

> **» What is behavioral design?**
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> Behavioral design is a methodology that allows us to create (or improve upon) programs and services to work better for the people they're meant to serve. It combines two academic fields: behavioral science (which provides empirical research on how people's decisions and actions are influenced by their environment) and impact evaluation (which uses experimental methods to measure the impact of programs and policies). Behavioral design can help address structural and systemic barriers by ensuring people can easily access, use, and benefit from available solutions. This methodology is especially well suited to address behavioral barriers, which are contextual features that can have an unexpectedly large impact on people's choices and actions because of how they interact with human psychology. Whenever a process depends on people's decisions and actions, there's room for behavioral design to add value.
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> ***For more information:*** *https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_new_science_of_designing_for_humans*

Behavioral barriers exacerbate existing challenges

Not only is there limited research on the impact of 2Gen programming on student parents' academic outcomes, there is even less research on behavioral barriers and solutions. The barriers that we suggest here come from our review of the literature and conversations with postsecondary institutions, but we encountered just as many questions as answers. Some academic research on student parents suggests a behavioral perspective, but there are limited direct examinations of behavioral barriers. And our interviews unearthed several running behavioral themes, but there remain many open questions. It is not yet clear how behavioral and structural barriers interact and impact student parents.

That said, we learned that there are concrete opportunities for a behavioral perspective to contribute to and expand upon existing efforts to support student parents. And beyond using behavioral design in addressing structural barriers, we also believe that many behavioral barriers require further investigation. They may reveal potentially novel approaches to help student parents reach graduation day. Below we share a few of these insights:

➤ *Time scarcity affects priorities*

Students with young children have nearly 90 extra hours of tasks every week, resulting in a context of time poverty.[8] Limited resources—whether it's limited time, money, or something else entirely—create contexts of ***scarcity***, which influence the way people behave and make decisions.[9] Scarcity further exacerbates a common tendency of humans to be present biased, or to prioritize short-term "wins" at the detriment of longer-term goals.

For students, ***present bias*** can play out as choosing to get a certificate or a two-year degree, even though a four-year degree will have more meaningful economic benefits over the long term.[10] Parents often try to "get what they can" as quickly as possible, especially if they feel they don't have the support to make it through a longer degree program. In focus groups at Central Georgia Technical College, student parents talked about the "mommy guilt" they felt from spending time away from their children, and how they only felt comfortable committing to a college program with shorter time horizons.

These choices aren't unreasonable: parents are facing scarcity in many ways and must make tough choices. In another context with ample support and resources, parents may choose differently. Better access to affordable childcare can help change the context,[11] but there might be other solutions, too: colleges could offer more hybrid or online courses to increase scheduling flexibility, or they could offer just-in-time financial aid or counseling to help parents respond to emergencies. Cutting the costs and creating slack are two ways that programs can better serve people facing contexts of scarcity.[12]

➤ *Perceived norms heighten isolation*

Even though nearly a quarter of all undergraduate students have children, many student parents don't realize how common their situation is. Parents tend not to see other parents or children on campus: 2Gen programming is still rare; the majority of on-campus childcare slots are occupied by children of faculty, staff, and community members (rather than children of students);[13] and parents often don't feel comfortable bringing their children to classrooms, libraries, or student centers (many campuses explicitly ban children from classrooms and other spaces). This creates a negative feedback loop: parents don't see or hear about other students with children, so then they don't bring or talk about their children, and the cycle repeats.

While most of the colleges we spoke with did not perceive a stigma around being a parent on campus, subtle contextual features of higher education can unintentionally make parents feel unwelcome. For example, if a college doesn't have the data to identify and connect with student parents, faculty and administrators may inadvertently reinforce the mental model of parents as an irrelevant minority group. Over the last several years, Central New Mexico Community College has increased its efforts to collect data on student parents, and they noticed that these efforts have helped the institution acknowledge these students in their role as parents.

When colleges offer family friendly campus environments—like having toys available in adviser's offices, or providing childcare during evening tutoring sessions, or making sure there are changing tables in the bathrooms—it can be powerful. Peer communities where parents can meet and interact with each other are especially helpful in normalizing parenthood on campus and fostering a sense of belonging.

> ➤➤ **SPOTLIGHT:**
> **Homework Dinners**
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> Central New Mexico Community College partners with local elementary schools to help serve student parents at Homework Diners. Children get homework help from teachers, their parents get access to classes in financial literacy and ESL, and everyone gets a free hot meal. This program addresses many of our hypothesized behavioral barriers. Combining multiple services—support for student parents, a focus on their children, and dinner—in one event helps to mitigate the time commitment for busy parents. Bringing everyone together gives student parents a chance to build a peer community and recognize that they're not alone. And addressing the holistic needs of student parents and their children in one event reduces the hassles of navigating each role separately. However, it's often difficult for resource-constrained community colleges to find the money to pay for this sort of programming, and many colleges struggle to set aside a dedicated space for student parents and their children.

➤ *Juggling roles creates extra hassles*

On top of balancing the competing demands of children and academics, student parents often have many other responsibilities: as employees, as members of extended families, and more. In one conversation we had, we heard how many student parents at that college also need to care for their own aging parents or younger siblings. Not only do student parents need to handle all of these tasks, but they also need to regularly switch back and forth between roles. The burden of role switching (called "role strain"[14]) likely presents a cognitive bandwidth tax that leaves less attention available for academics.

People are likely to need different sorts of support for each role, and these services are rarely integrated into a "one-stop shop." This means that student parents need to navigate many different campus services

as well as off-campus community-based organizations. These seemingly small hassles are incredibly taxing for student parents who already have limited time. Furthermore, since colleges are rarely able to systematically identify student parents and target messaging about relevant services, student parents are left on their own to navigate them.

When colleges provide wraparound services or centralized connections to community resources, students benefit.[e] For example, we heard from Hostos Community College that they've invested in a food pantry, recognizing that there's significant overlap between students with food insecurities and students who are caring for others at home. They also provide workshops on a variety of skills that student parents have requested support with, closely coordinating with local organizations to fill in any remaining gaps.

A Call to Action

We believe that a better understanding of the behavioral barriers facing student parents will help colleges better support this population. Our interviews only scratched the surface: additional landscape scoping could uncover more information about how postsecondary institutions are currently attempting to meet the needs of student parents, as well as what challenges they face in developing and implementing new programming. Most importantly, we interacted only with research reports and a small number of school administrators; direct interviews with student parents are needed to garner a deeper understanding of their lived experience.

Continued research can help identify opportunities to more formally evaluate promising practices, like Homework Diners and drop-in childcare services, and to start scaling the most successful strategies. It can also begin to answer some of the questions we've uncovered so far: how can we improve access to and utilization of available programming and resources? In what ways do student parents see tradeoffs between academic and parenting commitments, and how might we help them balance and integrate these priorities? What are the most effective methods of helping student parents build peer communities and increase resilience?

As more postsecondary institutions acknowledge the need to support student parents, there is an increased opportunity for behavioral science to improve access, utilization, and efficacy of 2Gen and other parent support programs. There is also an opportunity to further understand the behavioral barriers student parents face and to imagine new solutions that will support student parents on their path to graduation. We owe it to student parents—people with the drive and courage to pursue college degrees to build a stronger future for themselves and their families, despite all the challenges they know they'll face—to make education work for them.

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[e] These sorts of synergies benefit any population experiencing scarcity, not just student parents. Poverty Interrupted, ideas42's paper on applying behavioral science in the context of chronic scarcity, talks about how holistic services can reduce the costs of discovering, signing up for, and accessing different benefit programs.

CAEL
Linking Learning and Work

ideas⁴²

About us

ideas⁴²

ideas42 is a non-profit that uses insights from human behavior—why people do what they do—to help improve lives, build better systems, and drive social change. Previous project work about how behavioral science can improve the postsecondary student journey are shared in our reports: Nudging for Success, and Nudges, Norms, and New Solutions.

CAEL

CAEL brings 45 years of experience and research on supporting adult learners in post-secondary education. CAEL is also a membership organization of adult-serving postsecondary institutions, many of which are eager to adopt new strategies to help student parents succeed.

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