



Published in final edited form as:

*J Am Coll Health*. 2022 ; 70(8): 2276–2280. doi:10.1080/07448481.2020.1870474.

## Responding to the Pressing Yet Unrecognized Needs of Student-Parents Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

The urgent closures of campuses nationwide due to the COVID-19 pandemic have presented unforeseen challenges to college students, who already showed concerning rates of mental health conditions and suicidality. Among the US college students, more than one in five of them are parents raising young children. Student-parents are faced with compounding struggles that substantially intersect with those of minority students, students from low-income backgrounds, and first-generation students. However, the challenges and unique needs of student-parents have not been sufficiently recognized by the college administrations. As higher education grapples with supporting students to navigate through the pandemic, reaching out to student-parents and prioritizing their needs is indispensable to assure their continued engagement and completion of studies. The authors offer recommendations for college administrations to help alleviate strains in student-parents amid the crisis and promote strengths and resilience in the short term and beyond.

### Keywords

COVID-19; student-parents; academic attainment; stress; resilience

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unforeseen challenges to college students, who comprise a demographic with already concerning rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidality.<sup>1</sup> Rapid transitions to remote learning, disconnections from university resources,

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marginal housing availability, forced relocations, and changes or losses of jobs, have exacerbated perceived stress and confer greater risks for mental health conditions in college students.<sup>2</sup> Notably, the pandemic-related impacts may be unequal and disproportionate across age, gender, race/ethnicity, social class, and pre-existing health conditions. In this paper, we call for greater and much-needed attention to one particularly vulnerable group—students who are raising children while attending college. Considering their unique needs and complex concerns, college institutions must be called upon to develop policies and strategies to help this at-risk population navigate through this pandemic and beyond.

## A Significant Yet Unrecognized College Population

Many of the national relief and re-building efforts in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have focused on the populations of working parents and college students separately. Student-parents, whose challenges intersect with those of both populations have been inadvertently overlooked. For example, the Economic Impact Payments program, in response to the national Coronavirus Tax Relief effort, determines eligibility based on status of dependency and adjusted gross income ceilings.<sup>3</sup> These relief efforts did not consider the financial burdens of student-parents such as tuition, student loan debt, educational and technology-related expenses, childcare expenses, etc. Relief efforts for college students, such as the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act,<sup>4</sup> despite allowing for financial relief for federal student loans, did not address the unique needs of students who are also parents. The relief efforts of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are also income-based and some explicitly exclude students from eligibility criteria.<sup>5</sup> Taken together, none of the current relief efforts have attended to the overlapping challenges facing the population of students who are also parents.

Strikingly, approximately 3.8 million (22% of all) undergraduate students in the US are raising children.<sup>6</sup> Prior to the pandemic, student-parents faced myriad barriers to academic success compared to their non-parent counterparts. According to the results of the National Student-Parent Survey,<sup>7</sup> student-parents are more likely than their non-parent peers to from low-income backgrounds, members of minority groups, and first-generation students. Of these student-parents, the majority (70% or 2.7 million) are mothers and 1.7 million are single student-mothers. Approximately 42% of student-parents attend community colleges instead of four-year institutions.<sup>7</sup> A large percentage (about 66%) of student-parents enroll part-time and about 29% enroll less than half-time for at least a part of the school year, which can impact financial aid eligibility.<sup>8</sup> After accounting for all financial aids and supports, nearly 68% of student-parents, and 90% of single student-mothers, live in poverty.<sup>6</sup> In addition to their multiple responsibilities of school, childcare, and other domestic workload, the majority of student-parents work long hours for low incomes without paid sick leave. The financial insecurity, difficulty in meeting basic needs of life, and substantial caregiving demands negatively impact student-parents' chances for degree completion and significantly strain their physical and mental health.<sup>9,10</sup>

Clearly, this parent-population in higher education overlaps with other vulnerable populations that most institutions focus on—minority, low-income, and first-generation students.<sup>11</sup> The vulnerabilities of the student-parent population, however, may well

exceed those of other populations because of the additional challenges of family care duties. Unfortunately, many student-parents do not see their campus characteristics and cultures being family friendly or designed to meeting their needs. According to a survey administered to 259 student-parents across 147 colleges and universities in the United States during the winter and spring of 2020 (before and at the beginning of the pandemic), many student-parents reported feeling unwelcomed, isolated, and disconnected from the college community.<sup>7</sup> With the significant stressors and disruptions of the current pandemic added to their daily hurdles, student-parents are at heightened risk of dropping out and in acute need of assistance in continuing their academic attainment. We argue that college administrations need to quickly mobilize and reach out to underserved student-parents by communicating with them and engaging them in the process of policy making. Without such actions, the institutions may end up falling short of their ethical missions aimed at retaining high-risk students and advancing equity and equality in higher education.

## Understanding the Pandemic-Related Stress in Student-Parents

Underscoring the broad and profound impacts of the pandemic on student-parents' lives and understanding how stress proliferates and exacerbates their battles are critical for institutions to address the dire situations facing this vulnerable group. The emotional and physical toll of screen time on well-being, coined as "*Zoom fatigue*" has been recognized to be resulting from prolonged usage of computer-mediated communication exhaustion.<sup>12</sup> Other common psychological symptoms in response to the quarantine may include emotional exhaustion, low mood, nervousness, uncertainty, anxiety, grief, depression, frustration, irritability, anger, and post-traumatic stress.<sup>2,13</sup> The pandemic-related psychological stress student-parents are experiencing can "*spill over*" from one domain of life to another. With childcare and school closures, for example, the stress of having to provide educational support for children on top of increased childcare duties can significantly undermine student-parents' abilities to cope with their own learning and completion of course requirements, which perpetuates their own academic stress. Stress due to parenting and academic demands may compromise student-parents' abilities to fulfill duties at work, causing poor performance or job loss, and, thus, deepening financial pressure. Increased work demands and economic burdens may also diminish the parents' psychological availability for quality parenting, likely causing emotional and behavioral disturbances in children, hence, elevating parenting stress in student-parents. Indeed, recent literature suggests that the COVID-19 places families' well-being at increased risk for child abuse and neglect.<sup>14,15</sup>

The stresses brought on by the pandemic can be also contagious and "*spill over*" from one family member to another. The financial pressure due to quarantine, for example, may transfer to spouse, sparking quarrels and marital discord. The negative interaction between parents may trigger emotional insecurity and misbehavior in children, elevating parenting stress and likely subsequent spousal arguments.<sup>16</sup> Escalated negative dynamics between family members may perpetuate conflicts, creating an interactional spiral that worsens the relational tensions within the family. Hardships and relational strains are especially exacerbated in student-parents from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, those with additional health and/or special needs, and those with pre-existing mental health and addiction issues. Notably, the pandemic-related stressors can have widespread and

lingering effects on overall health in student-parents and their families when immunity against illnesses is critically needed.<sup>17,18</sup> Furthermore, depression and other psychiatric symptoms may elicit concerns about cost and stigma, hindering help-seeking behaviors and the likelihood of detecting health conditions.<sup>19</sup>

These pandemic-related impacts on the overall well-being of student-parents and their ability to parent their children should be taken into account during the planning and design process for institutional support policies and strategies. The stressors faced by student-parents in juggling education and financial solvency are similar to the challenges of disadvantaged students that colleges have been working to address but are compounded by the additional responsibilities of parenting. Institutional offices involving student affairs, physical health and mental wellness, and diversity, equity, and inclusion should work together to ensure that supports are available that take into consideration the unique needs of student-parents.

### **Providing Support for Student-Parents**

Given the disruptions the pandemic brought to student-parents' lives, it is vital that the unique needs of student-parents are recognized and addressed. For short term goals, the administrations may communicate with the instructors to provide student-parents possible exemptions to deadlines of other requirements. Student-parents may also need concrete resources (food, housing, transportation, financial)<sup>20</sup> that will allow them to continue with coursework and to provide for the urgent health, educational, and caregiving needs of their children. For post-pandemic long-term goals, providing courses with more flexible schedules that allow asynchronous participation may be particularly beneficial to student-parents. Also, approaches that bolster the strengths and coping skills of student-parents will enable them to navigate through the challenges of the pandemic and continue on the path of achieving their educational goals. Here we propose several avenues for higher education administrations to consider that can help student-parents and their families achieve coping and resilience amid the crisis and reach a thriving future following the pandemic.

### **Identify and Track Parenting Status of Students**

College communities urgently need to take steps in identifying the student-parents so that various forms of support can be delivered to this sidelined population. Most of student-parents are “invisible” on campus because most schools do not solicit information on the parenting status of their students. Although there is no available data on this, we argue that it is possible that the costs of childcare and family support may be concerns of the administrations and become roadblocks for the identification work, rendering student-parents remain unnoticeable. Additionally, student-parents may feel reluctant to disclose this information due to concerns of being treated differently and the stigma around teen parenthood.<sup>7</sup> If institutions of higher education make known to the campus community about their earnest initiatives of offering support to student-parents amid and after the pandemic, student-parents may be more inclined to report their parenthood status and reveal their distinct needs. Importantly, the administrations cannot address the special needs of student-parents without knowing who their student-parents are.

### **Assess the Needs of Student-Parents**

Once the administrations identify their student-parents, needs assessments ought to be put in place to gauge and understand the specific unmet needs facing student-parents. Effective needs assessments can efficiently direct finite resources towards practical and feasible solutions to fill the gaps in services available for student-parents. Because the barriers to academic success in student-parents coincide with and may surpass those of other underrepresented groups<sup>21–24</sup>, needs assessments for student-parents require sensitive measures that exclusively reveal the distinct needs of this high-risk population. Further, due to the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, effective use of the assessment data not only can help with the documentation of how student-parents are navigating through the current pandemic but also can inform preventive and supportive initiatives against probable future pandemics or other community crises.

### **Prioritize Student-Parents in Support Services**

Given that the challenges of student-parents overlap, in part, with those facing other vulnerable student populations, prioritizing the immediate, concrete needs of student-parents may prove to be an efficient strategy for reaching students who are most in need during the pandemic. An immediate goal would be to ensure these students have sufficient educational, financial, health, and social resources for their family that will enable them to continue with their studies. Examples of immediate, low-cost support include providing course requirement flexibility with deadlines and attendance, especially during the pandemic; checking in for physical and mental well-being via emails or phone calls, and deliveries of child care items such as wipes, diapers, and educational aids; ensuring that student-parents are aware of campus and community resources for finances, basic needs, child health and development, and other family needs.

Examples of more long-term support include creating a campus climate that respects student-parents and combats the stigma of teenage pregnancy; offering child care grants; providing targeted-advising session or targeted-advisors who are knowledgeable about the challenges of this population; creating peer or support groups to reduce isolation and strengthen within-community responses; offering parenting workshops and establishing websites for networking and information sharing; and ensuring the campus is “family friendly” by offering breastfeeding lounges and computer labs, and family activities such as family movie nights. Because student-parents tend to be from under-represented groups,<sup>7</sup> prioritizing the needs of student-parents may also advance the institutions’ efforts toward diversity, equity, and inclusion. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that addressing the needs of students-parents also entails the most direct and far-reaching influences on the next-generation: Children of college graduates are more likely to go to college and persist through degree or certificate attainment.<sup>25</sup> Thus, ensuring that student-parents are successful may turn out to be conducive to mitigating inequity that begins long before the next-generation reaches university campus.

### **Take a Holistic Approach**

For the majority of student-parents, emergency financial aids are urgently needed during the COVID-19 crisis. Although the federal government has authorized the Higher Education

Emergency Relief Fund for college students<sup>4</sup> and many institutions have allocated monetary and material aids, student-parents are likely be unaware of or do not know how to access the resources. In fact, approximately 75% of student-parents are uninformed that their financial aid could be increased to account for childcare costs.<sup>7</sup> It is also important to ensure student-parents' access to technology and essential learning assistance as they scramble to adjust to remote learning under limited resources. Amid the pandemic, concerted services by combining health and counseling programs can efficiently streamline processes and deliver urgent evaluation and holistic care to the student as well as his/her children.

The distinct challenges facing student-parents brought on by school closures cannot be sufficiently addressed without specific guidance and resources for childcare. Braiding of federal and state funding sources can improve campus- or community-based childcare programs. However, as the pandemic continues without clear reopening plans, expanding existing childcare programs may not be feasible to immediately meet student-parents' pressing needs. One practical way institutions may offer help involves building digital infrastructure and crafting online networks to encourage mutual support among student-parents.

### **Establish Networks of Connection and Advocacy**

Student-parents can greatly benefit from the institution's efforts of establishing online support networks that allow parent-peers to connect with one another during such chaotic and uncertain times. Such forms of support may prove vital in reducing the experiences of isolation and loneliness and instilling strength and resilience in student-parents. The support networks can serve as platforms for student-parents to field their questions, obtain information, discover resources, and feel understood and reassured by their parent-peers. Moreover, the institutions can encourage and facilitate student-parents to advocate for policy changes at the college, community, and government levels. In particular, it may prove beneficial to include in student government in which there are positions designated for student-parent representatives to allow opportunities for them to voice their concerns and needs. Counterintuitive as it may appear for student-parents to assume more tasks when they are already over-burdened, such advocacy initiatives can be rewarding themselves and beneficial to stress relief and overall well-being.<sup>26,27</sup> Advocating for positive changes that benefit fellow student-parents may also enhance a sense of purpose in life and lead to better social standing and higher life satisfaction.

### **Conclusion**

The ongoing COVID-19-related disruptions magnify the challenges of already stress-stricken student-parents as they struggle to manage school, work, childcare, and other duties. These students comprise a considerable portion of college population and their challenges substantially intersect with those of other vulnerable populations. Although most universities do not identify nor address the needs of student-parents,<sup>7,28</sup> a growing number of universities are beginning to develop specific resources for student-parents,<sup>29</sup> and there is emerging evidence of the effectiveness of these programs in terms of student retention and graduation rates and positive responses of these students.<sup>30</sup> There is a great opportunity to

develop holistic family wellness approaches that take advantage of community and campus resources for these young families. As student-parents are often highly motivated,<sup>7,28</sup> institutions should also facilitate student-parents to convene leaders from their campuses, communities, and governments to advance policies and programs that better the lives of students raising children. Attention to the unique struggles of student-parents is long overdue and should prove beneficial not only for relieving the short-term strains on those students and their families but also increase the long-term benefits of completing higher education for student-parents, their children, the university, and the community at large.

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