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Despite Big Enrollment Declines, Parents Make up 22 Percent of College Students

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Contact: Jennifer Clark | 202-785-5100 | clark@iwpr.org (<mailto:clark@iwpr.org>)

New fact sheet shows that student parents achieve higher GPAs than other students, are more likely to be at for-profit schools, and have higher debt.

Washington, DC—While overall college enrollment declined by roughly six percent between the 2011-12 and 2015-16 academic years, the number of student parents enrolled declined by 20 percent, more than three times the overall rate, according to

a [new fact sheet \(https://iwpr.org/publications/parents-college-numbers/\)](https://iwpr.org/publications/parents-college-numbers/) released by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR) and Ascend at the Aspen Institute. There are now 3.8 million undergraduate students who are raising children, representing 22 percent of all college students.

More than two in five student parents are single mothers, many of whom are balancing school, care, and work. The likelihood of raising children while in college varies by students’ gender and racial/ethnic backgrounds, with two in five Black women in college raising children.

While a range of time and financial obstacles can impede their ability to graduate on time, student parents achieve higher grade point averages (GPA) than other students. One in three student parents maintain a 3.5 GPA or higher.

A number of factors may have contributed to the declining share of college students with children, including an improved job market following the end of the Great Recession, the rising cost of college, and the continued high cost of non-tuition expenses like child care, housing, and transportation. Student parents also make up a disproportionate share of the student body at for-profit colleges, so the closure of more than 100 for-profit colleges between 2012 and 2016 probably also contributed to parents’ decreased share of the student body.

IWPR Executive Vice President Barbara Gault commented on the new analysis:

“Low-income college students raising children are highly motivated to build better lives for their families and we should give them every opportunity to attain quality degrees. Increasing supports for student-parent enrollment and completion are key improving racial and ethnic equity in college attainment.”

Anne Mosle, Vice President at the Aspen Institute and Executive Director of Ascend at the Aspen Institute, also commented:

“The right investments in the postsecondary success of parents with young children expands access to good jobs, offers children the benefits of high-quality learning environments and improves family economic security across generations. This two-generation (2Gen) approach can create opportunities for student parents and their children to build on each other’s successes.”

Additional findings from the new fact sheet include:

- Of the 3.8 million students who are raising children while in college, roughly 2.7 million (or 70 percent) are mothers. While the majority of mothers in college are single parents (62 percent), the majority of fathers are married (61 percent).
- While student parents are most likely to attend community colleges, they make up a disproportionate share of for-profit college students: 45 percent of all for-profit students are students with children and 39 percent are single mothers.
- Median debt among student parents was more than two-and-a-half times higher than debt among students without children (\$6,500 compared with \$2,500, respectively). Black student parents hold more student debt than parents or nonparents of every other racial/ethnic background.

The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR)

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a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization that conducts and communicates research to inspire public dialogue, shape policy, and improve the lives and opportunities of women of diverse backgrounds, circumstances, and experiences. IWPR also works in collaboration with the Program on Gender Analysis in Economics at American University.

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