

# Support Single Mothers in College to Make Education More Equitable for All

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By Barbara Gault and Jennifer Zeisler, [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#)

Today's college communities include [1.7 million](#) single mothers striving to earn degrees that could secure better futures for their families, but only [8 percent](#) of them complete school within six years, due in large part to the difficulties of balancing parenting with schoolwork and jobs.

The challenge is particularly pressing for people of color: Nearly [four in ten](#) Black female college students are single mothers, and Latina and Native American women students are also more likely to be juggling parenthood and school without the support of a partner.

Unless colleges and policymakers do more to support single mothers in college—of whom 90 percent have low incomes—they will continue to struggle to access the education that is essential for economic success and a more equitable society.

Emerging evidence suggests that investing in single mothers' educational attainment would be a worthy economic development priority for current and future generations. A [recent analysis](#) by the Institute for Women's Policy Research found that single mothers who complete associate degrees earn \$329,498 more over their lifetimes and are 38 percent less likely to live in poverty than single mothers with only high school diplomas.

These benefits are even more pronounced for single mothers who earn bachelor's degrees. Society reaps savings as well: Investments in child care and case management, which dramatically improve graduation

rates, pay for themselves in tax savings and reduced public benefit spending when single mothers graduate. Monroe Community College in Rochester, New York, for example, found that student parents who used campus child care were three times more likely to graduate than those who didn't receive child care.

Colleges, communities, foundations, and policymakers have made some [strides](#) in increasing educational opportunities for single mothers, but they must be encouraged to do more. Here are five actions that can make a difference:

### **1. Collect Better Data**

Colleges must start tracking how many of their students are parents. This information could help measure the need for services, such as campus child care, which is [declining in availability](#) despite growing demand; a 2016 survey of 99 campus child care centers found that the average waiting list [included 80 children](#).

Data can also help schools track performance, persistence, and completion outcomes for students who have children, and proactively offer targeted case management, academic support, or emergency financial assistance when student parents are struggling.

[Monroe Community College](#) in Rochester, New York, offers an example. It tracks students' parent status, as well as the ages of children, in an enrollment survey every term.

### **2. Consider Parenting Costs in Financial Aid and Student Supports**

Colleges can also take steps to understand single parents' unique living costs, including housing, transportation, and child care expenses, and make sure they are considered in financial aid decisions. One student parent [described](#) securing enough scholarship and grant money to pay for part of her educational expenses, but still accruing student loan debt to pay for child care. For many working and parenting students, living expenses far exceed the cost of tuition.

[Mount Wachusett Community College](#) offers scholarships specifically to help students cover child care expenses. [LA Valley Community College](#) provides students with free diapers, children's books and clothing, and spaces for studying or playing. As one student parent [wrote in \*The Washington Post\*](#), "For me, the hardest sacrifice has been postponing my college degree so I could afford to pay for my daughter's daily needs—such as diapers, clothes, food and, above all, child care."

### **3. Collaborate With Communities**

Colleges can make progress through modest efforts on campus and by working with their broader communities to embrace the central role that family care plays in the lives and success of their students. For example, Lane Community College in Oregon has [a resource and referral office on campus](#) to help students seeking child care. Miami Dade College [partners with Single Stop](#) to connect students to care and help them apply for federal child care subsidies.

In addition to funding innovative programs and outcome evaluations, foundations at both the community and national level can help foster community connections by using their convening power to connect stakeholders. For example, ECMC Foundation has brought together organizations across multiple disciplines to discuss research and practices aimed at improving postsecondary educational outcomes for single mothers. A [recent grant](#) to Education Design Lab will engage other ECMC Foundation grantees as subject matter experts in an effort to marry best practices and research with design thinking.

#### **4. Provide College Support Without Work Requirements**

Most single mothers in college spend [nine hours per day](#), on average, on caregiving and housework, limiting the amount of time they can spend on paid work and school. Yet many states have counterproductive policies that put even more time pressure on single parents when they reach out for help. Some of this is rooted in lingering, often implicit, attitudes that low-income single mothers, particularly those of color, [must be closely monitored](#) to ensure that social supports are used appropriately.

In Washington, officials [require college students](#) to work 20 hours per week—on top of attending school—to access child care subsidies, making it harder for them to graduate. This policy remains in place, despite the state passing legislation designed to dramatically increase the number of adults with postsecondary credentials [by 2023](#). But in an important first step toward addressing this issue, Washington lawmakers [passed a budget earlier this week](#) with a provision that would allow single parents pursuing vocational credentials to access subsidies without work requirements.

States that tie support to work requirements undermine their own efforts to spread college education to all of their citizens, not just single mothers. States such as Kentucky and Georgia provide an alternative approach. They have changed their public child care subsidy rules to make it easier for student parents to pay for child care while in school.

#### **5. Encourage Proactive Policies for Student Parent Success**

Some federal and state policymakers have made great advances in helping colleges with the success of student parents. In 2018, for example, Congress passed an omnibus spending package that [tripled the funding](#) for Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools (CCAMPIS), the only federal program that

promotes student success through child care. Now funded at \$50 million per year, CCAMPIS can make resources available to a larger number of campuses, but the funds still only reach a fraction of those who need them.

The governors of [California](#) and [New York](#) have both introduced proposals to increase support for student parents. [Minnesota's Postsecondary Child Care Grant](#) provides funding to eligible parents pursuing undergraduate or graduate degrees. Maine recently passed its [Act to Reduce Child Poverty by Leveraging Investments in Families Today \(LIFT\)](#), which provides financial aid to low-income parents who do not qualify for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Philanthropists should encourage forward-looking policies like these and other programs that lead to educational success for all students, including single mothers.

### **An Investment for Generations**

By doing more to address the needs of students who are single mothers, colleges will achieve better and more equitable educational outcomes and contribute to the economic success of individuals, families, and the country. It will also better position schools to meet the demands of a changing student body; nearly half of undergraduates are now considered [independent adult students](#), who often face formidable financial, family, and time demands, even if they aren't raising young children. Philanthropists can play a role as thought leaders, conveners, and investors in family-conscious campuses, programs, and communities. Helping single moms helps us all and will pay off for generations.



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