



Will Higher Ed Meet the Needs of Parenting Students?

Narrowing the Gap Between Federal Mandates and Institutional Practice

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This article is based on part of Heather’s doctoral dissertation and is written in the author’s personal capacity. The views expressed are the author’s own and should not be taken as the views of the University of California Office of the President or the University of California.

Nearly one in five undergraduates are parents—disproportionately female, low income, and people of color. Despite achieving academic performance comparable with or better than their peers, parenting students graduate at much lower rates owing to structural barriers such as unaffordable child care, inflexible academic policies, food insecurity, and housing insecurity. Federal laws provide only fragmented protections. But colleges can narrow governmental policy gaps through clearer accommodation policies, improved data collection, faculty and staff training, and expanded campus and community supports.

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Nearly 1 in 5 of all college undergraduates are parents, or students with dependent children. Parents in college disproportionately come from underrepresented and low-income backgrounds. Over half identify as nonwhite (55 percent), and just under half are first-generation students (48 percent). Three-quarters (74 percent) are female, and 2 in 5 of those are single.¹ Parenting students are more likely to live below the federal poverty level, and they have more financial obligations than their nonparenting peers,² leading to over half of student parents

experiencing food insecurity and nearly 70 percent experiencing housing insecurity.³ Despite achieving comparable or even higher grade point averages than their counterparts, parenting students graduate half as often. These students identify a lack of affordable child care, institutional and employment inflexibilities, and difficulty paying bills as their main reasons for dropping out.⁴ However, the success of parenting students is critical not only for their socioeconomic mobility, but also for the next generation's: children's educational, social, health, and economic outcomes are better when their parents graduate.⁵

Lack of federal legal protections and campus-level support structures for parenting students remains a significant barrier to success, leading to low graduation rates, elevated basic needs insecurities, and mental health concerns. Institutes of higher education—referred to here as colleges but including various organizations—must use their authority to help close the federal policy gaps. By implementing policy and programmatic changes that protect students' abilities to both care for their children and pursue their own educations, colleges can help student parents beat the odds.

The dismantling of the Department of Education and recent threats to the only federal grant specifically supporting child care for low-income college students, Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS), make institutional decisions all the more urgent. By fostering an educational environment that recognizes and supports the needs of parenting students, colleges can support multigenerational success, not only improving their own retention and graduation rates, but also increasing the likelihood that graduates' children will go to college as well.

This policy analysis will review the gaps in federal policy protections for parenting students through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), Title IX, and the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, along with the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act and Executive Order 13152.⁶ Colleges looking to narrow the gaps—that is, the differences between what federal laws require versus what student parents actually need—will also find recommendations for using their institutional resources strategically. College leaders, policy scholars, and student-parent advocates can use this information to develop initiatives providing essential protections and supports for parenting students.

How Do Student Parents Juggle Their Obligations?

The barriers parenting students face are exacerbated by significant gaps between federal protections and higher education policies. Colleges are not required by law to consistently provide many accommodations and flexibilities that would address caregiving challenges, leaving parenting students to navigate competing responsibilities without adequate support. Many student parents find themselves left with a decision: pursue their education to improve their family's socioeconomic stability or drop out to care for their children's immediate needs. This conundrum disproportionately affects historically underserved populations, with Black and single-parent students among the most likely to drop out.⁷ Addressing these systemic issues is essential for improving graduation rates and ensuring that parenting students can achieve both

academic and personal success, which ultimately supports national postsecondary attainment goals.⁸

What Gaps in Federal Policy Can Colleges Fill?

Unlike other groups of vulnerable students entitled to specific and generally normalized accommodations, such as students with disabilities, parenting students lack federal protections appropriate for their situations, despite their legal and moral caregiving obligations to their children. Statutes intended to apply primarily to other populations are pieced together to cover student parents, with the occasional measure to support pregnancy- or birth-related conditions. Some of these laws apply to students, while some apply only to college employees. Some protect against discrimination, while others provide limited accommodations generally not useful after pregnancy and lactation.⁹

For example, employees who meet certain requirements must receive accommodations according to the FMLA, which protects time off for qualifying medical and caregiving situations. However, students benefit only when they are qualifying college employees.¹⁰ Then, FMLA accommodations may only apply to their employment, not to their academic standing. The Pregnancy Discrimination Act, similarly, offers protection but does not apply to students unless they are qualifying employees. Other educational statutes cover students but have limited applicability. Title IX, which prohibits sex-based discrimination, provides grounds for certain accommodations but only for medical conditions related to pregnancy. Even when students qualify for the most benefits under these laws, none provide reasonable protections or accommodations for a student to meet the long-term caregiving responsibilities associated with parenting. Table 1 outlines federal regulations and their points of coverage.

TABLE 1
Federal Regulations Covering Student Parents

Regulation	Applies to employees^a	Applies to students^b	Prohibits discrimination	Requires accommodations or benefits
Americans with Disabilities Act	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Family and Medical Leave Act	Yes	No	No	Yes
Executive Order 13152	Yes	No	Yes	No
Title IX	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pregnancy Discrimination Act	Yes	No	Yes	No
Pregnant Workers Fairness Act	Yes	No	No	Yes

Note: “Yes” or “No” indicates whether or not the characteristic applies to the federal requirement.

^a Applies to those employed by a college, both students and nonstudents.

^b Some institutions provide students with the protections or accommodations of these policies, but the protections are not necessarily federally required

How Can Colleges Take Action?

Colleges typically fail to normalize the accommodations and flexibilities necessary to ensure adequate support for student parents.¹¹ This can leave student parents having to choose

between caring for their children to meet short-term needs and pursuing their education to secure their family's longer-term socioeconomic mobility. For example, neither federal statutes nor most institutions' practices guarantee student parents the right to exam or assignment accommodations to care for a sick child. Instead, flexibility is left to the faculty's discretionary decision making.

Parenting students are exposed to this decision roulette every time they need an accommodation—for every assignment, for every class, and for many services. Yet faculty and staff are rarely provided clear guidance on how to accommodate caregivers' needs equitably. This environment breeds systemic and inconsistent treatment of, and disproportionately negative outcomes for, a student population known to be vulnerable.

If colleges wish to strengthen support for parenting students, they need to offer faculty and staff clear guidance on caregiving accommodations comparable with those for other populations. For example, student athletes and student government leaders are often excused from class to attend events. Students with disabilities are often provided accommodations that extend beyond ADA requirements, such as reduced course loads. Federal legal reform is often slow, but colleges have the power to reform their own policies and offer resources that can significantly improve student-parent outcomes.¹² To address the gaps between federal mandates and the real needs of their parenting students, institutions can take several concrete actions.

Develop or Improve Standard Data Collection Practices

Colleges in most states are not required to collect data on parenting students, so they often do not know how many student parents are enrolled or their characteristics. Information on student parents' age, gender, income, ethnicity, and the number and ages of their children would help colleges develop and advocate for appropriate resources. Data collection recommendations have recently been developed by researchers and policy experts in collaboration with student parents and colleges to assist in these efforts.¹³

Update and Provide Guidance on Policies That Address Student Parents' Needs

To support parenting students, colleges must create, review, and update their academic, attendance, and support service access policies (or lack thereof), identifying (1) the gaps between what their institutions provide and what their student parents need to thrive, and (2) the policies and practices likely to create inconsistent and inequitable treatment of student parents in comparison with other vulnerable populations. Just as critically, these colleges must give faculty and staff clear guidance on how to equitably implement policies that provide student parents with reasonable accommodations and flexibilities.¹⁴

Train Staff, Faculty, and Administrative Leaders on Student-Parent Equity

Faculty and staff would benefit from training on the unique challenges parenting students face and how colleges can support them. Training will build awareness of the unique challenges faced by the student-parent population, their intersecting identities, and the significant impact of added resources.

Create and Strengthen Existing Campus Resources

High-quality data, along with feedback from student-parent populations, will guide institutions in creating dedicated and effective support services, including well-documented needs like affordable child care.¹⁵ Other needs include parenting student resource centers for streamlined support and referrals, on-campus child care, child care subsidies, food and housing support, financial assistance, specialized academic advising, and priority registration. Institutions can look to legislation for examples of services or practices now mandated for parenting students in certain states.¹⁶

Cultivate Collaborative Relationships

Colleges need support in meeting the full needs of their vulnerable populations, including student parents. To help provide critical resources, colleges can develop reciprocal referrals with local community organizations and a streamlined process for students to apply for public benefits with their local human services agencies. These programs assist with food, child care, housing, transportation, counseling, educational supplies, and other essential needs. Partnering with national programs, such as Head Start, and accessing state resources can be pivotal in helping colleges provide higher-cost services like child care.¹⁷ Colleges could also develop partnerships with their legislative representatives, advocating for the funding and resources needed to support student parents. These efforts are more likely to be effective if backed by data and done in collaboration with state advocacy and policy and advocacy organization initiatives.¹⁸

Conclusion

Bridging the divide between federal policy protections and what parenting students actually need to succeed in higher education requires immediate action from postsecondary institutions. Federal laws provide only fragmented and inconsistent safeguards, leaving student parents vulnerable to inequitable treatment, financial instability, basic needs crises, and academic attrition. Institutions, however, can help fill these gaps through intentional policy reform, guaranteed academic accommodations, and improved services. Given the recent reductions in force at the Department of Education and threats to social programs like SNAP, Medicaid, Marketplace (Affordable Care Act) insurance, and CCAMPIS, it is increasingly necessary for colleges and universities to take action.¹⁹ Institutional support is not merely a supplement to federal shortcomings—it is essential for ensuring that parenting students can succeed while fulfilling their caregiving obligations, thus advancing educational equity, improving retention rates, and creating intergenerational opportunity.

Endnotes

¹ All data from Theresa Anderson, Afet Dundar, Sheron Gittens, Renee Ryberg, Rebecca Schreiber, Laney Taylor, Jessica Warren, and Kate Westaby, [Who Are Undergraduates with Dependent Children? An Updated Overview of Student-Parent Characteristics Using 2020 Data](#) (SPARK Collaborative, 2024). A single parent is defined here as unmarried. Forty percent of female student parents are unmarried, compared with 71 percent of male student parents.

² Kevin Miller, Barbara Gault, and Abby Thorman, [Improving Child Care Access to Promote Postsecondary Success Among Low-Income Parents](#) (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2011).

³ Sara Goldrick-Rab, Carrie R. Welton, and Vanessa Coca, [Parenting While in College: Basic Needs Insecurity Among Students with Children](#) (Hope Center, 2020).

⁴ Susana Contreras-Mendez and Lindsey Reichlin Cruse, [Busy with Purpose: Lessons for Education and Policy Leaders from Returning Student Parents](#) (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2021).

⁵ Theresa Anderson, [What If Mom Went Back to School?](#) (Urban Institute, 2022); [Education Pays](#) (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025); Emily Forrest Cataldi, Christopher T. Bennett, and Xianglei Chen, [First-Generation Students: College Access, Persistence, and Postbachelor's Outcomes](#) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018); National Center for Education Statistics, [College Affordability Views and College Enrollment](#) (2022), [Students Are More Likely to Attend College If They Believe Family Can Afford to Pay](#) (National Center for Education Statistics, year published); Anna Zajacova and Elizabeth M. Lawrence, [The Relationship Between Education and Health: Reducing Disparities Through a Contextual Approach](#) (*Annual Review of Public Health*, vol. 39, 2018).

⁶ Executive Order 13152, a 2000 amendment to Executive Order 11478, Equal Employment Opportunity in Federal Government, prohibits discrimination on the basis of parenting status or sexual orientation.

⁷ Contreras-Mendez and Reichlin Cruse, [Busy with Purpose](#).

⁸ Emily Thomas, [New National Attainment Goal and Transfer Enrollment Grows](#) (*EdNC*, March 5, 2025).

⁹ Some states have implemented additional employee rights and benefits. See [Laws Protecting Family Caregivers at Work](#) (Center for WorkLife Law, 2025).

¹⁰ Requirements include working for an employer for at least 12 months and at least 1,250 hours over the past 12 months. The college must also employ at least 30 people. A student employee must work approximately 66 weeks at 19 hours per week to qualify. An academic year is approximately 30 to 40 weeks, depending on the institution. Accommodations include up to 12 weeks of unpaid job-protected leave for certain medical, caregiving, and family situations.

¹¹ Contreras-Mendez and Reichlin Cruse, [Busy with Purpose](#); Tracy R. Nichols, Donna J. Biederman, and Meredith R. Gringle, [Organizational Culture and University Responses to Parenting Students: A Case Study](#) (*Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, vol. 54, 2017); Alyssa Stefanese Yates, [Raising Expectations for Institutional Intervention: What Colleges and Universities Can Do to Support Student-Parent Success](#) (American Council on Education, 2024).

¹² Tia Caldwell and Sarah Nzau, [Student Parents Who Persist with Community College Are More Likely To Get Help From Their School](#) (New America blog, February 26, 2024); Meredith Manze, Dana Watnick, Lauren Rauh, and Polly Smith-Faust, [The Expectation of Student Parents to Self-Advocate: "The Ones Who Are Successful Are the Ones Who Keep Asking"](#) (*Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, vol. 48, 2024).

¹³ Nathan Sick and Theresa Anderson, [How Should Colleges Collect Parenting Student Data?](#) (Urban Institute, 2025).

¹⁴ For instance, many colleges have a cultural norm of excusing students from class or providing exam accommodations if that student falls ill, recognizing illness as a situation out of one's control. Parenting students should be provided the same courtesy when they are caregivers to a sick child. Faculty have expressed confusion about how to equitably apply accommodations or flexibilities for student parents. See Nichols, Biederman, and Gringle, [Organizational Culture and University Responses](#).

¹⁵ Barbara Gault and Lindsey Reichlin Cruse, [Access to Child Care Can Improve Student Parent Graduation Rates](#) (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2017); Lindsey Reichlin Cruse, Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Amanda Hare, and Susana Contreras-Mendez, [Evaluating the Role of Campus Child Care in Student Parent Success](#) (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2021); Brittani Williams, Jinann

Bitar, Portia Polk, Gabriel Montague, Carrie Gillispie, Antoinette Waller, Azeb Tadesse, Kayla C. Elliott, and Andre Nguyen, [For Student Parents, the Biggest Hurdles to a Higher Education Are Costs and Finding Child Care](#) (EdTrust, 2022).

¹⁶ For example, California’s AB 2881 (2022) requires colleges and universities to provide priority registration for student parents, notify them of on- and off-campus resources, and create a website for student parent resources to be provided at orientations. California’s AB 2458 (2024) furthers these efforts, including requiring higher education institutions to implement a campus policy for estimating cost of attendance for student parents, updating the net price calculator and establishing a data field in campus’ data management systems. California AB 2033 (2024) recognizes childcare and diapers as basic needs. In 2023, Minnesota provided [funding in the state budget](#) for the Student Parent Support Initiative, including institutional grants. Texas’s SB 459 provides early registration for student parents (2023) and HB 1361 (2023) requires campus liaisons for student parents and data collection.

¹⁷ Todd Boressoff, [Financing Child Care for College Student Success](#) (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2013); [Kids On Campus](#) (Association of Community College Trustees and National Head Start Association, 2026).

¹⁸ Recent California legislation demonstrates the success of collaborations between colleges and advocacy organizations. See [the California Alliance for Student Parent Success](#).

¹⁹ Eligibility requirements for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Medicaid have become more restrictive under HR 1. For instance, a SNAP work requirement exemption for those with children under the age of 18 now only applies to those with children under 14 years. This will affect part-time students more than full-time students. Medicaid has lost significant funding sources and created additional eligibility restrictions. Congress did not renew funding for CCAMPIS until February 2026, with some campuses losing immediate access to their CCAMPIS funding in 2025–26 because their institution does not align with federal priorities. Many of those who purchase insurance through Affordable Care Act provisions (that is, Marketplace insurance) will see a significant rise in their 2026 health care costs absent congressional action.

About the SPARK Collaborative

Mission: The Student-Parent Action through Research Knowledge (SPARK) Collaborative aims to collaboratively build evidence and make the case for policy change to support pregnant and parenting students so that they can meet their education and life goals.

Vision: We endeavor for pregnancy and parenting not to determine a person's ability to meet their goals. We also envision a future where all organizations and decisionmakers are coordinated and are working toward supporting parents in pursuing and achieving their goals.

How we work: We use data, research, lived expertise, and past learning to inform policy and practice solutions while developing future generations of leaders. SPARK provides shared data and other resources and manages a collaborative virtual space for organizations and individuals to connect and work together on research and action that advance opportunities for student parents and their families. SPARK is not owned by any single person or organization—it is made up of its members. The SPARK Collaborative is managed by a working board with representatives from the Urban Institute, the Pregnant Scholar, Child Trends, and parenting student fellows.

Who we are: The SPARK Collaborative is an association of individuals and organizations that build evidence and take action that supports pregnant and parenting students. We bring together teams with lived expertise as student parents, data expertise, policy expertise, legal expertise, and expertise in the systems that affect student parents and their families to holistically approach student parent issues.

How to get involved: Anyone interested in supporting student parents or engaging in research that would inform effective approaches is welcome to join the SPARK Collaborative. Membership is free but members must agree to our shared values and register at studentparentaction.org.

Author Information

Heather King currently serves as the inaugural systemwide Basic Needs Policy Analyst and Coordinator at the University of California Office of the President. She received her Master of Social Work at CalPoly Humboldt and her Ph.D. in Public Policy at Oregon State University, where she focused on social and higher education policy. Heather spent the majority of her time in college as a low-income student parent. These experiences inspired her to help found the basic needs movement in California and better understand systemic barriers to socioeconomic mobility. Her ongoing professional goal is to integrate the truth of lived experiences, the wisdom of practitioners, and the knowledge of research to create more effective policies and practices at system levels.

Recommended Citation

King, Heather. 2026. Will Higher Ed Meet the Needs of Parenting Students? Narrowing the Gap Between Federal Mandates and Institutional Practice. N.p.: Student-Parent Action through Research Knowledge (SPARK) Collaborative.