



Enhancing Support for Rural Student Parents

Insights from California

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Research on rural student parents remains limited, leaving policymakers and program designers unsure about how to address their challenges. This brief explores the experiences of student parents at public rural-serving institutions in California, highlighting their stories through their own voices. Rural student parents face the overlapping demands of coursework, parenting, and employment, but without the institutional infrastructure more commonly available in urban and suburban settings. The research addresses the critical question: How can California’s rural-serving institutions better support student parents in higher education?

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Introduction

Rural student parents in California represent a substantial and diverse population. According to the California Alliance for Student Parent Success, approximately 300,000 undergraduate student parents are enrolled across the state. The majority—about 72 percent—are students of color, 61 percent are the first in their families to pursue higher education, and more than half are raising two or more children. With a median age of 34, these students bring significant life experience to their academic pursuits, yet they often do so with limited institutional support.¹

¹ “California’s Undergraduate Student Parents,” California Alliance for Student Parent Success, September 06, 2024, <https://castudentparentalliance.org/resources/infographic-californias-undergraduate-student-parents/>.

For rural student parents, that support is even less substantial. Geographic isolation places them at a greater distance from the services most student parents rely on, such as child care, peer support, academic support, and other community networks. Like all student parents, they manage the overlapping demands of coursework, parenting, and employment, but without the institutional infrastructure more commonly available in urban and suburban settings. Programs specifically designed to support pregnant and parenting students in rural communities remain especially limited, both in availability and in capacity (Keyes and Dworak 2024).

The consequences extend well beyond academics. Rural student parents are more likely to struggle with persistence and degree completion, as competing responsibilities become increasingly difficult to manage in isolation. Research further indicates that this population experiences heightened levels of stress and mental health challenges, both of which compound the barriers to educational success (Shenoy et al. 2016).²

Methodology

Sample and Recruitment

Six public rural-serving institutions in California were identified using data from the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges.³ Shasta Community College; Butte Community College; Feather River Community College; Lassen Community College; California State University, Chico; and California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt. Recruitment relied on purposive and snowball sampling, through which a research opportunity flyer was distributed to contacts at each institution. Prospective participants completed a brief eligibility questionnaire, and those who qualified were invited to participate in a virtual interview. All participants provided informed consent in accordance with procedures approved by the Institutional Review Board at the Urban Institute. Recruitment and data collection took place over approximately two months, and participants received \$50 gift cards in appreciation of their time.

Data Collection and Analysis

Twelve semistructured interviews were conducted to examine how rural-serving institutions in California can more effectively support student parents. The participant group consisted of 1 male and 11 female student parents, all over the age of 18, who identified as White, Latiné, Black, or Native American. Each participant lived in a rural community and was enrolled at a public rural-serving institution in California. Interview audio recordings and transcriptions were analyzed to develop codes and identify recurring themes across participants' experiences.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. Scheduling interviews proved challenging given the time constraints rural student parents face. Some participants were early in their enrollment and had limited experience with institutional services, which constrained the depth of their contributions. Wildfire activity in the region restricted participation to four of the six originally identified institutions. Lastly, this is a small cross-sectional qualitative study and does not reflect all rural student parents' perspectives and experiences.

² "Student Parents in College Experience Unique Mental Health Challenges but Lack Access to Support on Campus," Ascend at the Aspen Institute and The Jed Foundation, press release, May 26, 2021.

³ "Projects: Introducing Our Nation's Rural-Serving Postsecondary Institutions," Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges, January 22, 2022.

Findings

This research finds that rural student parents are highly motivated by their personal and professional goals, family and community, and their own adaptability. Respondents also identified some benefits of rural life, though not all shared that view. Most findings, however, point to challenges and to opportunities for improvement. These often originate from the rural context, related to geography and institutional policy and practice, and student parents say existing supports are uneven in addressing them. Basic needs centers, a particular support that respondents often referenced, offer a promising platform for addressing barriers faced by rural student parents.

Motivation to Pursue Education as a Parent

Respondents identified three main motivators to pursue education as a parent: personal and professional growth, family and community, and adaptability to adversity.

Personal and professional growth: Many respondents viewed education as a pathway out of poverty and a means of securing better opportunities for themselves and their families. Mentors and professionals played an influential role in encouraging several participants to pursue higher education, particularly those who were the first in their families to attend college to pursue a degree. As one respondent shared,

“I was not born in the United States, and I have not finished any schooling in this country. It’s hard to apply for jobs when you’re an immigrant with no American educational background. So, to make sure that I can apply for any job that I want, I decided that I should get my bachelor’s.”

Family and community: Respondents were also motivated by a desire to model perseverance for their children and contribute meaningfully to their communities. One Native American participant, for instance, was driven by a commitment to gain knowledge that would directly benefit their Native community.

Adaptability to adversity: One respondent had lost a close family member, and two others were trying to stabilize their housing. They felt that having a degree would make them more resilient and adaptive as unexpected challenges arose in their lives.

“I actually experienced profound loss in my life. My little brother passed away, and he had a really great relationship with his probation officer—at the time he was in and out of jail. He actually wound up passing away from a severe asthma attack, but just experiencing his journey, and being such a big part of my life, I was really inspired by him, and then also in his passing, to want to go back to school so that I could help in a more profound way. I’ve been doing social work, but just without the degree for years. But a lot of the stuff I want to do, you have to have the degree to do it. So that’s what originally inspired me.”

Rural Community Benefits

Rural communities have strengths. Several respondents identified a sense of close-knit connection and community belonging as meaningful advantages of rural life, along with the

convenience and accessibility that can come with living in a smaller, more familiar area. But not all participants shared this perspective; some felt rural living offered no notable benefits.

Intimate support and connection: Smaller rural-serving institutions often foster a more personalized academic environment, where students and faculty are more likely to know one another by name and engage meaningfully beyond the classroom. This closeness can translate into more individualized support and a stronger sense of belonging. One student reflected on their experience:

“[I had a] lot of support and connection to faculty and to other staff. Especially in the office of grad studies, right, like [the student success advisor] and our dean...and people who make school a family-friendly environment. I can bring my daughter onto campus and bring her into the office and things like that. And she knows when I have classes, and it’s just a much more family-friendly environment than when I was, let’s say, at a junior college, for example, I went to [a community college], and so I feel like it wasn’t the same there as it was at [the university].”

Access and convenience: Several respondents highlighted practical advantages tied to the structure of their institutions. Proximity to campus meant shorter commutes, and the smaller scale of rural colleges made them easier to navigate. Some student parents also benefited from on-campus employment, which allowed them to work close to their classes. Online course offerings added another layer of flexibility, reducing the need for in-person travel. One student spoke to the relationship between their local college and the surrounding rural community:

“Oh, [my town] is rural-rural, but it really is right where we don’t have a huge population. So, I think that some of the benefits would just include having easier access to a college campus. I mean, I have to commute to get to [the university], but I can always go to [community college] if I need instant access to some resources that they have for university students. And then just building up a strong support system around me through knowing people within my community, which I think it would probably be more difficult to find in a bigger urban area.”

No benefit: Some students reported that rural-serving institutions did not provide distinct advantages, particularly given the persistent lack of resources tailored to student parents. One reflected this sentiment:

“I don’t know yet, to be honest, so far, I haven’t recognized that there are any benefits to being a [rural] student parent.”

Rural Community Challenges

Respondents identified limited access to affordable child care and transportation as central challenges of rural community life. For many respondents, the demands of parenting, employment, and academics left virtually no margin for flexibility. Rural student parents report facing considerable stress from managing multiple roles simultaneously.

Lack of child care availability and accessibility: One of the most significant obstacles respondents faced was the shortage of accessible, affordable child care. Many campuses lacked on-site child care facilities, and community-based options were equally limited, leading many parents to piece together informal care arrangements. Spouses, relatives, friends, and the broader student community frequently stepped in to fill child care gaps, particularly for those

facing long waitlists (sometimes up to two years) for limited campus or subsidized programs or those whose schedules did not align with child care offerings. The inability to secure evening child care was a direct barrier to enrolling in evening courses, constraining academic progress.

Those who qualified for child care subsidies received meaningful support. But those who fell outside eligibility requirements often could not afford or find any available options. Some respondents reported having to begin searching for child care while still pregnant, only to find few viable options upon the baby's arrival.

Some students, however, discovered helpful local resources:

"I'm in a mom's group out here...and somebody was asking about school and I just was looking through the comments, and they said, Oh, [Accelerated College Education] is a really good program for parents who want to go back to school, like, they are really helpful."

Some respondents also turned to social media to identify and coordinate informal child care arrangements. Although this informal support was invaluable, its inconsistency meant that student parents could rarely rely on it as a stable, long-term solution.

Transportation, rural barriers, technology, and online learning: Respondents had varied experiences with transportation, depending on their proximity to campus. Those living close to their institutions benefited from short commutes and relatively easy campus access. For others, however, long travel distances and inadequate transportation infrastructure created substantial obstacles, particularly when online course options were unavailable. The absence of reliable public transit, combined with limited nearby child care, made in-person attendance a significant burden for many. The costs of commuting, such as fuel, vehicle maintenance, and time, pushed some students toward online-only enrollment. These challenges underscore the uneven accessibility of rural institutions, where a student's physical location has a direct bearing on their ability to participate in higher education. In these conditions, respondents highlighted access to computers, reliable internet, and online courses as practical ways institutions could enable academic participation.

Limited physical access to campus resources: Physical distance added to the challenge of accessing support services. Respondents said that food pantries, writing centers, and other campus resources were often unavailable during the hours rural student parents could realistically be on campus, and most were closed on weekends entirely. Textbooks had to be mailed rather than picked up, campus events were largely out of reach, and students working through online programs missed the proximity benefits that on-campus enrollment provides. For many, the inability to access these resources was not a matter of awareness or interest; it was a matter of logistics:

"I won't be able to use the campus and what the campus has to offer because I'm pretty much forced into the online schooling."

Time management and overwhelm: Balancing academic responsibilities with caregiving left many respondents feeling stretched beyond their limits. The demands of juggling school schedules, child care, rural issues, and work created a sense of overwhelm compounded by institutional environments that were not always welcoming or accommodating. For some student

parents, even basic caregiving needs went unacknowledged. One graduate student parent described the stigma she experienced while breastfeeding:

“Being a working mom with a baby also in grad school was really hard, having to tell people, ‘Excuse me. I have to go because I have to go pump.’ It was looked down upon.”

This account reflects a broader pattern: when institutions fail to normalize and accommodate the realities of parenting, rural student parents are left to manage not only logistical barriers but also the emotional weight of feeling unwelcome in spaces meant to support their success.

Simultaneously managing coursework, employment, and caregiving took a significant toll on respondents’ mental health and overall well-being. One student captured this experience:

“Sometimes I feel like I’m a little more stressed than the normal student. Just because I have to deal with deadlines and tests and homework and juggle being a mom. And, you know, all my housework and stuff.”

Institutional Challenges

Rural student parents frequently encountered institutional environments that were ill-equipped and, at times, unwilling to accommodate their needs. Across faculty interactions, communication systems, and governance structures, respondents described a pattern of exclusion that exacerbated the challenges they already faced at home and in the community—though there were also some bright spots.

Administrative struggles: Navigating institutional processes proved frustrating for many respondents. Technological difficulties complicated both the application and the registration processes. In rural communities, where consistent internet access remains unreliable, online administrative tasks became an added source of stress.

Institutional and systemic barriers: Institutional policies were often ill-suited to the realities of parenting. Early campus closures, limited evening support, and mandatory degree requirements that failed to account for caregiving responsibilities left many student parents without viable options. Colleges’ restrictions on bringing children into campus spaces such as libraries and study areas further limited participation in supportive services. Lactation accommodations were another area of concern, with some respondents resorting to pumping in bathrooms, lacking designated spaces. Where designated pumping rooms were available, students noted they were an important accommodation.

Financial aid struggles: Rural student parent respondents encountered significant difficulties navigating financial aid, including confusing eligibility requirements, unclear policies, and unexpected costs. Some were disqualified from assistance altogether, while others fell into a coverage gap where they earned too much to qualify for subsidized aid but too little to cover their actual expenses. Several took out personal loans to pay for tuition, and others were burdened by a lengthy appeals process requiring extensive documentation, including proof of their children’s dependency. One student described the hardship of repaying a Pell grant that she was later deemed ineligible for:

“The whole [administrative] process was heartbreaking, discouraging. I almost didn’t want to continue with school just because of this hardship of having to pay back the Pell grant. I found out almost on accident, because I was speaking with an administrator about it and she was like, ‘Oh, no, you can’t do that. You’re going to have to pay that back.’ She said, ‘I have to report this because it’s a federal law,’ and she reported it, and then I ended up with this huge bill from [community college] for paying back the Pell grant. But then I was also able to get like an emergency sort of grant to help cover that. But it took a lot of time, and it was a whole lot of stress and anxiety on me in the interim.”

Access to needed courses: Securing required courses posed challenges for many respondents. Class cancellations, limited section availability, and rigid scheduling made enrollment difficult, particularly for those managing child care and unpredictable life circumstances that complicate long-term planning. Some students were unaware that priority registration was available to them, while others who did know still had to set alarms and compete for spots on registration day. For those who successfully accessed priority registration, the benefit was meaningful, reducing stress and providing a greater sense of academic stability. Yet communication gaps meant that many student parents were left to navigate enrollment without the advantage of resources that were, in principle, available to them.

Even some student parents who used priority registration found it did not solve all their problems. Some required classes were offered only at 8:00 a.m. with no alternative sections, leaving little room for students managing early morning child care drop-offs and school start times. Evening and hybrid course options were limited, and alternative schedules were rarely offered. These schedules made punctual attendance, or enrollment at all, nearly impossible.

Scheduling misalignment: Campus lunch hours overlapped with school pick-up times, leaving some students without meals. Child care center closing times forced difficult trade-offs, particularly for evening coursework. Mandatory field trips or course activities created participation barriers. Child care mismatch affected academic progress. One student parent captured how these constraints played out across a semester:

“I had an evening class, and it was part of my...degree. I really needed this class, and the day care closed at 5, and this class didn’t end until 7:50 in the evening. I had to go to the daycare, pick my children up, and then go dump them off over at a family member’s house a little bit away, and I saw my kids for like 5 minutes after day care. And then I didn’t get out of class until 7:50, and then I’d have to go pick my kids up after class and feed them and everything. It was pretty late at night, you know, and when they’re 3 and 5, it was really a hard semester.”

Coordinating group projects across mismatched schedules was also burdensome, often leaving motivated student parents to carry the workload alone:

“There were eight people [in a group], all being able to meet at the same time to go over these projects that are a substantial part of our grade. It can ruin us if we’re not able to find that time, and then you will have some students like me who are like ‘I’m going to do the best I can do.’ And then it turns into me doing the project for the entire group, because I don’t want to fail.”

Finally, internship requirements sometimes conflicted with work schedules, creating financial strain:

“Some people have to leave their job to do their internships.”

Transfer and credit issues: Credit transfer presented additional obstacles, particularly for students who had completed coursework elsewhere. Some found themselves short a class because of transfer complications, while others felt unsupported when their institutions refused to recognize foreign educational credentials. For these students, institutions’ not crediting prior learning not only extended time to degree completion but also signaled a lack of institutional investment in their success.

College resistance to structural changes: Respondents also described institutions that resist adapting policies to better reflect the realities of student parents. Student governance structures were seen largely as unrelatable, making advocacy for structural change feel out of reach. For many respondents, the underlying frustration was the assumption that all students share the same circumstances:

“Many of us were not just blessed with this ability to just be funded and go straight into school, and everything’s taken care of. We have to have this whole dynamic of another life, and school is just an extension of who we are.”

Mixed Supports

Despite the significant demands placed on rural student parents, dedicated support systems were often inadequate, though some students found helpful resources. Student parents faced barriers to accessing support, citing both lack of awareness about available programs and restrictive eligibility requirements that prevented access even when resources were known. However, some communities have developed collaborative networks between colleges and external organizations. Overall, these accounts highlight a persistent gap: individual programs and supportive personnel make a difference, but rural-serving institutions often lack a dedicated, coordinated structure designed specifically to support student parents over the long term.

Lack of awareness about resources: For many rural student parents, the experience of entering and navigating higher education was overwhelming and, at times, isolating. Many were unaware of the resources available to them. An absence of orientation programming and inconsistent dissemination of information meant that student parents often discovered resources only by chance. Several respondents knew only of basic needs centers, while others were unfamiliar with any available support at all. An absence of dedicated spaces or programs, such as parent clubs or student senate representation by student parents, meant that there were not many formal networks to help spread information relevant to student parents. A student shared the limited supports they were aware of on their campus but that seemed unavailable to them:

“I do know that the basic needs office has, like, emergency grants and different funding support for parents. But I know that I didn’t qualify.”

When questions arose, many student parents had to ask multiple people before receiving accurate guidance, reflecting broader gaps in institutional communication and follow-up. Not

knowing or getting unclear information about supportive resources made an already complex system feel inaccessible.

Mixed support and understanding from faculty: Many respondents felt that faculty did not understand them:

“I think there is a lot of lack of understanding of what it means to be a nontraditional student.”

Some faculty showed little initiative in understanding student parents’ struggles, and at least one respondent reported being emailed by an instructor suggesting they drop the course. However, others reported encountering supportive professors they could communicate with openly.

Mixed support and guidance from counselors: Respondents had widely varying experiences with academic counseling. Counselors were sometimes described as unhelpful or dismissive, and some students internalized negative interactions as their own personal shortcomings rather than institutional failures. Judgment for being a parent, and in some cases for breastfeeding, added an emotional dimension to an already demanding experience:

“There were a couple of rude comments [from my counselor], but I do know that they were specifically pertaining to my status as a parent, and breastfeeding.”

Many reported that counselors rarely inquired about their needs as student parents or proactively connected them with relevant resources. As a result, student parents frequently had to advocate for themselves, often discovering helpful options such as priority registration only by chance rather than through intentional institutional outreach.

Positive experiences seemed more often to be the exception rather than the rule, and the inconsistency of support left many feeling underguided and overlooked. Without mentorship, guidance, or basic compassion, some student parents came close to leaving higher education altogether.

The impact was notable when counselors did engage meaningfully, helping students navigate course selection and reduce anxiety. Respondents observed that staff with their own experience as student parents tended to be more attuned to their needs, pointing to the value of lived experience in service delivery.

Lack of student parent community support: Many respondents felt invisible within their institutions. Existing student organizations and governance structures were perceived as inadequate in representing the needs of student parents, and opportunities for community-building among peers in similar circumstances were limited or nonexistent. Respondents expressed a clear desire for dedicated programs and spaces, places where student parents could connect, find support, and feel recognized as a distinct and valued part of the campus community:

“You know how they have Trio, Upward Bound, and stuff like that, I believe they should have something like that for student parents.”

On-campus support and resources: Rural-serving institutions offered various resources that some student parents found meaningful. Financial assistance programs such as CalWorks,

Inspiring Scholars, scholarships, and merit-based financial awards helped offset the cost of tuition and related expenses. Basic needs services like food pantries, diapers, gas cards, and textbook support helped address immediate material hardships. Academic supports, including counseling, tutoring, library resources, and accommodations through Disabled Student Programs and Services, provided additional scaffolding. And on-campus employment offered proximity to campus resources while allowing some students to complete coursework during work hours. For some, these supports represented a genuine lifeline:

“Another reason why I’m going to school to hopefully get us out of transitional housing and actually into a home.”

That said, supports could be inconsistent. For example, the few student parents who qualified for child care assistance often encountered gaps in service tied to unstable grant funding. Graduate student parents faced particular isolation, as few programs extended support beyond the undergraduate level. Dedicated mental health services for student parents was one area of need that was largely unsupported.

Supports offered through digital communication posed their own challenges. Unresponsive emails, unclear messaging, and the complexity of virtual platforms made it difficult for student parents to get timely support. One shared:

“There is a hotline that I can call in case I need help. I don’t think it’s really helpful, because sometimes you have to show people what’s going on your computer to explain the issue.”

Community collaboration: Some respondents identified meaningful community partnerships that helped fill the void. Local organizations and programs, including the Accelerated College Education program; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; CalWORKS offices; the McConnell Foundation; and the Forest Service provided supports that institutions alone did not. Community-level generosity was also evident; for example, Costco donated returned goods to a local college’s basic needs center. Some institutions had begun partnering with local child care providers, and organizations serving homeless youth also served as informal parent resources. These examples point to the potential for cross-sector collaboration to build more robust support networks for rural student parents.

Basic Needs Centers

Colleges’ basic needs centers were often cited as a bright spot of support. Students who accessed these centers often found them helpful in offsetting their immediate barriers to education.

Awareness and outreach: Many respondents were unfamiliar with their college’s basic needs center or discovered it only through word of mouth, from personal research, or by working on campus. Formal communication about available services was inconsistent, and some students attended orientation without gaining meaningful knowledge about what the center offered. For student parents in particular, better advertising and proactive outreach could significantly improve awareness and uptake.

In the absence of systematic outreach, informal networks played a central role in connecting student parents to their basic needs center. Many learned about it through conversations with

peers, whereas others were referred by supportive campus staff. Access was thus uneven, and those without strong campus connections were more likely to remain unaware of supports.

Limitations to access: Even among those who sought help, access was not guaranteed. Geographic distance made services like the food pantry impractical for students living far from campus, and eligibility restrictions created additional barriers:

“So, I’ve heard of the food pantry and the ability to just go in there and be able to get groceries and stuff. But due to the rural area I’m in, if I am in that position to need food, that [would not be] an option. I’m then faced with financial issues of being able [to get there]. What’s more important, the drive to [town] to get the bag of food or putting the gas in the car to get there?”

Enrollment gaps also disqualified some students from emergency assistance, even those actively pursuing their degrees:

“One student of mine, you know, needed an emergency grant to pay her mortgage and couldn’t get it because she was not enrolled in summer classes. So, even though she had been enrolled in spring and was going to be enrolled in fall and is still an active grad student in the program, she couldn’t get any funding because she wasn’t enrolled in classes. So there’s still some big, like, barriers and limitations to getting that help.”

For some, being turned away had lasting effects beyond the immediate denial, discouraging future help-seeking behavior:

“I was very in a vulnerable...point of life and I think reaching out for help was already hard enough, and then just being just brushed off was very discouraging. And I think after that it was just even harder, like, to reach out for any other things, because then I just kind of felt like I’m going to be brushed off again.”

Fully supported when accessed: For those able to access the basic needs center, the impact was substantial. Respondents described it as an indispensable resource, providing food, diapers, clothing, textbooks, gas cards, computer rentals, fresh produce, and fire survivor support. A respondent reported that the number of students using one of these centers quadrupled in recent years, reflecting both growing need and increasing awareness. Student parents in particular highlighted food assistance and children’s supplies as especially meaningful, noting that the center helped supplement their families’ needs at critical moments.

Recommendations for Better Support

There are many opportunities to better support rural student parents in California and beyond. Affordable child care, mental health and well-being support, housing and transportation support, and improvements in advocacy, communication, and resources would likely make an important difference.

Affordable child care: Respondents called for expanded on-campus child care, drop-in care services modeled after fitness center child care corners, and stronger communication from institutions about available options. Parent-gathering groups, peer support groups, parent study

groups, and parenting classes were also identified as meaningful ways to build community and share resources, including informal child care arrangements, among student parents. Additional support for online-student parents, who often cannot access campus-based child care at all, was also highlighted as an urgent need. One shared the direct connection to economic success:

“We go to school to better ourselves and our family, but so many of us have to wait until our children grow to be more self-sustaining.”

Mental health and well-being: Respondents noted that addressing foundational needs, child care, food security, and housing would itself reduce much of the stress they carried. Beyond crisis support, student parents called for family-friendly spaces, communal study areas, play areas for children, and opportunities for peer connection and parent-child engagement as ways to reduce isolation and foster resilience. Library spaces welcoming to parents and children, parent support groups, and parenting education were also proposed as accessible, community-centered approaches to promoting well-being.

Housing and transportation: Housing instability and transportation barriers added significant difficulty to rural student parents’ daily lives. Long housing waitlists, a shortage of affordable options, and the absence of reliable public transit created compounding hardships. Rural students reported substantial amounts of driving, with associated costs such as frequent car repairs and vehicle replacement, straining already limited budgets. Environmental disruptions, including wildfires, power outages, and extreme weather, further destabilized both housing and class attendance. The distinctly rural nature of these transportation challenges was not lost on respondents:

“I don’t think that you know urban students face the issues of hitting a deer or a cow on the way to school.”

Respondents suggested that free bus passes and improved transit options could meaningfully reduce transportation burdens, particularly for those living far from campus.

Advocacy, communication, and resources: Across all areas, respondents emphasized the need for better advocacy, clearer communication, and more consistent dissemination of available services. Many were unaware of resources that existed, pointing to a systemic gap between institutional offerings and student awareness. Respondents called for continued research on student-parent experiences, stronger advocacy efforts on their behalf, and the development of parent clubs, student-parent nonprofits, and parent communities that could amplify their voices. Ultimately, respondents expressed a desire not just for more resources, but also for institutions to recognize and support their broader goal: to build more stable lives for themselves and their families through higher education.

Benefits of Stronger Supports

Financial relief and stability: Financial strain was one of the most pervasive forces undermining rural student parents’ ability to succeed academically. Respondents described how even modest financial relief could be enough to cover child care, housing, transportation, or monthly bills, allowing them to reduce working hours and invest more fully in their education. Greater financial stability would also open doors currently out of reach, including internships and

other experiential learning opportunities that require time and flexibility most respondents simply cannot afford. For many, the ability to return to school without the constant weight of financial instability would be transformative.

Mental health and well-being: Respondents were clear that stronger institutional support would have a direct and meaningful impact on their mental health. The compounding pressures of parenting, work, and academics, with little relief in sight, left many feeling depleted, anxious, and stretched. With more robust support systems in place, respondents believed they could sleep better, manage stress more effectively, devote more energy to their coursework, and approach their education with the focus it deserves.

Benefits to children: The impact of stronger support would extend well beyond the student parents themselves. Respondents spoke compellingly about their children and what becomes possible for them when their parents have access to adequate resources. Improved child care access would give children opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities, build social connections, and engage more fully in their communities. More broadly, when rural student parents are supported in completing their education, their children benefit from greater household stability, more present and less stressed parents, and the powerful model of a caregiver who pursued and achieved their educational goals. Supporting rural student parents is, in every meaningful sense, an investment in the next generation.

Academic focus and performance: With stronger support, respondents expressed confidence that their academic performance would improve substantially. Reduced financial and caregiving stress would translate directly into better attendance, deeper engagement with coursework, and greater capacity to meet academic demands. Many felt they were performing well below their potential, not for lack of ability or commitment, but because the circumstances of their lives made full academic engagement nearly impossible. Greater institutional support would not only help rural student parents survive their educational journey; it would give them the conditions they need to truly thrive.

Discussion

The experiences shared by rural student parents in this study point to a population that is resilient, motivated, and largely underserved. Findings reveal challenges that span finances, child care, transportation, and institutional support, as well as a particularly urgent theme regarding mental health, one that warrants deeper attention from researchers, institutions, and policymakers alike.

Rural student parents face a distinct convergence of stressors. The demands of parenting and academic life are challenging for any student parent, but geographic isolation, limited access to mental health services, unreliable transportation, and minimal campus resources create conditions of heightened strain specific to rural contexts. Anxiety, depression, sleep deprivation, and burnout were not peripheral concerns among respondents; they were recurring features of daily life. Yet mental health support tailored to this population remains scarce, both in practice and in the research literature.

Future research should move rural student parents from the margins to the center of inquiry. This means examining not only the prevalence of psychological distress within this population, but also the systemic conditions that produce it, including child care shortages, financial instability, and the absence of dedicated institutional support. Understanding how these factors interact in rural higher education settings is essential to developing interventions that are both evidence based and contextually appropriate.

Institutions and those who shape higher education policy have an opportunity to respond to the key issue described in this brief: rural student parents are pursuing education under extraordinary circumstances, and the systems meant to support student success were generally not designed with them in mind. Closing this gap will require targeted investment in research, intentional program development, and a broader commitment to equity that recognizes rural student parents as a distinct and deserving population, one whose success benefits not only themselves, but their children, their families, and their communities.

About SPARK Collaborative

The SPARK Collaborative is a multi-organization collaborative initiative. It aims to build evidence and make the case for policy change to support pregnant and parenting students and their families through data, research, lived/living expertise, and past learning, while developing future generations of leaders.

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