



Where Do Student Parents Attend College?

A Snapshot of Student-Parent Attendance Patterns Using 2020 Data

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This brief explores the types of institutions student parents attend and their enrollment patterns (e.g., full time or part time, online) compared with nonparenting students. We also present results by gender, and race/ethnicity to uncover potential inequities. Understanding of the types of institutions student parents attend and their enrollment patterns helps policymakers, researchers, and advocates identify disparities in access; provides insights for targeted policymaking at federal, state, and institutional levels; and informs tailored programs, support services, and academic offerings. We identified these patterns using the 2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study.

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Introduction

An estimated 3.14 million people in the United States are parenting children while enrolled in an undergraduate college program, making up 18 percent of the undergraduate student population.

Their counts and characteristics are detailed in a companion piece, “Who Are Students with Dependent Children?” (Anderson et al. 2024).

This brief uses the latest data from the 2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) to investigate the types of higher education institutions student parents attend and whether they attend full time, part time, or online, compared with nonparenting students.

Understanding of the types of institutions student parents attend and their enrollment patterns helps policymakers, researchers and advocates identify disparities in access; provides insights for targeted policymaking at federal, state, and institutional levels; and informs tailored programs, support services, and academic offerings. For example, colleges and programs enrolling high proportions of parents can explore online, evening or weekend, and flexible academic program offerings. Colleges and programs enrolling fewer parents can examine whether there are structural factors that may prevent student parents from entering and succeeding in their programs.

Different college types provide distinctive offerings for students. Community or technical colleges typically offer a pathway to credentials, certificates, or associate’s degrees that can be completed in a relatively short time and can lead to fair-paying jobs (Irwin et al. 2024). Baccalaureate institutions are more likely to offer programs and degrees leading to higher-paying jobs than other undergraduate institutions but require a greater time investment from students (Irwin et al. 2024). For-profit institutions often provide more flexible online learning structures, but they are less likely to have adequate student support services and resources (Ryberg, Rosenberg, and Warren 2021). Moreover, upon graduation from for-profit institutions, students typically have higher unemployment and lower earnings relative to other institutional types (Cellini and Turner 2018; Deming, Goldin, and Katz 2012; McMillan Cottom 2017). For-profit institutions often market toward marginalized students (Gaskew 2019); therefore, it is important to disaggregate student enrollment by gender and race/ethnicity in addition to parenting status to understand any resulting inequities.

Data Notes

We used the “dependent children” variable to identify student parents. In 2020 NPSAS, this variable is defined by whether a student has dependent children receiving more than half their support from the student. This may include children over age 18. The 2020 NPSAS identified the dependent children data item first from federal financial aid applications and then, if it was not available in the financial aid records, from the student survey.^a We understand that many more students might be parenting and caregiving for children than would be identified using this narrowed definition. In addition, the 2020 NPSAS does not include high school students in college or persons in noncredit training programs.

The COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns occurred early in the 2020 NPSAS data collection period. Because parents were particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic as they abruptly lost child care, employment, and educational continuity (Hicks 2021; Lin et al. 2022; Manze et al. 2021), students with dependent children were likely underrepresented in the survey portion of the NPSAS. This means that the 2020 data likely undercount student parents. In this brief, we report the numbers as they appear in the official data, despite these concerns. See <https://studentparentaction.org/resources/data-insights> for more detail.

^a National Center for Education Statistics, “National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: 2020 Undergraduate Students,” created August 13, 2024, accessed from PowerStats, <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/codebooks/by-subject/157-national-postsecondary-student-aid-study-2020-undergraduate-students>.

Where Student Parents Attend College

About half of student parents attend community and technical colleges, and they disproportionately attend private for-profit institutions

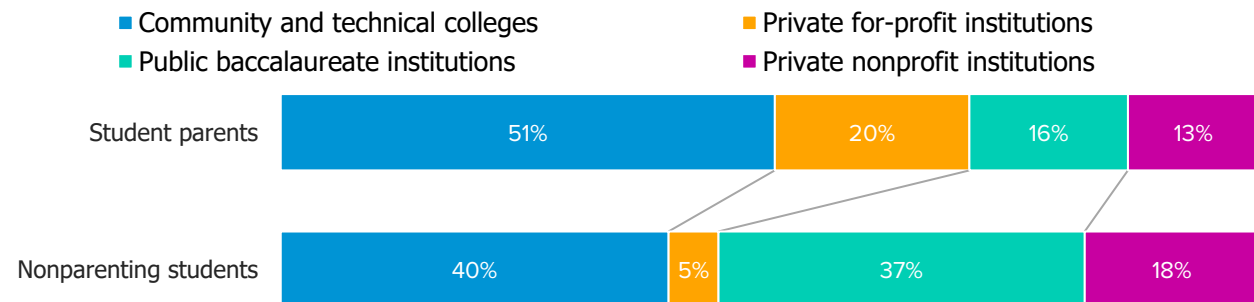
Student parents are more likely to attend community and technical colleges than nonparenting students: about half of student parents (51%) attend these institutions compared with 40 percent of nonparenting students (Figure 1).¹ Enrollment in public baccalaureate institutions is much higher among nonparenting students (37%) than student parents (16%), with the result that nonparenting students are more than twice as likely to attend public baccalaureate institutions than student parents.

One in five student parents (20%) attend a for-profit institution at any degree level—much higher than the 1 in 20 nonparenting students (5%) enrolled in for-profit institutions. Even though the enrollment rates for student parents are lower at other types of institutions, a substantial share still attend public baccalaureate institutions (16%) and private nonprofit institutions (13%), so these colleges also have a stake in promoting student parents' access and success.

FIGURE 1

Student parents attend all college types but are more likely to be enrolled at community and technical colleges and at private for-profit institutions

Sector of enrollment of student parents and nonparenting students, 2020



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2020.

Notes: Community and technical colleges are recategorized from an 11-sector detailed variable that coded colleges as public four-year non-doctorate-granting, primarily sub-baccalaureate institutions. These are often institutions that offer limited bachelor's degree programs. The analysis can be recreated with the variables SECTOR11 and DEPCHILD using DataLab (<https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/uwtweg>; free account required).

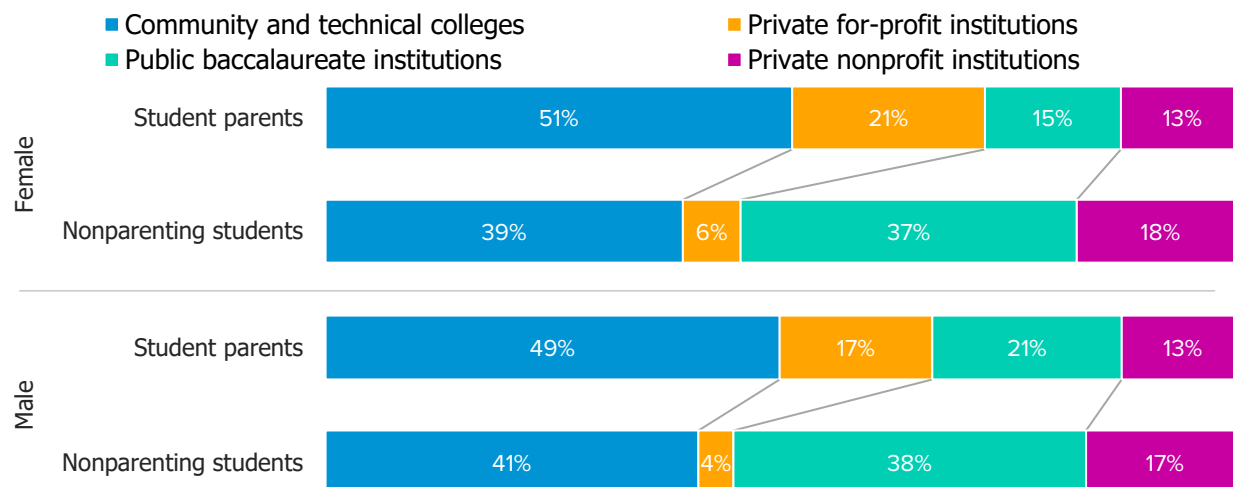
¹ We have included colleges coded as public four-year non-doctorate-granting, primarily sub-baccalaureate institutions in the NPSAS data as community and technical colleges. These are often community or technical colleges that offer a small number of bachelor's degrees. The NPSAS itself recodes these institutions as two-year colleges in a collapsed sector variable (SECTOR3A). We replicated this with the SECTOR11 variable to allow for separation of private nonprofit and private for-profit institutions, which are coded as "other" in the SECTOR3A variable. In the text, we avoid references to "two-year" and "four-year" because degree programs often take longer for student parents.

Institutional attendance by gender

Similar patterns emerge when we examine the data separately for student mothers and fathers compared with female and male undergraduate students without children (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

Student mothers and fathers are more likely to be enrolled at community and technical colleges and private for-profit institutions than same-gender nonparenting students
Sector of enrollment of student parents and nonparenting students by gender, 2020



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2020.

Notes: The sample of students who identified as genderqueer, gender nonconforming, or a different identity was too small to include. Community and technical colleges are recategorized from an 11-sector detailed variable that coded colleges as public four-year non-doctorate-granting, primarily sub-baccalaureate institutions. These are often institutions that offer limited bachelor's degree programs. The analysis can be recreated with the variables SECTOR11, DEPCCHILD, and GENDER3 using DataLab (<https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/uwtweg>; free account required).

Over half of student mothers (51%) attend community and technical colleges, a rate higher than female undergraduate students without children (39%). More than one in five student mothers (21%) attend for-profit institutions, at any degree level, compared with 6 percent of female nonparenting students. As shown in “Who Are Undergraduates with Dependent?,” student mothers are much less likely to attend public baccalaureate institutions (15%) than female undergraduate students without children (37%). The patterns and rates for student mothers relative to student parents overall (presented in Figure 1) are similar, largely because the vast majority (74%) of student parents are mothers (Anderson et al. 2024).

Nearly half of student fathers attend community and technical colleges (49%), a proportion higher than male undergraduate students without children (41%) (Figure 2). Student fathers are more likely to attend a for-profit institution, at any degree level (17%), than male undergraduate students without children (4%). Student fathers are less likely than male undergraduate students without children to attend public baccalaureate institutions (21% versus 38%).

Student mothers and student fathers have similar enrollment rates at community and technical colleges (51% versus 49%) and at private nonprofit institutions (13% for both). But student mothers are more likely than student fathers to enroll at private for-profit institutions (21% versus 17%), whereas student fathers are more likely than student mothers to enroll at public baccalaureate institutions (21% versus 15%).

We analyzed results for students who identified as genderqueer, gender nonconforming, or a different identity, but the sample sizes were too small to draw valid conclusions. Future iterations of the NPSAS could oversample these students to provide more insight on their enrollment patterns and other characteristics.

Institutional attendance by race and ethnicity

Student parents in higher education often have intersectional marginalized identities. For example, as shown in “Who Are Undergraduates with Dependent Children?,” student parents are more likely to be American Indian or Alaska Native (AIAN) or Black than nonparenting students, and they are disproportionately women of color, first-generation college students, veterans, and from low-income backgrounds. Many also identify as Latine (Anderson et al. 2024).² For student-parent supports to be effective, outreach that is sensitive to these complex identities is crucial.

Almost two-thirds (64%) of AIAN student parents are enrolled at community and technical colleges; this is the highest rate of community and technical college enrollment among all racial and ethnic groups of student parents (Figure 3). By contrast, only half (50%) of nonparenting AIAN students attend community colleges.

White student parents have the highest rate of attendance at public baccalaureate institutions of any racial or ethnic group of student parents (19%), though white student parents are much less likely than nonparenting white students to attend public baccalaureate institutions (40%).

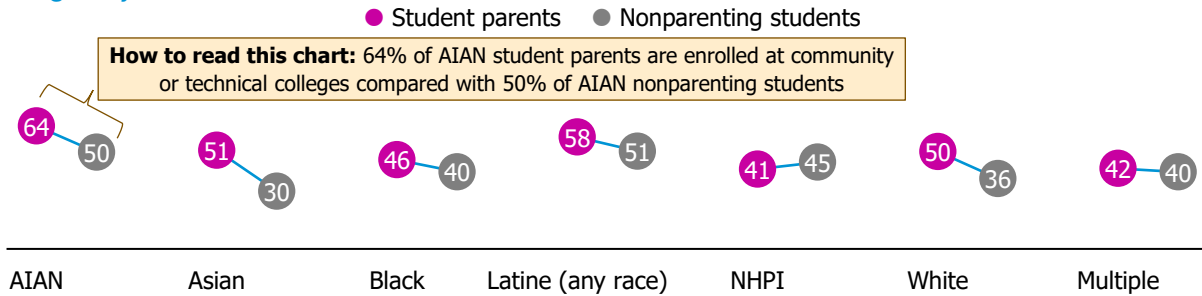
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (NHPI) student parents are much more likely to attend a private nonprofit institution or a private for-profit institution than any other racial or ethnic group of student parents, with one-fifth (21%) enrolled in nonprofit colleges and one-third (31%) enrolled in for-profit colleges. By contrast, 16 percent of NHPI nonparenting students are enrolled at nonprofit institutions and only one in 10 (11%) are enrolled in for-profit colleges. Some of these patterns of NHPI enrollment could relate to the availability of different types of colleges in geographic areas with high concentrations of NHPI people. Black student parents also have a high rate of enrollment at private for-profit institutions (29%), compared with only 9 percent of nonparenting Black students, and a low rate of enrollment at public baccalaureate institutions (13% of Black student parents versus 35 percent of nonparenting Black students).

² This brief uses the term Black to describe people who have ancestry from sub-Saharan Africa. This might also include people who trace their ancestry through the Caribbean or other geographies. In the NPSAS survey, the label used for this group changes over time but is identified as “Black or African American” in the 2020 data. The term Latine is used to describe people of Latin American background; Latine students can be of any racial group. In the NPSAS survey, the label used for this group changes over time but is identified as “Hispanic or Latino” in the 2020 data. We use the words Black and Latine because we believe them to be more inclusive. The authors acknowledge these may not be the preferred identifiers for every individual or group, and we remain committed to employing inclusive language whenever possible.

FIGURE 3

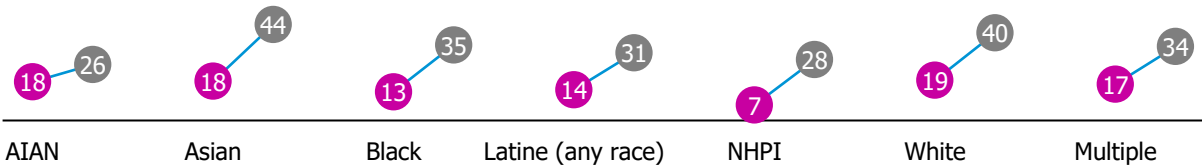
Student parents of all races, except NHPI, are more likely to be enrolled at community and technical colleges compared with nonparenting students

Percentage of student parents and nonparenting students enrolled in community and technical colleges by race, 2020



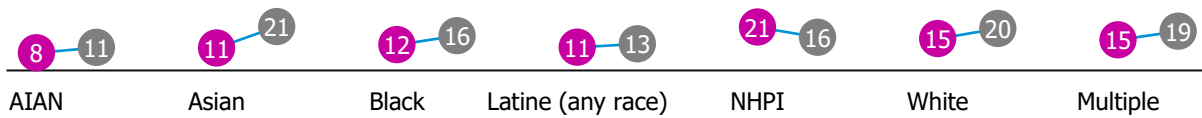
Student parents of all races are less likely to be enrolled at public baccalaureate institutions compared with nonparenting students

Percentage of student parents and nonparenting students enrolled in public baccalaureate institutions by race, 2020



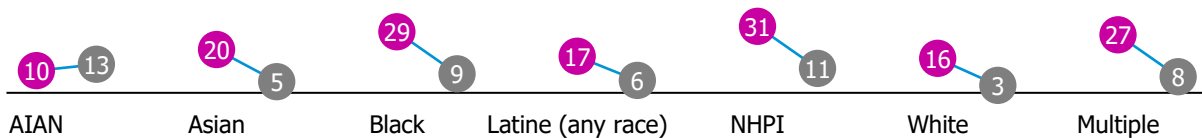
Student parents of all races, except NHPI, are less likely to be enrolled at private nonprofit institutions compared with nonparenting students

Percentage of student parents and nonparenting students enrolled in private nonprofit institutions by race, 2020



Student parents of all races, except AIAN, are more likely to be enrolled at private for-profit institutions compared with nonparenting students

Percentage of student parents and nonparenting students enrolled in private for-profit institutions by race, 2020



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2020.

Notes: AIAN = American Indian or Alaska Native; NHPI = Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. Community and technical colleges are recategorized from an 11-sector detailed variable that coded colleges as public four-year non-doctorate-granting, primarily sub-baccalaureate institutions. These are often institutions that offer limited bachelor's degree programs. The analysis can be recreated with the variables SECTOR11, RACE, and DEPCCHILD using DataLab (<https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/uwtweg>; free account required).

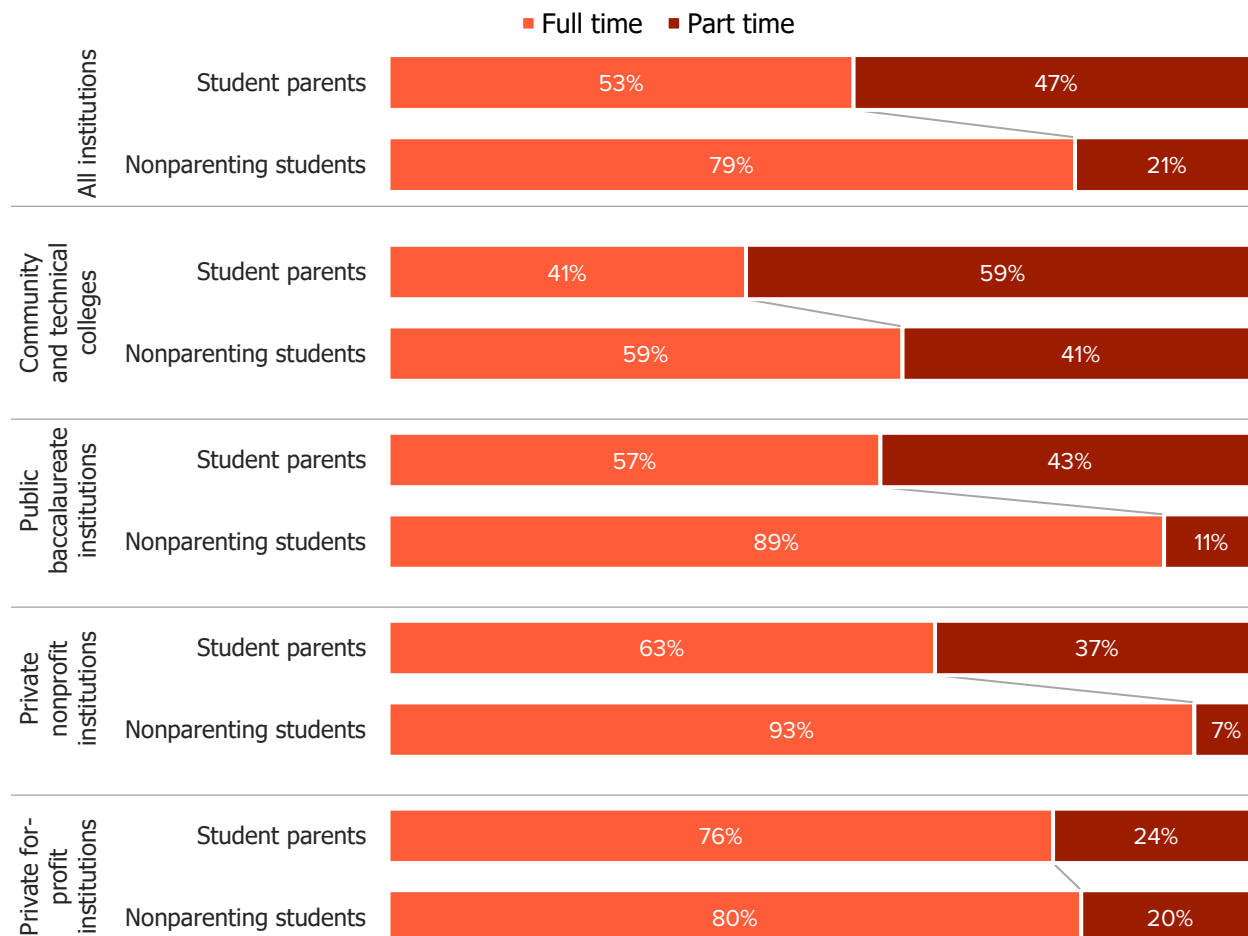
Full- versus Part-Time Programs

Across all types of institutions, student parents are more likely to enroll part time (47% versus 21%) and less likely to enroll full time (53% versus 79%) than nonparenting students (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4

Student parents are less likely to enroll full time than nonparenting students across and within each institution type, with the largest difference at private nonprofit colleges

Enrollment intensity of student parents and nonparenting students by institution type, fall 2019



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2020.

Notes: Community and technical colleges are recategorized from an 11-sector detailed variable that coded colleges as public four-year non-doctorate-granting, primarily sub-baccalaureate institutions. These are often institutions that offer limited bachelor's degree programs. The analysis can be recreated with the variables SECTOR11, DEPCHILD, and ATTEND using DataLab (<https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/uwtweg>; free account required).

Among student parents enrolled in community and technical colleges, 59 percent are enrolled part time and 41 percent full time. Among their nonparenting peers, the pattern reversed with 59 percent enrolling full time and 41 percent part time.

Part-time attendance is not common among nonparenting students enrolled in public baccalaureate institutions, as 89 percent are enrolled full time. In comparison, among student parents enrolled in these institutions, 43 percent attend part time.

The largest differences between parenting and nonparenting students appear at private nonprofit institutions, where 93 percent of nonparenting students enroll full time and only 63 percent of student parents enroll full time. We have found from previous experience that for-profit colleges sometimes define full-time enrollment more liberally than other types of institutions.

Enrollment in Online Learning

Student parents are more likely to enroll in online programs or take some classes online than nonparenting students (Figure 5). Among student parents, 44 percent are enrolled in an entirely online program while only 19 percent of nonparenting students are in an entirely online program.

Three-quarters of student parents (76%) have taken at least some online classes within the academic year (as measured before the COVID-19 pandemic). This is higher than the two-thirds of nonparenting students (64%) who have taken at least some classes online.

Online enrollment options may make college education more accessible and flexible for student parents, as student parents often juggle multiple responsibilities that include child care and work. Enrolling in online courses and programs eliminates the need to commute to a college campus, saving student parents time. It also has other cost savings such as transportation expenses and potentially reduced child care needs.

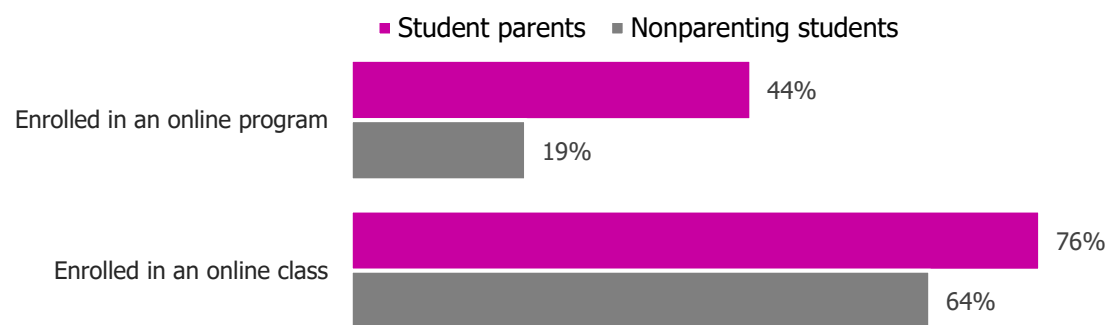
Various strategies can help instructors, programs, and institutions make online instruction more inclusive, such as promoting equity consciousness, disaggregating and examining data, and making efforts to even the playing field in online learning (Anderson et al. 2021). But some programs cannot be fully online, such as those that require hands-on training. In addition, some students prefer in-person or hybrid learning options, so in-person programs also need to promote the success of students who are parenting.

The 2024 NPSAS will help us explore how the pandemic changed online enrollment as more college programs have begun offering hybrid or fully online options since then.

FIGURE 5

Student Parents Are More Likely to Be Enrolled in Online Programs or Online Classes than Nonparenting Students

Online program and course enrollment of student parents and nonparenting students, 2020



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2020.

Notes: The analysis can be recreated with the variables DISTALL, DISTEDUC, and DEPCHILD using DataLab (<https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/uwtweg>; free account required).

Multiple-Institution Attendance

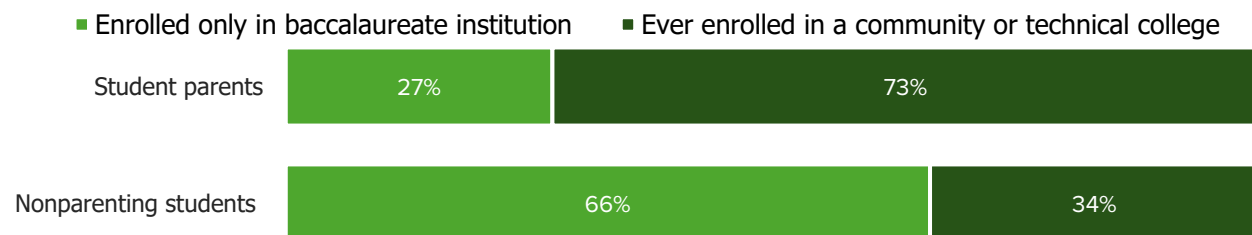
As mentioned above, the largest share of student parents attends community and technical colleges, likely because of the accessibility, affordability, and flexibility these institutions offer. However, as discussed, a sizable share of student parents also attends other types of institutions. Although the NPSAS does not allow analysis of whether the student parents transferred or co-enrolled, we used the available data to examine how often parenting and nonparenting students to have attended both a baccalaureate institution and a community or technical college (Figure 6).

Among student parents who attended a public or private nonprofit baccalaureate college or university in 2019–20, 73 percent had at some point also attended a community or technical college, indicating about one-quarter of student parents had attended only baccalaureate institutions. In contrast, among nonparenting students, only 34 percent of those who attended a baccalaureate college or university in 2019–20 had at some point attended a community or technical college.

FIGURE 6

Student Parents at Baccalaureate Institutions Are More Likely to Have Community or Technical College Experience

Percentage of students at baccalaureate institutions (public or nonprofit) who had ever attended community and technical colleges, 2020



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2020.

Notes: The analysis can be recreated with the variables EVER2PUB, DEPCHILD, and SECTOR11 using DataLab (<https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/uwtweg>; free account required).

Conclusion

Student parents attend different higher education institutions than nonparenting students, and in different ways, whether they attend full time or part time, whether they enroll in online classes or programs, and whether they have experience attending community and technical colleges.

- ✦ Overall, student parents (51%) are more likely to attend community and technical colleges than nonparenting students (40%). But a large share of student parents also attend other types of institutions.
- ✦ Student mothers and student fathers have similar enrollment rates at community and technical colleges (51% versus 49%) and at private nonprofit institutions (both 13%). But student mothers are more likely than student fathers to enroll at private for-profit institutions (21% versus 17%), whereas student fathers are more likely than student mothers to enroll at public baccalaureate institutions (21% versus 15%).

- ✦ AIAN student parents are enrolled at community and technical colleges at the highest rate (64%) of any racial or ethnic group. NHPI student parents are much more likely to attend a for-profit institution than any other racial or ethnic group of student parents (31%). White student parents are more likely to attend public baccalaureate institutions (19%) than any other racial or ethnic group of student parents.
- ✦ Student parents are more likely to enroll part time (47%) than nonparenting students (21%).
- ✦ Among student parents, 44 percent are enrolled in an entirely online program, whereas only 19 percent of nonparenting students are in an entirely online program. Three-quarters of student parents (76%) have taken at least some online classes within the academic year (as measured before the COVID-19 pandemic) in comparison with the 64 percent of nonparenting students who have taken at least some classes online.
- ✦ At baccalaureate institutions, it is much more common for student parents to have attended a community or technical college (73%) than for nonparenting students (34%).
- ✦ Community and technical colleges play an important role in serving student parents. Although nonparenting students also enroll in these colleges, the data suggest that student parents often use community and technical colleges as a substantial portion of their educational pathways, possibly because of factors such as cost, flexibility, and proximity.
- ✦ At the same time, student parents are not exclusively enrolled at community and technical colleges. Other institutions, particularly public baccalaureate colleges and universities and private nonprofit institutions, serve a substantial share of parenting students and could attract even more with additional commitments to and supports for student-parent success. Perhaps these colleges can draw lessons from the approaches (e.g., flexible, year-round enrollment opportunities) private for-profit institutions are taking to disproportionately attract student parents, while ensuring that student parents receive a high-quality educational experience.
- ✦ Further, student parents are also more likely to attend college part time and engage in online education compared with nonparenting students. Part-time enrollment and online education each offer flexibility beneficial particularly for student parents, who might have more complex schedules and responsibilities than nonparenting students. While recognizing the benefits of part-time and online enrollment for student parents, institutions should also be cognizant that enrolling only part time or online may not be the ideal educational experience for all student parents. Students enrolled in part-time and online programs have lower persistence and completion, on average (Berg, Causey, et al. 2024; Berg, Cohen, et al. 2024). Colleges should seek to make both in-person and online programs inclusive for parents.

Student parents are a substantial and diverse segment of the student population. Addressing their needs and supporting their success should be integral to strategic goals at all types of institutions. Creating financial aid options tailored to student parents' needs, offering flexible course scheduling, encouraging equitable and family-friendly practices among faculty, and providing subsidized transportation and child care are all measures that can support student parents in successfully completing their education programs. Such measures enable and empower student parents to make choices that are right for them, whether they opt for full- or part-time studies, online learning, or on-campus programs. This will help close equity gaps among students, support intergenerational mobility for children, and improve institutional success metrics.

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. The SPARK Collaborative is stewarded by a working board comprising Theresa Anderson (Urban Institute), Jessica Lee (The Pregnant Scholar), Nina Owolabi (Skills and Training in Action Research [STAR] Fellow), Krystle Pale (STAR Fellow), Renee Ryberg (Child Trends), Kimberly Salazar (Urban Institute), and Kate Westaby (Urban Institute).

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.

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