

# STRATEGIES AND INNOVATIONS THAT SUPPORT STUDENT PARENTS

Provide Financial Supports Responsive to Parents



# INTRODUCTION

**Parents are a sizable but often overlooked student population in postsecondary systems.** The COVID-19 pandemic has placed new demands on all parents with young children and shed new light on the multiple demands of students who are parents. Seeking to strengthen supports for parents and boost overall completion rates, [Ascend at the Aspen Institute](#) launched the [Aspen Postsecondary Success for Parents \(PSP\) Initiative](#) in 2018. Ascend has engaged a diverse group of leaders, including parents, researchers, workforce development experts, college presidents, philanthropies, and policymakers, to develop strategies and innovations that better support parents as they achieve their postsecondary goals. Through our research activities and convenings, we have identified barriers that make it difficult for parents to complete their studies to the best of their abilities.

Students who are parents are mainly [women of color](#) who tend to face more systemic barriers to postsecondary completion than their white peers. In the economic shock caused by COVID-19, Black and Hispanic women experienced higher unemployment due to the sectors impacted; without income, continuing

their postsecondary journey is even more daunting. The long-term impact of COVID-19 is uncertain, but it is clear that we have an opportunity to rebuild our systems to better support those who are parenting young children. As colleges, service providers, policymakers, and advocates engage in relief and rebuilding measures, identifying and addressing the barriers students with dependent children face will support their desire to remain enrolled and not stop out.

Some of these barriers can appear minor yet addressing them can be impactful. For example, bookstores and resource centers that stay open beyond typical business hours can accommodate parents who also work. Or college campuses with dedicated spaces for children can change the cultural norms that stigmatize students who are parents. Many of the solutions shared below were generated by the experts who attended Ascend's PSP convenings, and they are meant to spark innovation of current policies and programs. Postsecondary leaders who understand their students' diverse roles and needs, and the systemic gaps, are better positioned to pursue additional strategies that support their institutional as well as national achievement goals.

# STRATEGY: PROVIDE FINANCIAL SUPPORTS RESPONSIVE TO PARENTS

**The median debt among student parents enrolled from 2015-2016 was more than two-and-a-half times higher than debt among students without children.**

- Ascend at the Aspen Institute and the Institute for Women's Policy Research

A lack of financial resources has long been cited as a barrier to furthering and completing postsecondary education for all students. For students who are parents, however, awareness of and access to financial supports could mean the difference between stopping school to work or continuing their studies. According to a 2018 [survey](#) by the Urban Institute, the average two- or four-year college student graduates with \$20,860 in debt, but students who are parents also have to factor in the cost of child care as well as other child welfare costs. The average family spends 20 percent or more of their annual household income on child care.



Below are some specific approaches that postsecondary institutions and external organizations can take to financially support students who are parents.

## TUITION SUPPORTS

- Create incentives for student parents to complete their degree, such as reduced tuition rates for their children to attend the same college.
- Pilot a randomized controlled trial of basic income for students, including free tuition, room, board, and child care, to understand its impact and return on investment.

## LIVING COST SUPPORTS

- Promote and assist student parents in applying for a dependent care allowance to provide additional funds for child care costs or other dependent needs. (Example: [SwiftStudent Dependent Care Allowance Request Letter](#))
- Help students who are parents align benefits.
  - Inform student parents of their eligibility for public assistance options.
  - Create seamless access to support services that elevate educational opportunities and assist with applications for benefits that support enrollment.
  - Designate a person to serve as a benefits liaison on campus.
  - Use technological solutions to promote access to benefits.
  - Refer and connect student parents with community services that assist with public benefits access.
  - Provide in-depth training for those working directly with student parents on topics like public benefits, financial aid, etc. to help them be more effective.
- Designate emergency grant funds for student parents experiencing crises.
- Expand the pool of financial aid so that it can include necessary expenses such as child care and transportation.
- Prioritize housing assistance for parents enrolled in postsecondary education.
- Create scholarships for students that can be used to pay for child care.
- Create a financial literacy program/classes for students who access additional aid.



# STRATEGY IN PRACTICE



**Generation Hope** is a nonprofit organization dedicated to dismantling poverty by providing financial and emotional support to teen parents attending college and to their children as they prepare for kindergarten. Teen parents (i.e., scholars) are pursuing degrees at 20 different two- and four-year colleges in Washington, DC; Maryland; and Northern Virginia. The organization works with its scholars to achieve college and professional success and economic stability through its Scholar Program, which pairs each student with a sponsor who provides up to \$2,400 per year in tuition assistance and one-on-one mentoring until graduation. Scholars also receive case management, mental health support, life balance and academic planning trainings, tutoring, career preparation, emergency funding, access to crisis assistance, free child care at all events, and registration at the annual Hope Conference, which provides life and career skills from experts in the community. Recognizing that the children of teen parents face systemic barriers to their early growth and development, Generation Hope launched **Next Generation Academy** in 2018. Next Generation Academy provides the scholars' children up to age five with monthly home visiting/case management; developmental, literacy, and social-emotional interventions; mental health and parenting support; access to high-quality early child care; and matching with families in the community who use their network connections to assist with family needs.