

# STRATEGIES AND INNOVATIONS THAT SUPPORT STUDENT PARENTS

Create Networks for Parents to Eliminate Social Stigma



# 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: CREATE NETWORKS FOR PARENTS TO ELIMINATE SOCIAL STIGMA

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- Social Forces

Students who are parents need access to networks to create social capital and to achieve their goals, such as completion of a postsecondary credential and ensuring access to the job market after graduation. These networks and the skills to build them are important contributors to families' well-being. According to a recent [survey](#), low-income mothers with children enrolled in child care centers were 40 percent less likely to be depressed than those whose children were not enrolled because of the network they created with other mothers. Campus experiences can help parents create the social capital they need to navigate the ups and downs of pursuing a postsecondary degree. The networks they develop as a student can also help parents navigate their work and family challenges as well as create new opportunities once they have their degree.

Public perception around students who are parents, how they define themselves, and how they interact with the postsecondary education system is shaped by multiple and contrasting narratives. Although the population of students or workforce participants who are parents remains steady, the common narrative of the "traditional" student continues to persist, excluding this group and resulting in a stigma around students with children. Creating more inclusive student-serving strategies, such as networking and sharing of narratives, reduces this stigma and promotes overall inclusion on campus.

Below are specific approaches postsecondary institutions and external organizations can take to help create the kinds of experiences and networks that will reduce stigma of students who are parents.

## ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES

- Form a group of student parent ambassadors to network with other student parents.
- Create roles for student parents on campus advisory boards.
- As part of enrollment, provide every parent with a mentor who can support their success, with an emphasis on currently enrolled parents serving as mentors.
- Create a page on the official institution website that acknowledges student parents and offers a way they can communicate.
- Create accurate representation of student parents on and off campus. (For example, student parents constitute approximately 25 percent of all college students but are rarely portrayed on college promotional material.)
- Capture positive stories about students who are parents and their desire to succeed in order to promote faculty and staff engagement, and profile these students on the official website, in student newspapers, etc.
- Create an affinity group for students who are parents. (Example: [Rutgers Students with Children group](#))
- Encourage student who are parents to seek buddy families and facilitate matching.
- Create a special personal and/or academic fellowship for students who are parents so that they and their families can be part of a cohort experience.



# EXTERNAL SHIFTS

- Include the voices of student parents through a large-scale marketing campaign to shift the narrative of student demographics and experiences. (Example: [The Rise Prize](#))
- Create accurate representation of student parents in popular culture.
- Cover the successes and challenges of student parents, including elevating successful, working single mothers and fathers in internal and external campus communications and marketing
- Create and promote special issues on student parents in publications of interest among postsecondary leaders. (Examples: [Inside Higher Ed](#), [Chronicle of Higher Education](#), student newspapers, etc.)

# STRATEGY IN PRACTICE



## Jeremiah Program

**[Jeremiah Program](#) is one of the country's most successful two-generation prosperity solutions for families headed by single mothers experiencing poverty.** Education and housing stability are the priority levers at the heart of the JP model. JP doesn't profess to have a national panacea for educational and economic inequity, but it operates under the belief that the pervasive and systemic impacts of poverty can be disrupted with postsecondary education for mothers, strong K-12 education for their children, and a stable home for families. Since JP's founding in Minneapolis in 1998, more than 4,000 mothers and children have achieved positive outcomes as a result of the program. A recent survey of Jeremiah Program alumnae (2010-2014) found that 100 percent of surveyed graduates are living in safe housing, 91 percent are employed or continuing their education, and 81 percent of their children are performing at or above grade level. One of Jeremiah's five pillars is a supportive community. By living and working together in establishing themselves and raising their children, the women who participate increase their self-confidence and develop cooperative relationships. Coaches work one-on-one with the women to offer support, advice, and accountability in dealing with daily challenges and opportunities. Dedicated volunteers extend women's access to community resources and networks, resulting in expanded social capital for Jeremiah families.

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Cover photo: Generation Hope Scholar and her daughter. Generation Hope is a nonprofit based in Washington, DC, providing wraparound, two-generation support to young parents in college and their pre-kindergarten little ones, and promoting student parents' college completion through national advocacy and direct technical assistance to colleges and universities.