

Parenting Students: What They Need and What Institutions Can Do

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March 2025

Plumb, M.H. (2025). *Parenting Students: What They Need and What Institutions Can Do*. Trellis Strategies.



Approximately one in five undergraduate students, including around a quarter of first-generation students, are parents.¹ Many of these learners are highly motivated by the desire to better their family's situation and serve as a role model for their children,² and research has shown that a parent completing a college degree can lead to meaningful intergenerational benefits.³ However, students with dependent children face many challenges when pursuing postsecondary education, including time poverty, financial insecurity, and a low sense of belonging with their institution. As a result, over half of first-time enrolled students with children stop-out at some point during their college journey, compared to just under a third of their non-parenting peers.⁴

Making postsecondary education accessible to parenting students, and re-engaging those parents with some college but no credential, is essential to increasing overall degree

attainment among U.S. adults.⁵ To better understand the needs of this group of learners, this brief summarizes responses from parenting students in the Fall 2023 implementation of Trellis Strategies' Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS), an annual survey which captures a snapshot of student wellbeing at over 100 institutions across the U.S.⁶

Balancing Life Responsibilities

Parents are often juggling multiple responsibilities which impact the time and energy they can dedicate to their education. Of the nearly 12,000 parenting students who participated in the 2023 SFWS, 72 percent were employed at the time of the survey.⁷ Almost all of these working parents (91 percent) worked more than 20 hours per week while enrolled, and two thirds worked 40 or more hours per week, reflecting much higher work commitments compared to their non-parenting

peers (Figure 1). This can have a profound effect on their degree attainment, as working more than 15 hours per week while enrolled in college is associated with slower academic progress and other negative effects.⁸ Additionally, nearly two thirds of employed parenting students in the SFWS saw themselves “a worker who goes to school” rather than “a student who works” (Figure 2).

FIGURE 1. WORKLOAD WHILE ENROLLED

During the school year, about how many hours do you spend in a typical 7-day week working for pay? (Among working students)

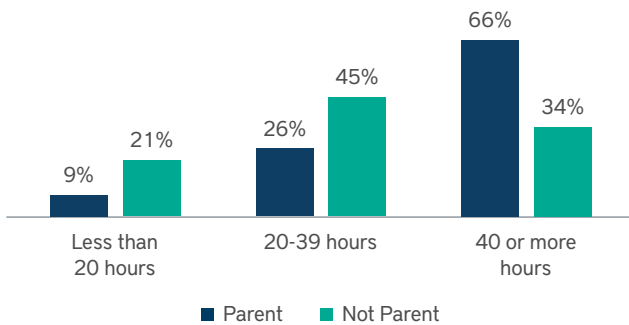
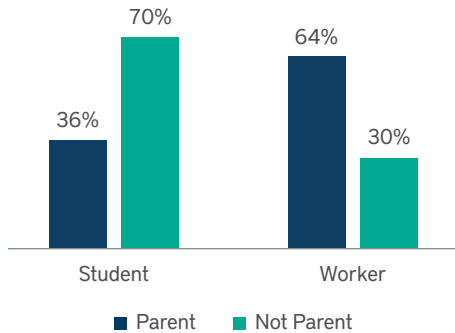
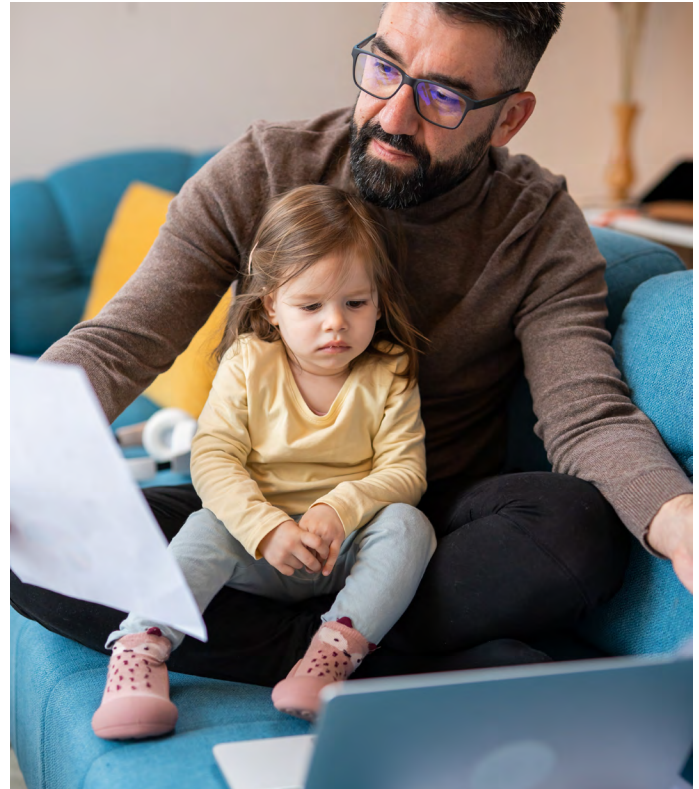


FIGURE 2. IDENTITY AS STUDENT VS. WORKER

Do you consider yourself a student who works or a worker that goes to school? (Among working students)



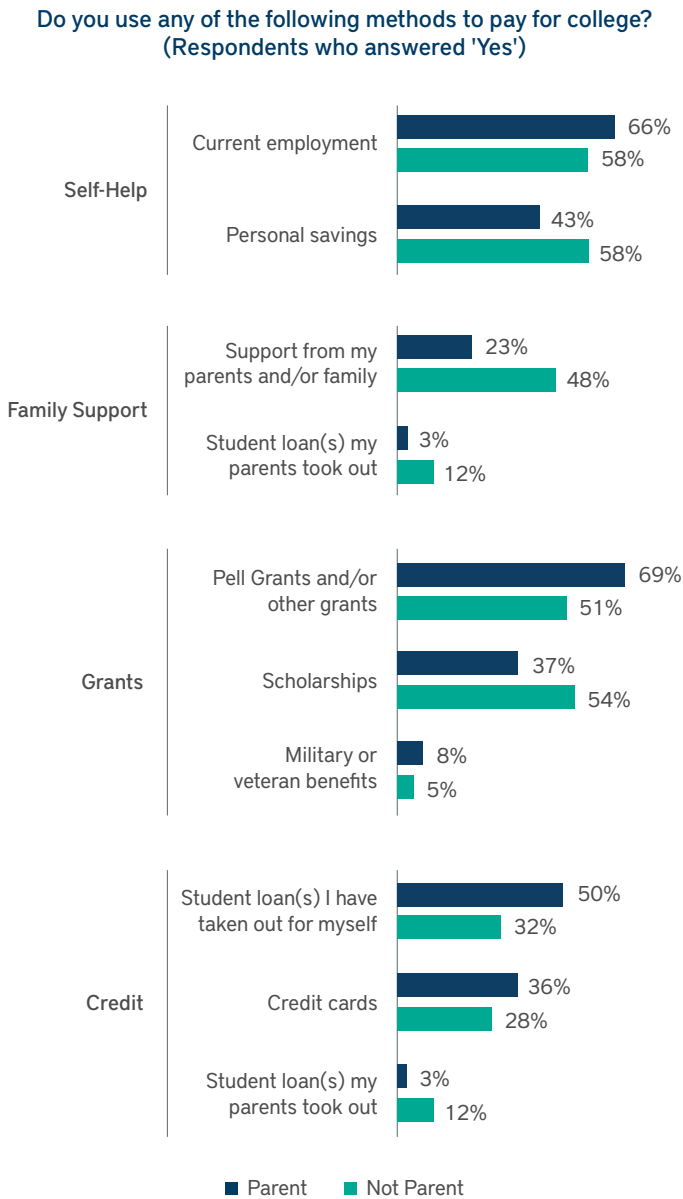
In addition to high rates of full-time employment, 41 percent of parenting students in the 2023 SFWS reported spending 40 or more hours per week providing care for their dependents. Moreover, nearly a quarter of parenting students (23 percent) reported missing at least one class due to lack of childcare during the Spring 2023 semester. This points to how the effects of work and childcare compound to result in higher time poverty among parenting students. In fact, a study of large-scale time survey data found that students with children had 60 fewer minutes per day of discretionary time compared to their non-parenting peers.⁹



Paying for College

Even when student parents work full-time, they are unlikely to be able to cover all their college expenses using that income; one recent study estimated that an average student would have to work 52 hours per week to cover the cost of both childcare and tuition at a public four-year institution.¹⁰ While 66 percent of parenting students in the 2023 SFWS reported using current employment to pay for college, only five percent were able to cover their college costs using only their income and savings. Compared to their non-parenting peers, parents were more likely to rely on student loans (50 percent) and credit cards (36 percent) to cover the cost of their education (see Figure 3). While 69 percent of parenting students received Pell and other grants, only 37 percent reported receiving scholarships. Ultimately, the discrepancy between the net cost of college, the cost of childcare, and the wage of a working parent can have a substantial impact on the amount of debt parenting students carry. For example, an analysis of nationally representative data found that in 2019-2020, parenting students took out an average of \$8,546 more in student loans compared to non-parenting students.¹¹

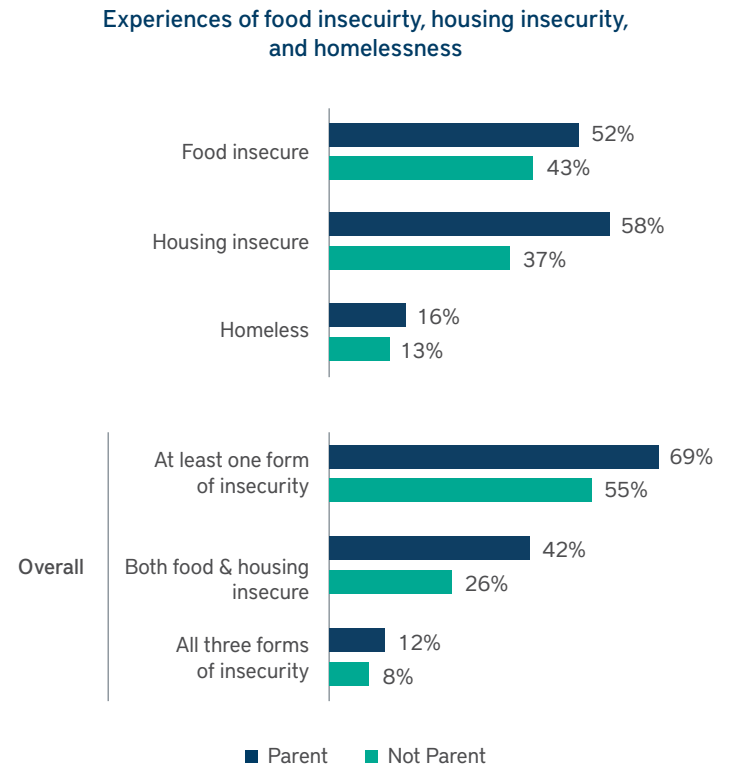
FIGURE 3. PAYING FOR COLLEGE



Financial & Personal Wellbeing

Parenting students also face higher rates of basic needs insecurity compared to their non-parenting peers. In the 2023 SFWS, 52 percent of parenting students were food insecure, and 58 were housing insecure (compared to 43 percent and 37 percent of non-parents, respectively).¹² Overall, over two thirds of parenting students—69 percent—had experienced some form of basic needs insecurity (Figure 4). Despite this high rate of need, most parenting students (59 percent) were unaware that their institution offered at least one food pantry or closet to assist students.

FIGURE 4. BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY



Conclusion

Despite these many challenges, parenting students in the 2023 SFWS were much more likely to recommend their school to a friend or family member compared to their non-parenting peers,¹³ and prior research has shown that parents (and other independent students) are highly motivated and can achieve strong academic outcomes.¹⁴ Programs which provide support to parenting students—such as direct financial assistance, child-care access facilitation, and peer-community opportunities—can be highly effective in promoting their college success.¹⁵ For example, Trellis Strategies’ evaluation of the Parenting Students Project at Austin Community College District found that participation in the initiative increased term-to-term retention by 20 percentage points, reduced reliance on student loans and emergency funding, and had a meaningful impact on participants’ overall financial stability.¹⁶

Overall, while parenting students face various roadblocks on their journey to a college degree, this group of students is well worth supporting. By welcoming parents on campus and leveraging research-informed initiatives to bolster their success, institutions can make a profound impact on these learners and their families.

Endnotes

- ¹ In the 2020 implementation of the nationally representative National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (<https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/npsas/>), 18 percent of all undergraduates had dependent children. Among students whose parents had not completed a bachelor's degree, 25 percent had dependent children.
- ² Hotez, E., Lin, H., Chan, V., Felix, J., Francis, A., Giacinto, D., Mitchell, G., & Siddique, F. (2020). "If I spent five hours giving birth then I can do this final:" A qualitative investigation of college students with children. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* 6(2), 147–159.
- ³ Anderson, T. (2022, May). *What if Mom went back to school? Short- and long-term effects for both generations, with policy and practice implications*. Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/what-if-mom-went-back-school>
- ⁴ Contreras-Mendez, S., & Reichlin Cruse, L. (2021). *Busy with purpose: Lessons for education and policy leaders from returning student parents* (C496; IWPR). Institute for Women's Policy Research. <https://iwpr.org/busy-with-purpose-lessons-for-education-and-policy-leaders-from-returning-student-parents/>
- ⁵ Hensly, C., White, C., & Reichlin Cruse, L. (2021). *Re-engaging student parents to achieve attainment and equity goals: A case for investment in more accessible postsecondary pathways* (IWPR #C501). Institute for Women's Policy Research. <https://iwpr.org/re-engaging-student-parents-to-achieve-attainment-and-equity-goals/>
- ⁶ Fletcher, C., Cornett, A., & Ashton, B. (2024, May). *Student Financial Wellness Survey – Fall 2023 semester results*. Trellis Strategies. <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/student-financial-wellness-survey-fall-2023-semester-results/>
- ⁷ Non-parenting students in the 2023 SFWS were employed at a similar rate of 67 percent.
- ⁸ Kyte, S. B. (2017). *Who does work work for? Understanding equity in working learner college and career success*. ACT Center for Equity in Learning. <https://equityinlearning.act.org/research-doc/who-does-work-work-for/>
- ⁹ Conway, K. M., Wladis, C., & Hachey, A. C. (2021). Time poverty and parenthood: Who has time for college? *AERA Open*, 7.
- ¹⁰ Williams, B., Bitar, J., Polk, P., Nguyen, A., Montague, G., Gillispie, C., Waller, A., Tadesse, A., & Elliot, K. C. (2022). *For student parents, the biggest hurdles to a higher education are costs and finding child care*. The Education Trust, Generation Hope. <https://edtrust.org/resource/for-student-parents-the-biggest-hurdles-to-a-higher-education-are-costs-and-finding-child-care/>
- ¹¹ Schreiber, R., Ryberg, R., Warren, J., Taylor, L., & Gittens, S. (2024, October). *The financial well-being of parents pursuing postsecondary education: A statistical portrait of student parents using 2020 data*. SPARK Collaborative. <https://studentparentaction.org/resources/the-financial-well-being-of-parents-pursuing-postsecondary-education>
- ¹² Due to substantial variation between institutions, rates of food and housing insecurity across all students are generally higher in voluntary surveys like the SFWS than in nationally representative studies. For example, the 2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (<https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/npsas/>) placed the national rate of food insecurity at 29 percent of students with dependent children and 25 percent of independent students without dependent children (this difference is statistically significant). However, the results from the 2023 SFWS serve to highlight the high level of need among parenting students at underserved institutions.
- ¹³ The SFWS measures student satisfaction with their institution via the Net Promoter Score (NPS), a research-based method to benchmark customer satisfaction ratings. NPS uses a 0-10 scale: those who score 9-10 are promoters, 7-8 are passives, and 0-6 are detractors. %Promoters - %Detractors = NPS. Measured across two-year institutions in the 2023 SFWS, the NPS among parenting students was 48.38, compared to 27.78 among non-parents. Four-year institutions in the SFWS had a lower overall NPS but still demonstrated a similar magnitude of difference between the two populations, for 26.69 among parenting students and -0.74 among non-parenting students.
- ¹⁴ Institute for Women's Policy Research & Ascend at the Aspen Institute. (2019). *Parents in college: By the numbers* (IWPR #C481). Institute for Women's Policy Research. <https://iwpr.org/parents-in-college-by-the-numbers/>
- ¹⁵ DeMario, M. A. (2021). Supporting one of our most at-risk populations: Student-parents. *Innovation Showcase*, 16(10). <https://www.league.org/innovation-showcase/supporting-one-our-most-risk-populations-student-parents>
Pendleton, V., & Atella, J. (2020, May). *Academic outcomes of undergraduate students served by the University of Minnesota's Student Parent Help Center: A retrospective study* (2000-2018). Wilder Research. <https://www.wilder.org/wilder-research/research-library/academic-outcomes-undergraduate-student-parents-served-university>
- ¹⁶ Plumb, M. H. & Wheeler, P. E. (2025, January). *Pillars of support: Results from an evaluation of the Parenting Students Project at Austin Community College*. Trellis Strategies. <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/pillars-of-support-results-from-an-evaluation-of-the-parenting-students-project-at-austin-community-college/>

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Fletcher, C., Cornett, A., & Plumb, M. H. (2024). Student Financial Wellness Survey Fall 2023 Report: Experiences of Hispanic Students at Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities Institutions in Texas. Trellis Strategies. <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/student-financial-wellness-survey-fall-2023-report-experiences-of-hispanic-students-at-hispanic-association-of-colleges-and-universities-institutions-in-texas/>

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