Today's Students: A Policy Roadmap for Student Parents in Colorado

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YOUNG INVINCIBLES
Despite the fact that more than one in five of today’s college students are parents in America, higher education systems are often not set up to meet the needs of this important population.\textsuperscript{1} Making college more accessible, affordable, and easier to complete is critical to the financial security of both generations, their communities, and our national and local economies. Parents attending college also experience unique challenges pursuing their degrees that must be addressed to meet broader higher education goals. For starters, they have less time: student parents can spend about one-third less time on their studies than their childless peers, spending additional hours caregiving and on household chores.\textsuperscript{2}

Student parents also carry increased financial burdens: Nationally, nearly two-thirds of student parents receive no financial contribution from their family to pay for college, compared to less than a third for non-parents (Figure 1). Nationwide, student parents are entering college with no financial support at twice the rate they were in 2004. These factors contribute to lower graduation rates for student parents.\textsuperscript{3} In fact, students without children are three-and-a-half times more likely to earn a degree within six years than students with children (Figure 2).

**Figure 1: Percent of students w/ $0 Expected Family Contribution**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Student parents</th>
<th>Students w/o children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NPSAS:16
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This roadmap presents policies for Colorado policymakers to consider to make college more affordable for today’s students. At least 17 percent of Colorado college students are parents and are balancing rising college prices with the struggle to meet their families’ needs.4 Under the Lumina Foundation’s Rule of 10, an affordability benchmark which states students should pay no more for college than 10 percent of their discretionary income for 10 years, and the earnings from working 10 hours a week while in school, only eight percent of Colorado’s four-year institutions are affordable for student parents.

Figure 2: Percent of students who earned a degree 6 years after starting college

Establish an Attainment Goal and Collect Data About the Student Parent Experiences

While the increased focus on postsecondary attainment is encouraging, states need objective methods to determine whether they are meeting the needs of their residents. To accomplish this, it is important to adopt a statewide attainment goal, implement strategies to reach that goal, and measure progress. To successfully reach attainment goals, it is necessary to recognize how many college students are parents and identify the unique challenges they face pursuing postsecondary education. State agencies, systems, and institutions need to track the enrollment, progress, and completion of their student parent populations. Education systems and institutions should add basic flags of parenthood status, allowing for disaggregation of all other variables collected between parents and non-parents. The Family Friendly Campus Toolkit developed by Endicott College Program Evaluation & Research Group also provides a helpful framework for how states and institutions can evaluate the needs of student parents.5

Colorado has established an aggressive goal of 66 percent attainment by 2025, as well as clear goals to erase equity gaps for African American, Latinx, and Native American students.6 The focus on erasing equity gaps could be expanded to also include Colorado’s 50,000 student parents.

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Make Clear, Predictable Financial Commitments

While stakeholders point fingers over who is to blame for the rising costs of college, no one can argue that the rising prices delay students’ path to success, and carry significant consequences for America’s widening socio-economic and racial equity gaps. Making clear, predictable financial commitments, whether branded as “Promise” programs or increasing the numbers of institutions deemed affordable, equips policymakers with clear affordability goals and provides students and families with the assurance that they can afford a postsecondary education.

States should guarantee affordability for students along the following principles:

- Prioritize low-income students.
- Measure completion rates and incentivize improvement.
- Incorporate support for costs beyond tuition, including housing, food, transportation, and child care.

With only eight percent of Colorado’s four-year colleges affordable for student parents, the state should make improving affordability a priority. In its 2019 session, Colorado could explore a new grant program to provide emergency assistance for low-income students. Qualifying costs could include medical bills, sudden food and housing insecurity, or vehicle repair. These short-term emergency grants can help student overcome temporary setbacks and complete their path to earning a degree.

Include Student Parents in State Child Care Programs

The federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), which provides funds to states to help low-income parents pay for child care, allows states flexibility in determining program eligibility, including whether students pursuing education programs are eligible. Considering the benefit of each level of postsecondary attainment (lower unemployment and higher wages for each additional level), state child care programs can help student parents by allowing all programs, including baccalaureate and above, to count towards eligibility.

In 2018, Congress doubled CCDBG funding. While states could choose to invest the additional funds in improving quality or investing in providers (grants for start-up costs, increasing payment rates, or increased training for special populations like infants), states could also focus on providing and promoting benefits for more college students.

Furthermore, Congress also infused the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program with additional funding, more than doubling federal dollars available to institutions to start and support child care centers on campus. States should encourage their institutions to apply for CCAMPIS support. Even institutions that already have childcare centers should pursue this funding, as an Institute for Women’s Policy Research study found long waiting lists at 95 percent of the institutions they studied.

While 38 percent of Colorado public institutions have child care centers on campus, only 12 percent of all Colorado institutions do, restricting student parents’ ability to balance school and family. Colorado should include...
student parents in their CCDBG state plan and use some of the $29,321,000 in additional funds the state stands to gain for student parents. Colorado’s 2Gen Action Plan calls for increasing awareness of federal funding opportunities and expanding child care on campus for student parents. Colorado’s state plan could also include explicit coordination and promotion with community colleges. The legislature might also consider new tax credits to incentivize child care professionals to enter and stay in the profession.

Improve access & awareness of SNAP

While a federally funded program, states and localities have a lot of flexibility in how they administer the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), including determining eligibility and how to promote align promotion programs. While student parents do not need to meet the work requirements that regular students must meet, many low-income student parents are not receiving benefits for which they are may be eligible. Young Invincibles’ analysis of U.S. Census data finds that out of the country’s 746,000 student parents living in households below 133 percent of the federal poverty level, roughly 316,000 of them, or 42 percent, do not receive SNAP benefits for which they are probably eligible.

County administrators should follow the lead of states like Illinois, that have designated career and technical education programs under the Perkins Act as SNAP-eligible programs under the Education & Training (E&T) program, thus exempting participants from additional work requirements. In the same legislation, stakeholders are charged with establishing a protocol to identify and verify students’ eligibility for SNAP benefits. State and county SNAP administrators can also learn from California, which adopted and expanded the restaurant meals program that provides hot meal benefits to homeless disabled, and elderly students, to college campuses.

Young Invincibles estimates there are nearly 5,000 low-income student parents who are probably eligible for SNAP but do not receive benefits. Colorado’s 2Gen Action Plan calls for raising awareness of eligibility for, and reducing barriers to college students’ access to, SNAP. Specifically, the Colorado Department of Human Services can designate all students participating in a CTE program as SNAP eligible under the E&T program. The Colorado Community College System can also advise all students eligible for Federal Work Study that they are eligible for SNAP without an additional work requirement.
End Notes

1. National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16)
3. Clare Wladis, Opinion: Many student-parents drop out because they don’t have enough time for their schoolwork, research shows, (The Hechinger Report: 2018)
4. This estimate, using the American Community Survey definition, potentially undercounts student parents by excluding both graduate students and students pursuing certificates, parents with with children living separately more than half the year, and potentially excluding part-time students.
6. Colorado Department of Higher Education, Colorado Rises, August 2017
7. Young Invincibles, Today’s Students in Colorado
8. Similar legislation passed the House in the 2018 session but died in the Senate. See Bill HB18-1414, 2018 regular session
11. CLASP, Child Care in the FY 2018 Omnibus Spending Bill, March 2018
14. Law Project of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, “SNAP Benefits for College Students”,
15. Illinois General Assembly, SB 0351, 110th General Assembly