The CALIFORNIA ALLIANCE for STUDENT PARENT SUCCESS

ADMINISTERED BY CALIFORNIA COMPETES: HIGHER EDUCATION FOR A STRONG ECONOMY AND EDTRUST–WEST

Making the Invisible Visible:

Taking Stock of How the California State University Collects and Uses Data About Parenting Students

About The California Alliance for Student Parent Success

The California Alliance for Student Parent Success (The Alliance) is led by California Competes: Higher Education for a Strong Economy and EdTrust-West, with support from an Advisory Committee composed of student parents and other field experts. The Alliance's diverse membership consists of organizations focused on a range of issues, including basic needs security and poverty elimination, child welfare, civil rights, economic development, health, housing, higher education, and social justice.*

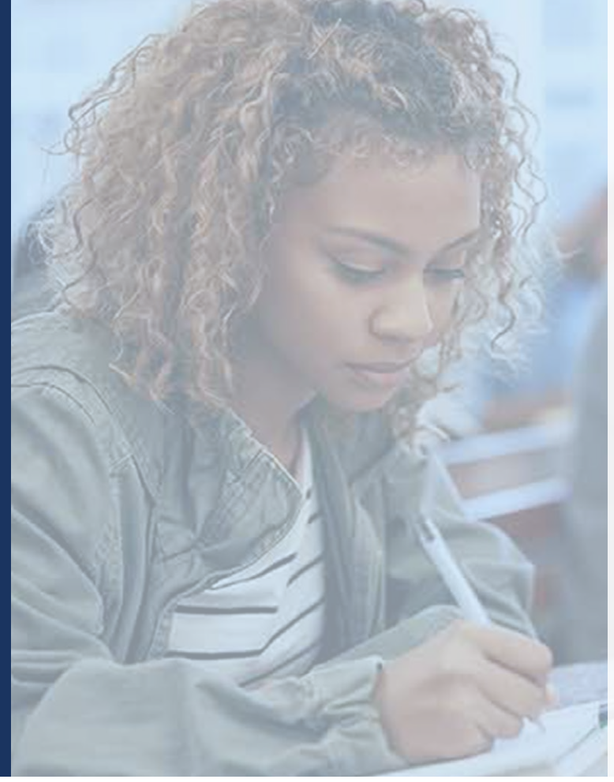
Mission

Through research, policy, advocacy, capacity building, and community engagement, The California Alliance for Student Parent Success supports the postsecondary success and comprehensive well-being of California student parents and their families.

Vision

We envision a California where higher education systems equitably support and empower student parents on their paths to earning meaningful credentials and securing gainful employment. The California Alliance for Student Parent Success commits to driving systems change and advocates for investing in resources and services that propel student parents and their families forward. We work to ensure that student parents and their families are recognized and supported, effectively bridging equity gaps and strengthening systems that will enable current and future generations to truly thrive.

*Although the term student parents appears in The Alliance's name, we recognize that many names, such as parenting students and students with dependents, apply to this population and honor all students in this community. Throughout this report, the term parenting students is used frequently as active language to acknowledge and center the identity of these individuals.



Empowering Bright Futures

The Alliance's Policy Agenda for California's Leaders to Support Student Parents and Their Families

To pave the way to prosperity, The Alliance crafted a policy agenda for California policymakers and higher education leaders to support parenting students and their families. We urge state leaders to prioritize and invest in **five core strategies:**

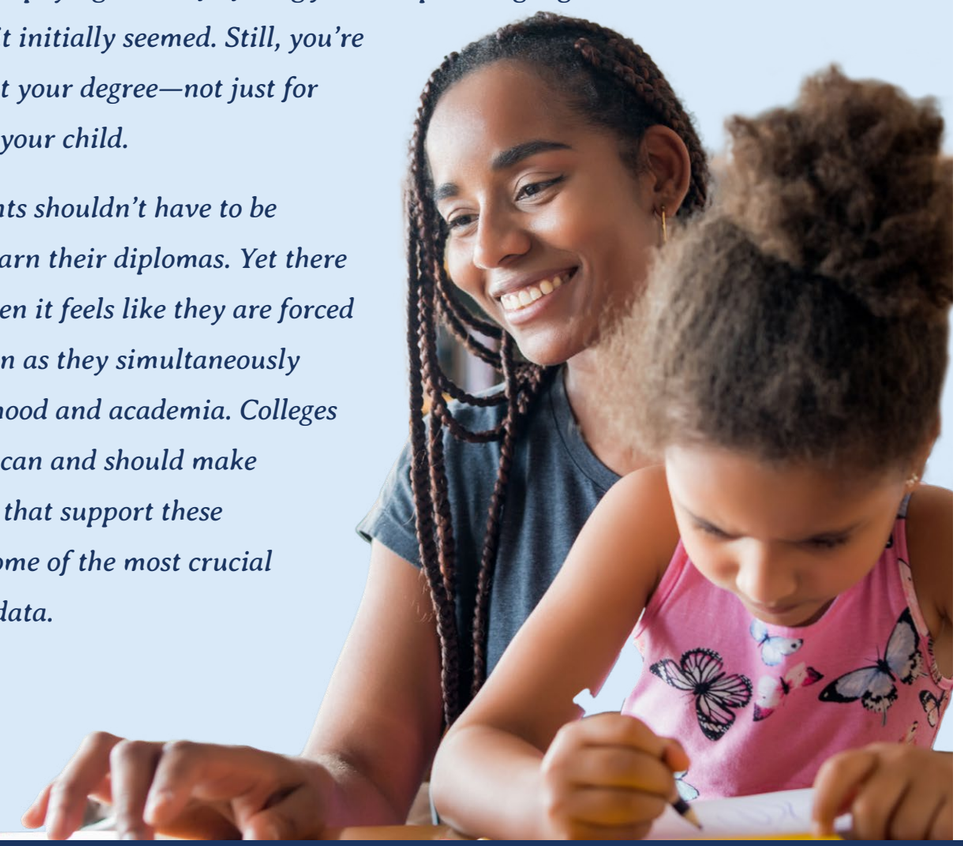
1. Strengthen financial aid to cover student parents' true college costs
2. Provide enough quality, affordable child care options to address student parents' needs
3. Meet the housing needs of student parents and their families
4. Advance family-serving institutional policies and practices
5. Collect and utilize data on student parents' pathways to improve their well-being and success

To dive deeper into The Alliance's policy agenda and explore ways to partner, visit us at our website: castudentparentalliance.org.

Imagine you are a college student. Like your peers, you are immersed in studying for exams and writing meticulously formatted papers—but your daily routine is slightly more packed than theirs. In addition to academic responsibilities, you are a full-time parent to a spirited toddler, which means that in between meeting academic deadlines, you are teaching your little one the alphabet and guiding her through toilet training. Additionally, you are responsible for child care drop-offs and pickups—not to mention providing for your little one's food, housing, and overall health and well-being—requiring you to deftly juggle the demands of academia and parenthood: the ultimate game of Tetris.

Others are often impressed by the way you manage those competing demands, unaware of the mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion that regularly threatens to overwhelm you. With all the challenges you face daily, you often wonder if trying to juggle your low-paying and unfulfilling job with pursuing higher education is as promising as it initially seemed. Still, you're determined to get your degree—not just for yourself, but for your child.

Parenting students shouldn't have to be superheroes to earn their diplomas. Yet there are moments when it feels like they are forced to be superhuman as they simultaneously navigate parenthood and academia. Colleges and universities can and should make campuses places that support these students—and some of the most crucial steps start with data.



Executive Summary

Data Helps Make the Invisible Visible

An estimated **22% of college students** in the United States—just over **1 in 5 students**—are parents living a version of the scenario described on the previous page.[1] California's data collection on college students' statuses as either pregnant or parenting is spotty at best and estimates of the proportion of undergraduates across the state who are parents vary by data source. They range from 12% (just under 300,000 students) to 17% (roughly 425,000 students).[2]

Even the most conservative of these estimates makes one thing clear: parenting students are neither a small fraction of our state's undergraduates nor a niche, special-interest group. The fact that the majority (72%) of this population are students of color (Black, Latinx, Native American, Pacific Islander, and Asian American) and 61% are first-generation college students means that ensuring parenting students have the support to attain their degree is both an equity imperative and a necessity if the state wishes to build the skilled workforce needed to cultivate a thriving economy.[3] Nonetheless, this sizable student group is rendered nearly invisible because neither individual colleges nor the state systematically collects data on parenting student demographics, experiences, and outcomes.

Recognizing this disconnect, The California Alliance for Student Parent Success, a collaborative project led by California Competes: Higher Education for a Strong Economy and EdTrust-West, has identified the collection and utilization of data on parenting students as a critical component of a statewide policy agenda to effectively support the postsecondary success and comprehensive well-being of parenting students.

> 22% of college students in the U.S. are parents.

As the largest and most diverse public four-year university system in the nation, the California State University (CSU) system has tremendous potential to improve higher education outcomes for its parenting students and to set an example for the state's other systems. In 2023, The Alliance gathered insights from key stakeholders to learn how campuses within the CSU are tackling (or not) the critical work of collecting and leveraging essential data in support of parenting students.[4]

This report shares insights on work underway to improve data collection and support parenting students, and highlights significant unaddressed gaps. Insights are drawn from perspectives of individuals directly engaged in parenting student support across 11 CSU campuses, shared through survey responses and focus group conversations, as well as information collected via a thorough review of campus websites and CSU data dashboards. We also surface promising practices from Sacramento State and California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly), which shine as bright spots that lead the way in identifying and supporting parenting students.

Insights From the Field

The following recurring themes, which emerged through survey and focus group data, reflect the perspectives of 16 stakeholders based at 11 CSU campuses, all of whom are engaged in supporting parenting students:

1. On several CSU campuses, there is growing recognition among faculty and staff of the importance of collecting and disaggregating data on parenting students.

2. Some CSU campuses collect metrics on parenting students, though campus-based stakeholders report that many campuses still lack crucial data points, and the definition of the term *parenting students* varies within and across campuses.

3. Within a single campus, limited coordination of data collection efforts across departments can act as a barrier to leveraging parenting student data to inform institutional policies and practices.

4. Faculty and staff leading parenting student support work at several CSU campuses named infrastructure, a clear vision from leadership, and dedicated staff as important building blocks for high-quality, sustainable collection and use of data on parenting students.

These themes point to three key levers for change that individual CSU campuses, the CSU Chancellor's Office, and policymakers and higher education leaders have at their fingertips. Common data definitions, a strong data infrastructure, and collaboration that improves the collection and use of data would go a long way toward removing barriers that currently prevent parenting students from achieving their postsecondary goals.

> We accommodate students in all other aspects of education; [supporting] parenting students [is] a matter of diversity, equity, and inclusion work at its finest. [Parenting students] should be included in all DEI work.
>
> – California State University, Fullerton staff member

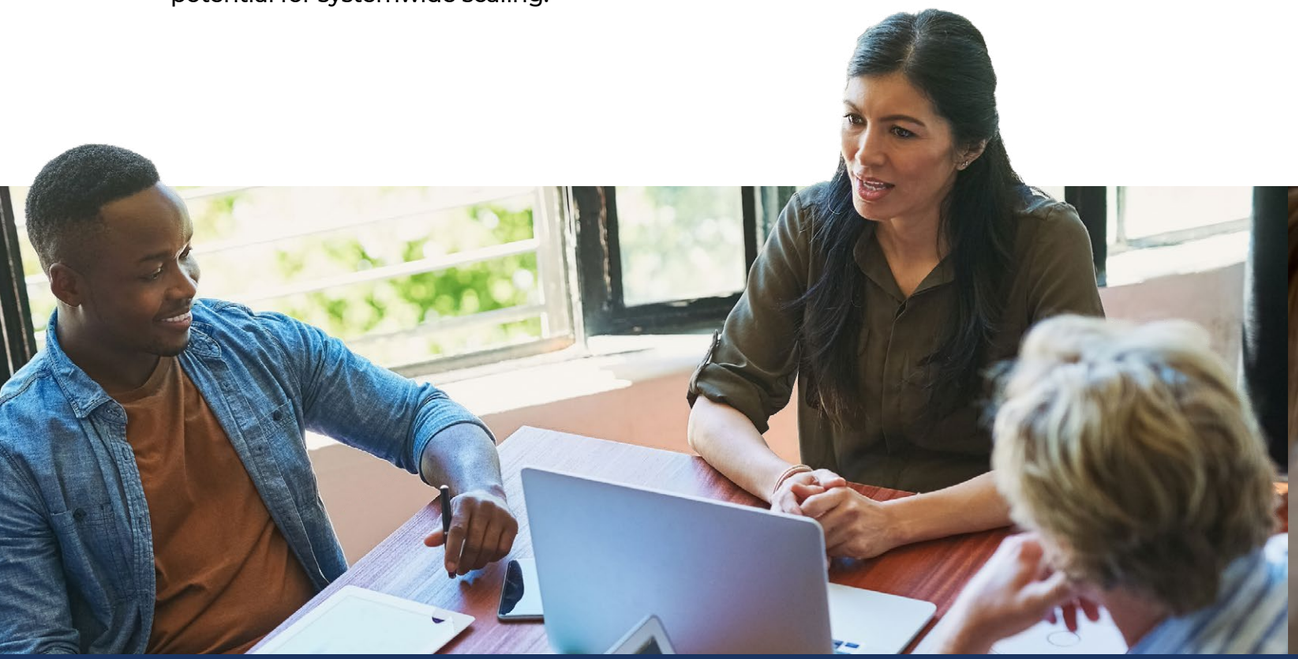
Recommendations

CSU Campuses

- **Campuses should create committees of parenting students, staff, and faculty** to inform data collection processes and support the collaborative implementation of data-informed recommendations.
- **Campuses should encourage collaboration across departments—**including but not limited to institutional research offices, campus-based child care centers, and financial aid offices—to increase efficiency and unlock resources for student support, such as the federally funded Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) grant.

CSU Chancellor's Office

- **Designate staff and invest in staff and faculty professional development** to enhance capacity for coordinating data collection and utilization efforts across campuses.
- **Include parenting students as a demographic category in the CSU Course Equity Portal**, which enables faculty to examine equity gaps in grades.
- **Add student parenting status to CSU Data Dashboards**, such as the Graduation Data Dashboard, which include information on student persistence and graduation rates.
- **Collaborate with campuses leading the way,** like Cal Poly and Sacramento State, to learn about their data collection and data coordination practices and explore the potential for systemwide scaling.



Policymakers and Higher Education Leaders

- **Support legislative efforts to create a clear statewide definition of the term *parenting student*** as a student who has a child or children under 18 years of age who will receive more than half of their support from that student.
- **Mandate that colleges collect, share among campus departments, and make public de-identified data on parenting students'** applications, enrollment, campus experiences, and academic and workforce outcomes. Each data point must be disaggregated by key demographics, such as race and ethnicity, gender, income, geographic location, first-generation status, and education level.
- **Require relevant government agencies that administer programs used by parenting students and their families (such as the California Department of Social Services, California Student Aid Commission, and Employment Development Department) to train staff to regularly analyze and publish data on parenting students,** including applications for and receipt of financial aid and public benefits, and postsecondary and employment outcomes; these agencies should disaggregate analyses by key demographics.
- **Include data on parenting students with linkages to their families in the California Cradle-to-Career (C2C) Data System—**including uptake of social services, higher education attainment, and postsecondary and workforce outcomes—to examine whether policies are strengthening outcomes for parenting students and their children.[5] Doing so would align with AB 2881 intent language that any future data and outcome reporting on parenting students be linked in the C2C Data System.

Introduction

Supporting Parenting Students' Success Is a Matter of Racial and Socioeconomic Equity

Differences in definitions and data collection approaches lead to variation in the statistics about California undergraduates who are parenting students.

That said, even the most conservative estimates suggest these students make up a sizable portion of the state's higher education enrollees. An analysis by UC Davis Wheelhouse found that over 200,000 California students who applied for financial aid in 2018 were parents—a significant number, especially considering that this most likely reflects an undercount of parenting students, as not all students complete a financial aid application.[6] Data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study suggests the number of parenting students in California was closer to 17% of undergraduates during the 2019–20 school year, totaling more than **425,000** students.[7]

72% of parenting students are students of color.

In California, as in the nation as a whole, most parenting students are female, and a greater share of students of color are parents when compared to the share of white students who are parents.[8] An analysis of national data by the Institute for Women's Policy Research found that 40% of Black women in college are mothers, 36% of female Native American college students are mothers, and 35% of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander women in college are mothers. Roughly a quarter of Latinx and white women in college are parents.[9] Parenting students also experience basic needs insecurity at far higher rates than those of their peers who are not parents. A 2019 survey of more than 23,000 parenting students across the United States found that 53% of parenting students were food insecure in the previous 30 days, 68% were housing insecure in the previous year, and 17% were homeless in the previous year.[10]

When higher education data is disaggregated to make parenting students visible, it tells a concerning story of motivated, high-achieving students with ambitious aspirations who are not supported in earning a degree. Data on the grades of parenting students reveals that they often attain higher grades than their nonparenting peers.[11] But along these students' academic trajectories, institutions fail to provide sufficient support to enable them to stay in college, resulting in parenting students, despite herculean efforts, being less likely to earn their degrees compared to their nonparenting classmates. As such, first-time college students with children are nearly twice as likely to leave college without graduating than their peers who are not parents.[12,13] Because Black, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, and Native American students are more likely than their peers to be parenting while in college, erasing that attainment gap for parenting students is an urgent racial equity imperative.

"The average age of students at [my institution] is 30 years old—if they're not coming to class, it is because their kid is sick or they have school drop-off in the morning.

- Sacramento State staff member

New State Policy Paves the Way for Stronger Supports and Better Data Collection

California has recently taken long-overdue steps to create state policies aimed at supporting parenting students and laying the foundation for better data collection.[14] In September 2022, the passage of AB 2881 made California the first state in the nation to mandate that its public higher education institutions, namely the California Community Colleges (CCC) and the CSU, give parenting students priority in course registration, allowing them to register early for classes.[15] Although the legislation encouraged but did not mandate that the University of California (UC) provide priority course registration to parenting students, all 10 UC campuses had offered priority registration by Fall 2023.[16]

The legislation does not explicitly mandate data collection, but it does express the intent that "future data and outcome reporting on student parents" be linked through California's C2C Data System.[17] Because identifying these students is a necessary first step in providing them with early registration, AB 2881 creates a catalyst for the CCCs, the CSU, and the UC to build their data collection infrastructure in a way that intentionally and comprehensively incorporates parenting student data. In Fall of 2023, the first term of the legislation's implementation, 2.1% of the CSU student body (over 9,500 students) self-reported as having at least one dependent under the age of 18 and received priority registration status, a number likely to increase as the process becomes more firmly institutionalized and campuses communicate more widely and effectively about the benefit of self-identifying.

Scan of the Current Data Landscape: Digging Into Parenting Student Data Collection at the CSU

As the largest and most diverse public four-year university system in the nation, the CSU has tremendous potential to improve outcomes for its parenting students, of whom there were more than 24,000 as of 2018,[18] as well as for the estimated 280,000 parenting students attending a CCC who have the potential to transfer to a CSU campus.[19] The Alliance conducted this exploratory examination to learn how the CSU is approaching the critical work of collecting and leveraging data in support of parenting students. The scan included data gathered from a survey and two focus groups, representing the perspectives of 16 key stakeholders who support parenting students at 11 campuses across the CSU system. Those 11 campuses serve over 270,000 CSU students and represent 60% of the total CSU student body. The scan also included an extensive review of all 23 campus websites and the CSU's systemwide data dashboards to determine what, if any, data on parenting students' college journeys is currently being publicly reported.[20] Additional details about participating campuses and methodology can be found in the Appendix.

Insights From the Field: Recent Progress and Room for Improvement

1. **On several CSU campuses, there is growing recognition among faculty and staff about the importance of collecting and disaggregating data on parenting students.**

Survey and focus group participants shared that faculty and staff at their CSU campuses are gradually recognizing the value of collecting data on parenting students. Participants viewed this recognition as a foundational step for supporting individual students and key to closing equity gaps and increasing graduation rates—two pillars of the system's Graduation Initiative 2025.

The need for such data may be garnering increased attention because, as one professor noted, *"Parenting students sit at the intersection of multiple identities."* The campus-based stakeholders we surveyed viewed data as serving a dual purpose: as a flashlight and as a key.

Data as a *Flashlight*

Data helps higher education decision-makers see and focus on parenting students, both at individual campuses and more broadly across the state's higher education systems. By illuminating the specific needs and strengths of parenting students, data can bring to light both the disparities these students face in their college journeys and the assets they contribute to every classroom they enter, which enable schools and the state to more directly target programs and supports to meet students' needs.

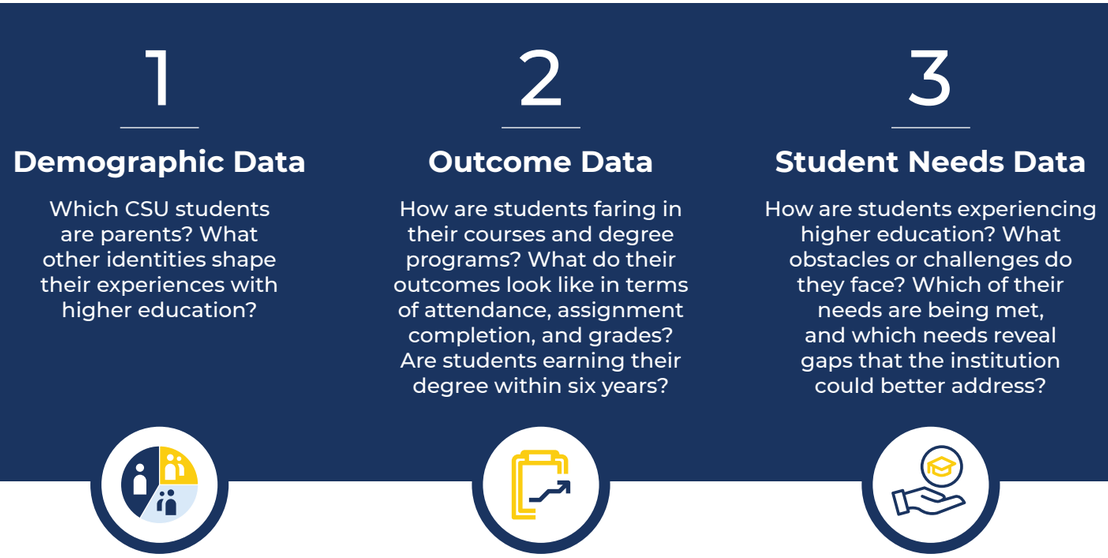
Data as a *Key*

Data can help unlock the door to resources like the federal Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) grant, which supports the participation of low-income parents in higher education by funding campus-based child care services. Being able to quantify how many parenting students a campus serves, the rates at which parenting students access campus-based resources like campus child care centers and the relationship between resource use and student outcomes can help institutions secure funding for programs that benefit parenting students.[21]

Though growing awareness of the power of such data is worth celebrating, this awareness should extend beyond individual staff members or isolated pockets within universities. Instead, every part of a university—including institutional policies and practices and overall student support services—should have an awareness of and a commitment to parenting students.

2. Some CSU campuses collect metrics on parenting students, though campus-based stakeholders report that many campuses still lack crucial data points, and the definition of the term parenting students varies within and across campuses.

A robust system for data collection on parenting students should include at least three categories of data, and all information should be collected in a way that allows for disaggregation by key demographics such as race and ethnicity, gender, income, geographic location, first-generation status, and education level.



To better understand their parenting student populations, several CSU campuses have begun to collect data that fits into each of these categories; however, participants felt that these efforts are in their nascency at many campuses, and there is not yet a coordinated systemwide effort to collect and use the data in a standardized way. Our scan of campus websites and CSU data dashboards revealed that, at the time of the scan (Fall 2023), no campuses publicly shared data on parenting students across these three dimensions.

Reporting requirements tied to the receipt of federal funding encouraged several campuses to ramp up data collection related to parenting students. To help fund on-campus child care, 12 CSU campuses applied for and received federal funding from the CCAMPIS grant in 2022. Grantees must submit annual performance reports that include specific data on students who participate in the CCAMPIS program. Although the data covers only a relatively small fraction of parenting students on a given campus (namely, those who participate in CCAMPIS-funded services), the required data (listed on the following page) provides a template and baseline for the type of data that can, and should, be collected on all parenting students.[22]

Demographic Data on CCAMPIS Participants Required for Federal Reporting

a. Gender
b. Ethnicity
c. Pell enrollment status
d. Low-income status
e. Marital status
f. Enrollment by the applicable educational schedule (semester, quarters, terms)
g. Number of years taken to transfer or graduate
h. Degree or certificate earned
i. Students who transferred (two-year institution to a four-year institution) and those who withdrew
j. Number of children per student supported by the program
k. Child care center (national) accreditation and (state) licensing status
l. Fee schedules used
m. Institutional and community resources and funding

We asked survey participants to identify those parenting student–specific data points they knew their institution collected, using the CCAMPIS grant-required reporting categories as a baseline. Participants from only four participating campuses reported that, to their knowledge, their campus was able to capture a clear count of parenting students enrolled during a given semester or to disaggregate parenting student data by race, ethnicity, or Pell eligibility.[23] In focus groups, several participants shared that, in their experience, a significant barrier to collecting reliable data on parenting students is the lack of a single definition of who is considered a "parenting student," with some departments and campuses using broader, more inclusive definitions than others.

Participants from 4 of 11 campuses surveyed reported they were aware of their campus collecting data on the number of dependents a parenting student supported, and no participants were aware of their campus collecting data on whether students were accessing campus-based resources aimed at supporting parenting students, such as campus-based child care or Title IX services (Title IX protects people from sex or gender discrimination).[24] Participants from only 2 out of 11 participating campuses reported knowing that their campus connected demographic and outcome data to determine the number of years parenting students take to graduate, and participants from only one campus reported being aware of their campus connecting data to determine the specific degrees earned by parenting students.

Encouragingly, participants from CSU campuses Long Beach, Fullerton, Northridge, Cal Poly, Sacramento State, and Fresno State indicated they were aware of efforts underway on their campuses to more fully disaggregate data for parenting students. In focus groups, participants shared that where more robust data is currently being collected, detailed online intake forms have proven reliable for gathering these data points (examples of this strategy are featured in the bright spots below). These efforts are important given the perception held by participants that many of their campuses are not yet collecting or sharing data across all three categories named above—demographics, outcomes, and student needs—limiting their ability to adequately and equitably support parenting students. Intake forms represent one simple step campuses can take to strengthen data collection.

3. Within a single campus, limited coordination of data collection efforts across departments can act as a barrier to leveraging parenting student data to inform institutional policies and practices.

In some ways, perception is reality when it comes to data on parenting students. Even if parenting student data is collected on a given campus, if administrators, professors, student affairs coordinators, or other student-facing faculty and staff are unaware of or are unable to access the data, the information may as well not exist. Even when survey participants knew for certain that specific data points were collected by their campus, several also expressed that they were unsure of the totality of data that was collected. One campus coordinator shared that although they oversaw a center focused on supporting parenting students, they were still unaware of the full extent to which data was being collected about these students across departments.

Survey and focus group participants suggested that one reason for this disconnect, in their experience, was decentralized data collection, with various departments on a given campus collecting different types of data but lacking structures for integrating it—thus leaving it siloed and of limited usefulness. Several participants reported that they are aware of a variety of centers and departments on their campus that manage parenting student data in some capacity, including financial aid offices, registrar's offices, gender resource centers, dedicated student-parent centers, Title IX offices, and institutional research offices.

Focus group participants shared that another major obstacle was a lack of clear protocols about how to securely share information gathered through various applications. For example, financial aid offices have some data on parenting students but are often hesitant to share it with campus staff, faculty, and parenting student centers without clear guidance on safe data-sharing practices. Participants expressed a desire for campuses to establish mechanisms for coordinating information across departments and to provide clear data-sharing guidance that protects student privacy. Coordinated efforts would allow student support staff, administrators, and faculty to access and use the same data to gain a common understanding of needs and streamline support delivery.[25]

To better understand their parenting student populations, several CSU campuses have begun to collect data that fits into each of these categories; however, participants felt that these efforts are in their nascency at many campuses, and there is not yet a coordinated systemwide effort to collect and use the data in a standardized way. Our scan of campus websites and CSU data dashboards revealed that, at the time of the scan (Fall 2023), no campuses publicly shared data on parenting students across these three dimensions.

> "Data looks different across campus; outside of a [campus] data tool, there aren't formalized mechanisms to capture data on parenting students."
>
> – Fresno State professor

4. Campus leaders of parenting student support efforts named infrastructure, a clear vision from leadership, and dedicated staff as important building blocks for high-quality, sustainable parenting student data collection and use.

Putting data to work by using it to change institutional policies and procedures is essential for achieving educational equity and justice. When asked how well they felt their campus administration used existing data about parenting students, survey participants from 8 of 11 campuses had negative perceptions of their campus' data usage, and focus group respondents felt that data were underutilized and often hard to access. Data that are collected but not used risks eroding trust in institutional data collection efforts and threatens the integrity of future data collection, making this an especially urgent concern to address.

> In 2019, [my campus] created a **mechanism** to identify parenting students, which was inclusive beyond children and encompassed adult dependents. The institutional research office is understaffed, so [my campus] has not been able to operationalize or comb through data.
>
> **– Fresno State professor**

Many of the focus group participants expressed a desire to hear more directly from campus and system leaders such as university presidents, vice presidents, and the CSU Chancellor's Office about guidance related to data and initiatives on parenting students, including the implementation of policies like AB 2881. "Efforts need to be made from the top down to direct the institution," commented one respondent, who discussed the need for leadership to set clear priorities for establishing supports guided by meaningful data, like coordinating offices or centers with a dedicated focus on pregnant and parenting students.

One clear area of opportunity for centralized guidance is the need for a shared definition and criteria for identifying students who are parenting. Currently, definitional variations exist within the same campus, across campuses, and throughout state systems of higher education. Failure to align definitions risks creating inequities if, for example, students identified as parents at one campus receive services and supports while another campus with a differing definition excludes students who meet the same criteria.[26] This lack of uniformity underscores the need for a single, shared definition used across all institutions—ideally, one broad enough to include a variety of caregiver-dependent relationships and independent of the amount of financial responsibility the parent has for their child. Without such uniformity, schools and the state cannot answer a simple fundamental question: Who are California's parenting students?[27]

Promisingly, the CSU Chancellor's Office has recently expressed the intent to enhance student access to basic needs support and better monitor students' use of these supports to understand uptake and gaps in access.[28] This effort would be a perfect example of an opportunity for the system to include students' parenting status as one of the demographic dimensions used to disaggregate service usage data.

> I would love to see a system[wide] commitment to parenting students.
>
> **– Fresno State professor**

Bright Spots

Promising Parenting Student Data Practices at Two CSU Campuses to Replicate and Scale

Our analysis of the landscape identified two CSU campuses, Sacramento State and Cal Poly, that stand out as bright spots for their concerted efforts to strengthen data collection and translate it into meaningful support for parenting students. For instance, Cal Poly's voluntary intake form and internal tracking system have led to partnerships across campus departments, and Sacramento State has collected data that revealed that one in three of its students are parenting children under 18 years old.

Cal Poly's Program: Students With Dependents

Cal Poly stands out as a bright spot for its approach to handling data on parenting students. It focuses on minimizing siloed information, maximizing collaboration across campus departments, and using real-time data to be responsive to student needs.

Centralization and dedicated capacity strengthen data collection and program continuity

Following years of student-led advocacy, with support from faculty such as Dr. Tina Cheuk and in response to a broader state and national push to recognize and support pregnant and parenting students, Cal Poly hired a full-time student services coordinator in Spring 2023 to spearhead its Students With Dependents program. When the program began as an unfunded student-led coalition in 2017, it faced challenges with maintaining continuity when student leaders departed their roles or graduated, yet hiring a full-time coordinator has since enhanced the program's sustainability. The position also streamlines communication by creating a single point of contact who understands students' needs and can use this information to coordinate services and lead programmatic initiatives supporting students with dependents. The new position represents a marked shift from a system where data resides with individuals to one where it resides with dedicated roles, preserving institutional knowledge that otherwise would have been lost to student and staff turnover.

An online intake form streamlines detailed data collection

The Students With Dependents program created an online intake form that allows parenting students to share detailed information, offering the program a snapshot of the institution's parenting students. Although an intake form is not an ideal method of data collection because it relies on voluntarily submitted information and may underestimate the number of parenting students—namely those who don't know about or prefer not to use the form—it nonetheless is an important data-gathering tool. Its intake data provides valuable insights about parenting students, including the ages of their dependents, class standing, anticipated graduation date, city of residence, and the length of their commute to campus. During the 2022–23 academic year, nearly 100 parenting students completed the form, enabling the program to personalize its supports, provide warm handoffs to other campus departments, and connect students with relevant resources both on and off campus.

Collecting data across departments enables targeted support design and delivery

Intake data revealed that the majority of Cal Poly's parenting students (70%) were transfer students and another 15% were graduate students. Although small in scale, this dataset facilitated partnerships across campus departments, including the Transfer Center, Children's Center, and Parking and Transportation Services. Additionally, data revealed that several students commuted more than 100 miles to campus; these commuters spanned from southern Los Angeles County to northern Alameda County. The program's data collection surfaced the mental, emotional, and financial strains of commuting and highlighted the necessity of including parenting students in the development, design, and plans for on- and off-campus family housing. Although these long-distance commuter students are a minority, understanding their commuting challenges prompted the Students With Dependents and Off-Campus Housing programs to explore the housing experiences of the institution's parenting students through dedicated focus groups and listening sessions. Now, both the Students With Dependents and Off-Campus Housing programs are equipped with quantitative and qualitative data that uplift parenting students' needs for family-friendly housing.

The Students With Dependents program also implemented a tracking system to record communications received from parenting students. By noting the date of correspondence and nature of concerns, the program could identify trends over time and develop solutions. For example, students noted that the campus shuttle route didn't include a stop at the campus children's center. In response, the program collaborated with Transportation and Parking Services to offer enhanced parking accessibility for parenting students. Now, parenting students no longer must leave class early to get their cars from the much farther commuter lots to pick up their children from the campus children's

center. Cal Poly's use of data is a perfect example of the role it can play in identifying, understanding, and meeting students' needs and eliminating barriers.[29]

Sacramento State's Parents & Families Program

Spearheaded by **Dr. Haley Myers-Dillon**, Sacramento State's **Parents & Families Program** offers pre-birth support services, peer mentorship, one-on-one academic advising, and post–parental leave planning support to pregnant and parenting students.

The best sources of data on parenting students' needs are the students themselves

Because parenting students are the ultimate experts on issues relevant to them, the program leverages their expertise to enhance parenting students' visibility on campus. Student–Parent Peer Ambassadors work one on one with parenting students to plan and implement educational, academic, and social workshops and events, serving as liaisons between parenting students and the institution. Ambassadors elevate the stories of their peers and share best practices for effectively and equitably supporting parenting students—giving voice to their challenges, triumphs, and joys—to drive institutional change.

Finding creative ways to collect data can reduce the burden of self-reporting

Sacramento State offers several ways for students to share information about themselves and their families at orientation and in-person tabling events. However, recognizing that an opt-in method places the onus on students, Dr. Myers-Dillon strategized ways to shift responsibility from the student to the institution. These strategies include elevating the need of cross-campus partnerships and demonstrating the benefits of proactively collecting data and data sharing between departments.

Collaboration leads to tangible resources and services

In 2018, the Parents & Families program collaborated with the campus children's center and financial aid office while applying for Sacramento State's first CCAMPIS grant. A collaborative effort identified 3,675 parenting students who completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and enabled the program to secure its first CCAMPIS grant of $536,000. CCAMPIS funding supported the establishment of a voucher system that provided students an opportunity to use off-campus child care services from licensed providers—a necessary move given that the campus child care center maxed out at 250 spots and could not accommodate all of the children of the institution's parenting students.

In 2022, Dr. Myers-Dillon collaborated with the Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning (OIREP) for her doctoral research on parenting students. Her engagement and relationship with OIREP laid the groundwork for more effective data collection on parenting students across the institution. The data they collected on the number of students caring for children under the age of 18 offered valuable insight to the university, which could now begin to use this information to tailor its support services to meet these students' needs. Moreover, Dr. Myers-Dillon and OIREP's data-sharing arrangement contributed to the institution's second CCAMPIS grant of $1.9 million in 2022. Dr. Myers-Dillon, the Parents & Families program, and other campus programs' efforts to accelerate data-driven change granted Sacramento State an opportunity to create targeted policies and practices for parenting students.[30]

Recommendations

CSU Campuses

Individual CSU campuses play a critical role in identifying and supporting their parenting students. **To harness data to most effectively support them, CSU campus leaders should follow the example of bright spot campuses and take the following actions:**

- **Campuses should create committees of parenting students, staff, and faculty** to inform data collection processes and support the collaborative implementation of data-informed recommendations.
- **Campuses should encourage collaboration across departments—**including but not limited to institutional research offices, campus-based child care centers, and financial aid offices—to increase efficiency and unlock resources for student support, such as the federally funded CCAMPIS grant.

CSU Chancellor's Office

Although AB 2881 does not mandate data collection, it paves the way for it by requiring campuses to identify their parenting students, thus granting an opportunity for the Chancellor's Office to streamline collection and utilization of parenting student data across the CSU system. **To facilitate more consistent data collection and use, we encourage the CSU Chancellor's Office to take the following actions:**

- **Designate staff and invest in staff and faculty professional development** to enhance capacity for coordinating data collection and utilization efforts across campuses.
- **Include parenting students as a demographic category in the CSU Course Equity Portal**, which enables faculty to examine equity gaps in grades.
- **Add parenting student status to CSU Data Dashboards**, such as the Graduation Data Dashboard, which include information on student persistence and graduation rates.
- **Collaborate with campuses leading the way,** like Cal Poly and Sacramento State, to learn about their data collection and data coordination practices and explore the potential for systemwide scaling.

Policymakers and Higher Education Leaders

Recently, California legislation has moved the needle on parenting student support with the passage of AB 2881 and state funding for the Cal Grant Access Award for Students with Dependent Children.[31] The state should build on this foundation by taking the following steps:

- **Support legislative efforts to create a clear statewide definition of the term *parenting student*** as a student who has a child or children under 18 years of age who will receive more than half of their support from that student.
- **Mandate that colleges collect, share among campus departments, and make public de-identified data on parenting students'** applications, enrollment, campus experiences, and academic and workforce outcomes. Each data point must be disaggregated by key demographics, such as race and ethnicity, gender, income, geographic location, first-generation status, and education level.
- **Require relevant government agencies that administer programs used by parenting students and their families (such as the California Department of Social Services, California Student Aid Commission, and Employment Development Department) to train staff to regularly analyze and publish data on parenting students,** including applications for and receipt of financial aid and public benefits, and postsecondary and employment outcomes; these agencies should disaggregate analyses by key demographics.
- **Include data on parenting students with linkages to their families in the C2C Data System—**including uptake of social services, higher education attainment, and postsecondary and workforce outcomes—to examine whether policies are strengthening outcomes for parenting students and their children.[32] Doing so would align with AB 2881 intent language that any future data and outcome reporting on parenting students be linked in the C2C Data System.

Conclusion

Data collection is a fundamental prerequisite of any strategy for closing equity gaps in opportunities and outcomes that currently prevent parenting students from realizing their educational aspirations. Critically, it is not merely a compliance exercise that higher education institutions and the state should engage in just for the sake of accumulating information or checking a statutorily required box.[33] Only when parenting students are counted can they be properly supported. This scan's findings suggest that across several CSU campuses, leadership and staff have begun taking important steps toward collecting and leveraging data to better support parenting students, but the findings also indicate that much more needs to be done. The recommendations point toward actions that individual campuses and the CSU system can take to do this work in a more comprehensive and robust way with a consistent eye on closing racial and income-based equity gaps.

As California prepares to roll out the C2C Data System, which has the potential to shed light on students' postsecondary pathways, there is no better time than the present to collect better data on parenting students and advocate for its inclusion in the statewide data system. AB 2881 also lays a timely foundation for this work by necessitating that campuses identify parenting students as part of priority registration. Together, these conditions provide California with a unique opportunity to become a national leader in the collection and use of parenting student data. To seize the moment, California must support, incentivize, and require both private and public higher education systems to collect and use parenting student data. **Additionally, the state has a responsibility to ensure that this data is used both as a flashlight to illuminate equity gaps and as a key to unlock the necessary resources to close those gaps—so that nothing stands between a parenting student and their certificate or degree.**

Imagine you're back in a parenting student's shoes, but this time your college has leveraged data on you, your peers, and your children to implement family-serving policies and practices. You are empowered, because in any office on campus you walk into, someone is prepared to support you and your family. Although your superhero cape still flutters behind you, it no longer weighs heavily on your shoulders. That's because now, you earn your superhero status not because you're forced to go to heroic lengths to navigate a system that once made earning a degree seem impossible, but purely because you are your little one's hero.

Appendix

Methodology

This exploratory examination employed a mixed-methods approach to present a picture of strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improving data collection on parenting students enrolled at the CSU. The first component was a thorough review of all 23 CSU campus websites as well as the CSU Data Dashboards curated by the Institutional Research and Analyses (IR&A) division of the Chancellor's Office, using key terms to search for data on parenting students. The goal was to determine what, if any, data on student parents is currently made public via campus-level or system-wide datasets, tools, or dashboards. This point-in-time scan reflects website content that was publicly accessible as of November 2023.

This review was followed by a 16-question survey, comprised of both closed-ended and open-ended questions, distributed via email directly to key stakeholders engaged in the work of supporting parenting students across CSU campuses. The survey was initially sent to 85 recipients, including members of the CSU Student Parent Network and offices of Vice Presidents of Student Affairs, as well as graduate student assistants, staff, faculty, and administrators identified by members of the CSU Student Parent Network as campus leader of student parent support work. This group was invited to share their experiences with their campus' data collection and use because individuals in these roles were considered to be most intimately familiar with, and thus ideally positioned to share insights related to, parenting student supports. Recipients of initial outreach emails were encouraged to share the survey with colleagues who also worked closely with parenting students and others who they believed might have informed perspectives on campus data strengths and needs related to this student population. Two rounds of follow-up emails were sent to encourage completion of the survey.

A total of 16 individuals across 11 campuses, all of whom reported being directly engaged in leading or supporting parenting student support efforts on their respective campuses, completed the survey. Themes and insights included in the report reflect their responses. Survey questions inquired about the metrics respondents are aware of their campuses collecting or disaggregating related to parenting students, their perceptions of data use on their campus, the value of this data, their awareness of efforts to strengthen data collection, and steps they felt could be taken to improve data collection and use.

The final portion of the project consisted of two focus groups of 10 individuals from five campuses. Participants were identified through a survey question asking respondents to indicate their level of interest in joining a focus group. To create an environment that encouraged candor, participants engaged in focus groups under the condition of confidentiality. Focus groups were structured around a protocol designed to gather more extensive information about participants' knowledge, beliefs, and experiences than was possible through the survey. Focus groups were recorded and emergent coding of transcripts and notes taken throughout was used to identify themes.

It is important to note that our sample was created using targeted recruitment and outreach to individuals who are closest to the work of supporting parenting students on their respective campuses. This means that this data reflects the experiences and perspectives of these stakeholders; that is, the data does not capture official institutional perspectives. The survey and focus groups reflect data from one or two participants at 11 CSU campuses and may not reflect each campus as a whole or the overall CSU system.

Survey and focus group participants were based at the following campuses:

Campus	Represented in survey data	Represented in focus group data
Bakersfield	X	X
Chico	X	
Fresno	X	
Fullerton	X	X
Long Beach	X	
Los Angeles	X	X
Northridge	X	
Sacramento	X	X
San Francisco	X	
San Luis Obispo	X	X
Sonoma	X	

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