Mapping the Landscape Through Data:
Six-State Analysis of Student Parent Information Systems

Fall 2025

Executive Summary

An estimated 800,000 men in the United States postsecondary education system are fathers and students, representing a significant but largely invisible population within higher education. These parenting fathers study at two and four-year institutions across all 50 states, navigating the complex balance of fulfilling both parenting and student responsibilities while transitioning to the workforce. They face unique challenges, including immediate financial pressures that cannot wait for future earning potential, complex time management demands that differ from traditional students, and the need to prioritize children's schedules over academic requirements. They are served through a variety of institutional types and support systems, including community colleges, four-year universities, online programs, and hybrid learning environments, with varying degrees of family-friendly policies, childcare services, and academic accommodations.

Understanding the experiences and needs of student fathers is crucial to ensuring that all students in the United States can not only access, but also complete, the education, training, and credentials necessary to achieve social and economic mobility. This landscape analysis examines the existing data and how it can be analyzed to deepen our understanding of the student father and parenting experience in general, from both national and 50-state perspectives. A five-stage journey map is used to frame the analyses.

A key challenge in this work is that information related to parenting students—specifically, data about their status as parents and details regarding their children—is not readily available in most existing datasets. There are three major findings from this landscape analysis: (1) there is a dual data challenge of difficulty in both identifying student fathers and tracking their outcomes, preventing effective policy development at federal, state, and institutional levels, (2) student fathers experience inconsistent and inadequate consideration across their education and workforce journeys, and (3) inconsistent state-level attention to student father issues despite states' extensive authority over higher education through operating authorization, funding, program approval, and regulatory oversight.

Rather than creating entirely new programs, states can leverage existing regulatory and funding structures to support student fathers. We recommend integrating student father support across key areas where states already have authority: operating authorization and regulatory compliance (including data collection requirements), funding and appropriations (performance metrics and targeted allocations), new programs and degrees (flexible pathways and scheduling), tuition and fee policies, infrastructure and construction (family-friendly facilities), distance education standards, and strategic direction. This approach acknowledges that states possess the necessary mechanisms to address these challenges through established higher education governance structures.

This landscape analysis reveals a significant policy opportunity. The convergence of adult learner and student parent populations creates a unique policy window, as 91% of student fathers are adult learners, meaning policies supporting this population can advance multiple state priorities simultaneously, including degree completion and workforce development. Student father support serves as a lens through which to examine and improve existing higher education policies, offering states an opportunity to create systemic impact through coordinated policy action across their established areas of authority.

Introduction

An estimated 800,000 men in the United States postsecondary education system are fathers and students, representing a significant population within higher education. These parenting fathers study at two and four-year institutions across all 50 states, navigating the complex balance of fulfilling both parenting and student responsibilities in their everyday lives. They are served through a variety of institutional types and support systems, including community colleges, four-year universities, online programs, and hybrid learning environments, with varying degrees of family-friendly policies, childcare services, and academic accommodations.

As higher education institutions continue working to improve access, retention, and completion rates for diverse student populations, much remains to be learned about where and how student fathers are served; how outcomes vary for fathers with different background characteristics, family circumstances, and institutional contexts; and the relationship between available support services, institutional policies, and student success outcomes.

Understanding the experiences and needs of student fathers is essential for ensuring that all students in the United States can both access and complete the education, training, and credentials needed for social and economic mobility. This analysis aims to examine what data exist and how it can be analyzed to improve our understanding of the student father and parenting experience overall, considering both a national and 50-state perspective. A major challenge in this work is that information related to parenting students—specifically, data about their status as parents and details about their children—is not readily available in most existing datasets. This review looks at the current state of available data sources, highlights gaps in our knowledge, and offers evidence-based insights to help institutions and policymakers better serve this group of students balancing parenthood and academic success.

College Promise and Supporting Student Parents

College Promise is a national, nonpartisan, non-profit organization that aims to ensure all students in the United States have access to the education, training, and support necessary to achieve social and economic opportunity. Founded in 2015, College Promise advocates for and promotes a network of over 450 Promise programs in all 50 states, which align with more than 1,700 colleges and universities. Thirty-eight states have statewide Promise programs (see Table B1). Promise programs are regional and statewide initiatives that aim to eliminate financial barriers to higher education by providing high-need, high-potential students with funding and comprehensive support services such as academic advising, career counseling, and mentoring. While often marketed as making college "free," these programs typically cover tuition and fees but may not address the full cost of attendance, including childcare, transportation, housing, and living expenses.

While the College Promise movement has transformed higher education for millions of students, student fathers represent a particularly complex population within this landscape. Their dual responsibilities as parents and students create unique barriers that extend beyond traditional financial aid, requiring specialized support systems that address childcare needs, flexible scheduling, and family-sustaining career pathways to ensure not only access to higher education but also persistence through their programs and successful completion of credentials. Understanding how current Promise programs serve, or could better serve, student fathers across these critical stages is essential to ensuring that these initiatives truly reach all students seeking to break cycles of poverty and achieve upward mobility for themselves and their families.

About the Parenting Fathers Landscape Analysis

College Promise is conducting a landscape analysis of available data on student fathers in the United States higher education. The landscape analysis will provide a comprehensive picture of existing data on student fathers at the national level and in six key states—California, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, and Texas—exploring how these data can be analyzed and what gaps limit our understanding of this population. Our goals are to assess the current state of data availability and quality across these varied contexts and to raise questions for future data collection efforts that can inform policy and practice aimed at supporting student fathers.

In the six profiled states, 171 Promise programs are in operation (see Table 1). Forty-six percent of programs allow students to attend colleges only in their local areas, while the other 54% enable students to attend educational institutions anywhere across the state.

These Promise programs represent a substantial component of higher education (see Table 2). With coverage ranging from 16% to 92% of Title IV institutions across the six profiled states, Promise programs provide a significant pathway to college access. More importantly, these programs potentially reach between 51% and 99% of students in participating states, indicating their capacity to serve as a primary mechanism for college affordability rather than a supplementary option. This extensive reach suggests that Promise programs are becoming institutionalized within state higher education systems, fundamentally reshaping how students and families approach college financing decisions.

Table 1: Promise Programs Coverage in Statutory Student Parent Data Collection States

State	State Total	Local College Access Only	Statewide College Access
California	91	26	65
Illinois	18	15	3
Michigan	27	22	5
Minnesota	7	2	5
Oregon	3	1	2
Texas	25	12	13
Total	**171**	**78**	**93**

Note: Geographic coverage does not reflect whether programs cover public institutions only, private institutions only, or both.

Source: College Promise, MyPromise Tool, 2024.

Table 2: Promise Program Coverage of Institutions and Students, Selected States and United States

Region	Institutions: Total Title IV	Institutions: Promise-Aligned	Institution Coverage	Students: Total Title IV	Students at Promise Programs	Student Reach
	N	N	%	N	N	%
California	442	151	34	2,483,724	2,037,083	82
Illinois	149	62	42	677,089	401,123	59
Michigan	89	82	92	466,694	463,013	99
Minnesota	78	40	51	373,128	223,309	60
Oregon	49	39	80	194,987	187,024	96
Texas	238	37	16	1,569,046	804,323	51
United States	**3,915**	**1,745**	**45**	**18,713,534**	**13,058,685**	**70**

Note: This table includes only Title IV-eligible, degree-granting institutions that enroll first-time, full-time undergraduates. Enrollment figures reflect total undergraduate enrollment at each institution. Each Promise program provides a list of eligible institutions where their students can use Promise funding. The table shows the number and percentage of Title IV institutions aligned with Promise programs, along with the estimated number and percentage of students who these programs could potentially reach. While one or more Promise programs may partner with a given institution of higher education, not all students at that institution are Promise students, as eligibility requirements vary by program and institution.

Sources: National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (NCES IPEDS), and College Promise, MyPromise Tool, 2024.

Student Fathers Data Analysis Study

Drawing on analysis of federal datasets, public policies, survey data sources, Promise program leaders, student interviews, and participants at convenings (see Appendix A for Methodology), this study will:

- Focus analysis on student fathers nationally and within six states.
- Identify insights into the educational journey of student fathers at five stages: awareness, access, persistence, completion, and workforce outcomes.
- Provide recommendations for policymakers on systemic changes to support student fathers, including financial aid reforms, childcare supports, improved access pathways, and workforce transition policies.

Framework for Analysis

Given the limited research on student fathers in higher education, our analysis focused on:

1. Examining Available Data: Analyzing what existing data reveal about student fathers' educational experiences and outcomes.

2. Mapping Educational Pathways: Understanding how student fathers navigate awareness, access, persistence, completion, and workforce transitions.

3. Identifying Support Gaps: Highlighting where current systems and policies fail to support student fathers adequately.

4. Developing Policy Recommendations: Proposing systemic changes to better support student fathers through financial aid, childcare, and workforce transition policies.

Project Impact

This landscape analysis will fill critical gaps in our knowledge about the data available on student fathers across different states, help identify promising data sources and analytical approaches that might be worth replicating, and set the stage for more thorough research.

The Prospect Pool for Higher Education

Pursuing higher education has never been a given or a straight path—even for men (Thelin, 2019). That's why we should consider men across different age segments, each with distinct pathways and challenges.

Recent high school graduates (18-19 years) face immediate post-secondary decisions. Yet, college enrollment has dropped to a thirty-year low, with men comprising 56% of the over 1.1 million students who do not attend college immediately after graduation (United States Census Bureau, 2023; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). This trend occurs alongside projected demographic shifts, as high school graduation rates are expected to decline in all but 12 states over the next 15 years, with nine states facing potentially severe drops exceeding 20% (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2024).

Young adult men (18-24 years) represent a second transition opportunity. However, a growing cohort remains disconnected from education, employment, and training, essentially vanishing from traditional paths to higher education and economic mobility (Abraham & Rendell, 2023).

Adult men (25 and older) constitute the third transition segment for those seeking to re-engage with higher education, but millions who previously stopped out of college fail to return at rates matching economic demands (Franzino et. al., 2018; United States Census Bureau, 2023), contributing to discouraged worker rates that run approximately 85% higher than women (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025).

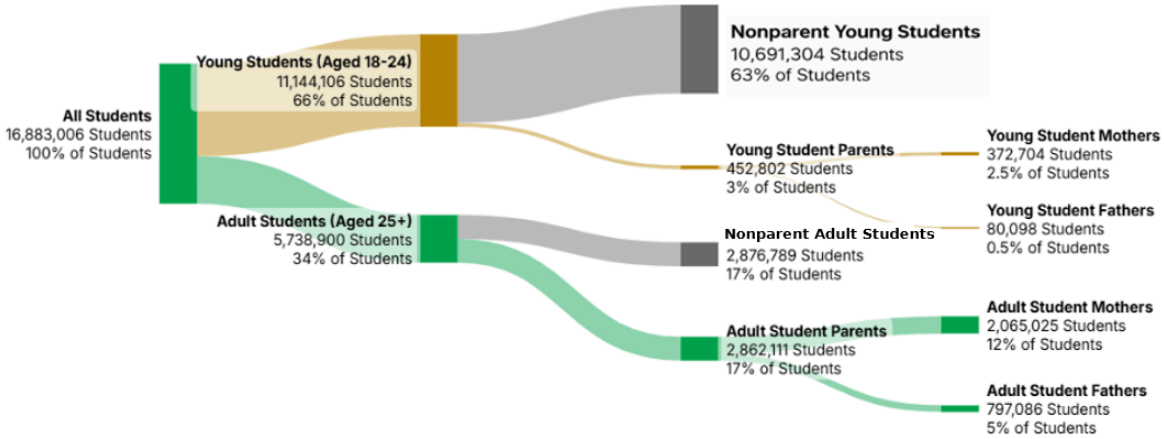
These three age segments reveal how opportunities for educational engagement evolve across men's lives and underscore the compounding nature of disconnection that affects not only higher education participation but also employment stability and long-term career advancement, creating ripple effects throughout the economy and labor market.

Within this prospect pool, student fathers represent a distinct population with unique needs:

7 million men enrolled in higher education in 2020. They represented 42% of the total student population.

In total, **877,184** men who are fathers enrolled in higher education in 2020. They represent 5.2% of the total student population. As Figure 1 indicates, **797,086** men who are fathers over the age of 25 enrolled in higher education in 2020. They represent 4.7% of all students enrolled in 2020.

Figure 1. Student Demographics Flow: Young Adults, Adult Learners, and Parenthood, 2020

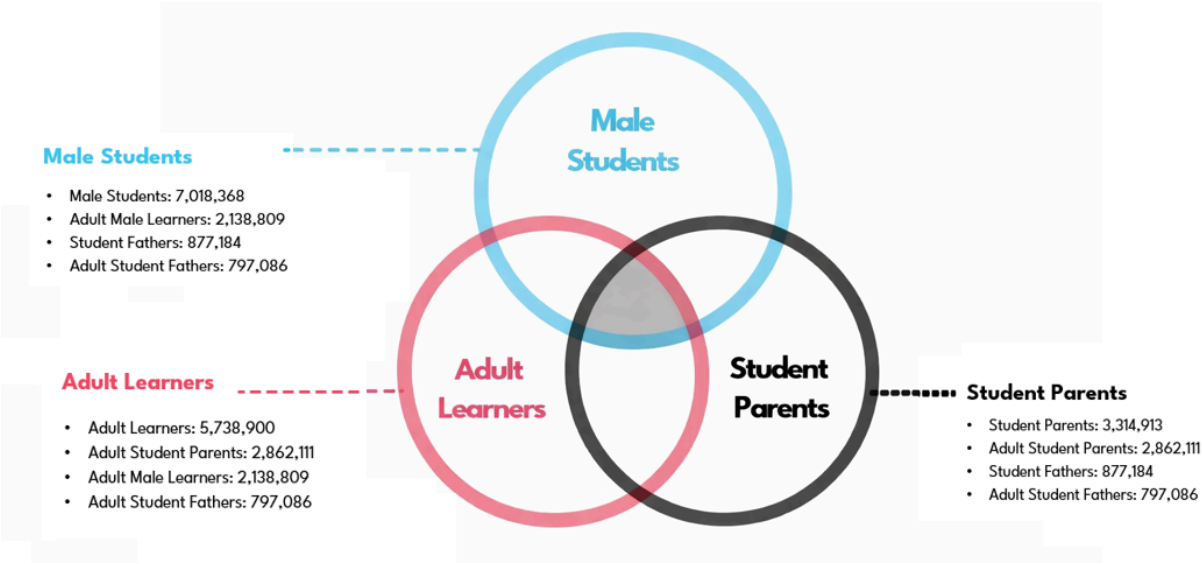


Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2020). 2019-20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:20). U.S. Department of Education.

Student Fathers at the Intersection: Navigating Overlapping Populations

Student fathers exist at the intersection of three overlapping populations: men, adult learners, and parents (see Figure 2). Since 91% of student fathers are also adult learners, they share many educational challenges while facing distinct gendered experiences as fathers. This overlap creates analytical complexity that requires sophisticated data approaches to understand their unique needs and develop targeted interventions.

Figure 2: Intersection of Male Students, Adult Learners, and Student Parents



Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2020). 2019-20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:20). U.S. Department of Education.

The Dual Data Challenge

Supporting student fathers effectively faces two interconnected data challenges that limit both research and practice. First, institutions struggle to comprehensively identify student fathers within their populations and develop complete demographic profiles that capture their overlapping identities—including veteran status, employment history, first-generation status, and socioeconomic circumstances. Second, even when identification is achieved, institutions rarely track how student fathers engage with support services or measure the effectiveness of interventions, making it nearly impossible to determine which supports work best for different subgroups.

These challenges compound each other: without solving identification, institutions cannot track service utilization; without robust utilization data, they cannot develop evidence-based interventions. The result is a population that remains largely invisible in institutional data systems despite representing nearly 800,000 students nationally.

Why This Matters for Policy and Investment

This data gap undermines efforts to improve male enrollment, support adult learner success, and strengthen workforce development outcomes. Student fathers represent a critical intersection where educational policy, workforce needs, and family well-being intersect. Understanding their pathways and barriers is essential for developing interventions that can simultaneously address declining male enrollment, support family economic mobility, and meet employer demands for skilled workers.

Two Analytical Approaches: Enumeration and Comparison

Once student fathers are correctly identified, two analytical approaches become possible. **Enumeration** reveals scope and representation—showing what proportion of students are fathers, how their enrollment compares to population demographics, and whether they are proportionally represented across institution types and programs. **Comparative analysis** examines how fatherhood correlates with educational outcomes throughout the pipeline—from college awareness and access through persistence, completion, and workforce participation. Together, these approaches provide the evidence base needed to design targeted interventions and measure their effectiveness across different subpopulations of student fathers.

The Fatherhood Question: How We Ask Matters

Understanding the current data landscape for student parents, and student fathers in particular, requires examining federal surveys, state-level initiatives, and the broader ecosystem of institutional and organizational data collection efforts. While federal surveys, such as the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), provide nationally representative data, only six states have established legal requirements to collect information on student parents systematically. Beyond these official channels, 48 additional surveys conducted by institutions, organizations, and researchers over the past five years have gathered information on the student-parent or caregiving status of postsecondary students (see Table C1).

How researchers ask about fatherhood fundamentally shapes who gets counted, studied, and ultimately served by higher education institutions. This multilayered data infrastructure reveals significant variation in how fatherhood is defined and measured across different surveys and contexts. This section examines how different data collection efforts frame questions about fatherhood and the implications these variations have for understanding student fathers as a population.

National Center for Education Statistics

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) survey programs have multiple points of focus. We highlight two programs that emphasize institutions and students.

Institutional Profile

The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), through its 12-month Enrollment survey (2025), asked institutions to report unduplicated headcounts by level of student, race/ethnicity, and gender. However, when students look up an institution on the

College Navigator tool or search in a Data Feedback Report, information about student father enrollment is not provided.

Postsecondary Data Collection Programs

The National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) is a nationally representative cross-sectional study of undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in higher education. NPSAS:20 is a particularly relevant data collection year for this landscape analysis, as it was designed to include both national and state-level representative data on postsecondary students enrolled in the 2019-20 academic year. It is state-representative for all undergraduates across 30 states overall, including 34 states for public two-year institutions, and 40 states for public four-year institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025). Representative state-level analyses can be conducted for the featured states in this landscape study, except Oregon. In several instances, data are not available. In some cases, caution should be exercised when making inferences about the population of students in Oregon using these data.

NPSAS collected data on respondents' marital status, as well as information about whether they have dependent children, the number of dependent children they have, and the age of their youngest dependent child (see Table 3).

Table 3: Marital and Dependent Children Variables from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:20)

Data Element	Response Category	Item Responses
Marital Status		
AMARITAL	Marital Status	0= Not married (single, widowed, divorced), 1 = Married, 2= Separated -1 = Unknown
Dependent Children		
N20HDEPS	Do you [{if before July 1, 2020} now have, or will you have, {else} have] children who [{if before July 1, 2020} will receive {else} received] more than half of their support from you between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2020?	1 = Yes 0 = No
N20HDEP2	How many children [{if before July 1, 2020} receive, or will receive, {else} received] more than half of their support from you between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2020?	Number of children
N20HDAGE	How old is your youngest dependent child?	Age of child: Less than one year to 25 or older

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2020). 2019-20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:20). U.S. Department of Education.

State Views

Research by the Education Commission of the States (2024) indicates that 31 states have established or are developing longitudinal data systems that span early learning through the workforce, with nearly half having been created through statutory or legislative action. This substantial investment in data infrastructure reflects states' recognition of the importance of tracking student outcomes across multiple domains and developmental stages. However, when examining the specific variables included in these robust systems, attention to student parent data remains limited. While some states collect data on fathers of P-20 students as part of family demographic information, there is considerably less focus on students who are fathers themselves—a distinct population with unique educational challenges and support needs. This distinction is particularly significant, given that student fatherhood is not an isolated variable; being a student father intersects with multiple educational, socioeconomic, and developmental factors that these comprehensive data systems are designed to capture.

To date, only six states have moved beyond recognition of this gap to establish legal requirements for collecting data on student parents: Michigan (2020), Illinois (2021), Oregon (2021), California (2022), Texas (2023), and Minnesota (2024) (see Table 4). The remaining 44 states have not yet implemented statutory requirements for collecting student-parent data. Except for Minnesota, these requirements apply only to public institutions. The organizational structures handling oversight vary across states, with some using higher education coordinating boards while others rely on legislative committees. This piecemeal approach to incorporating student parent data across state systems underutilizes the comprehensive longitudinal frameworks that states have invested considerable resources in developing.

Table 4: States with Statutory Data Collection Requirements

State	Legislation	Enacted	Data Collection Status	Higher Education Institution Coverage	Primary Oversight
Michigan	Senate Bill 927	12/30/2020	Paused in 2021	All Public	State Legislative Oversight Committees
Oregon	Senate Bill 564	5/26/2021	Underway in 2025	All Public	State Higher Education Coordinating Board
Illinois	Senate Bill 267	7/9/2021	2023 Published Data Available	All Public	State Higher Education Coordinating Board
California	Assembly Bill 2881	9/30/2022	Commencing in 2026	All Public	Government Operations Agency
Minnesota	House Floor 4024	5/24/2023	Underway in 2025	All Institutions	State Office of Higher Education
Texas	House Bill 1361	6/12/2023	Collected in 2025, Not Publicly Available	All Public	State Higher Education Coordinating Board

Table 5: Questions Asked by States with Statutory Data Collection Requirements

State	Statewide Question	Most Relevant Item	Response
Michigan	No	FAFSA Item Acceptable: Do you now have or will you have children who will receive more than half of their support from you between [date] and [date]?	Yes; No
Oregon	Yes	Are you a parent, are you serving as a parent, or are you a legal guardian of a child/children while you are enrolled at [insert college or university name]?	No; Yes, I am a solo/single parent/guardian; Yes, I am a parent/guardian sharing responsibilities with someone living with me; Yes, I am a parent/guardian sharing responsibilities with someone not living with me
Illinois	Yes	Do you now have or will you have children who will receive more than half of their support from you between [date] and [date]?	No; Yes, Single parent; Yes, Married parent; Don't Know
California	Yes	How many children are dependent on you for more than half of their financial support?	Zero; One; Two; Three; Four or More
Minnesota	Yes	Are you the parent or legal guardian of or can claim as a dependent a child under the age of 18?	Yes; No
Texas	Yes	How many people, including yourself, live in your household?	(Marital Status: Married; Single; For each child, First/Last Name; Date of Birth; City of Birth; Country of Birth; Country of Citizenship; Gender; Male; Female)

Availability of State Data on Student Parents

Among the six states in our analysis (see Table 4), Illinois is the only one with publicly available data on student parents. According to the Illinois Board of Higher Education (2023) data collection report, student parents comprised 2.8% of all undergraduates across the state's 12 public universities during the 2022-23 academic year. These data reveal a striking gender disparity: while men made up 44% of the non-parent student population, student fathers represented only 23% of all student parents, highlighting how parenthood disproportionately affects female students in higher education.

Survey Inventory: Data Sources on Student Parents

Building on previous research efforts to compile surveys related to student parents (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2024; Anderson & Green, 2022; Gault et al., 2020; Sick & Anderson, 2024; Sick et al., 2023; Yates, 2024), College Promise staff conducted a review of existing data sources. This process included examining earlier studies and creating a comprehensive database of sources that gather information on student parents or dependents—individuals responsible for caring for children (see Table C1). Our database includes 48 surveys conducted in the past five years (2020-2025) that meet two key criteria:

- An item or items that assess the caregiving status of respondents, and
- An item or items that assess postsecondary enrollment or current educational attainment of respondents.

While these criteria may be more inclusive than those used in earlier research, this approach aligns with the goal of the landscape analysis: to provide the most comprehensive examination possible of student parents, with particular attention to student fathers, utilizing all available data sources. National surveys provided the most extensive set of questions (42%), followed by state surveys (29%), federal surveys (19%), and institutional surveys (10%).

Staff coded the items to identify central approaches for each survey. These are: (1) caregiving time and responsibilities, (2) child custody and living arrangements, (3) child demographics and characteristics, (4) financial support and dependency, (5) household composition, (6) marital/family status, (7) parental status and role definition, and (8) pregnancy and reproductive history.

This analysis also shows that different surveys collect varying levels of detail about student parent status, family composition, and child characteristics. This inventory reveals considerable variation in the basic information collected across different surveys. Some datasets can identify both student fathers and student mothers separately, while others only capture general dependent status. Similarly, information about children varies significantly—some surveys collect details about the number and age of children, while others provide no child-specific data. (Table C1).

The National Student Father Profile: By the Numbers

Student fathers represent a distinctly different demographic from other male students, with notable differences in key characteristics (see Figure 3).

Age and Experience. A striking 91% of student fathers are adult learners—nearly three times the rate of non-parental male students (22%).

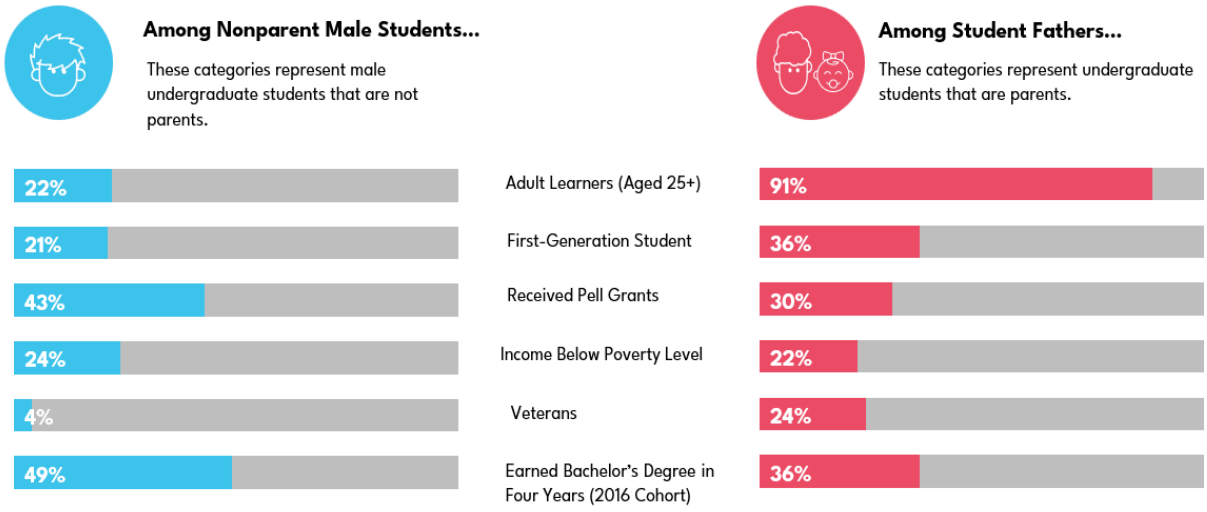
Educational Background. More than one in three student fathers (36%) are first-generation college students, compared to roughly one in four (21%) other male students.

Military Service. Student fathers are six times more likely to be veterans, with 24% having military experience, compared to just 4% of their peers.

Geography and Financial Aid. These data reveal student fathers are slightly more concentrated in rural areas (21% vs. 18%) and more dependent on need-based aid, with 43% receiving Pell grants[1] compared to 33% of other non-parental male students.

Through NPSAS (2020), comparable demographic profiles of student fathers from the six states can be developed (see Table 6). These profiles illustrate both the similarities and differences among student father profiles. For example, while four out of five fathers in each state are adult learners, there is considerable variation among the states, with 95% of student fathers being adult learners in Minnesota compared to 82% in Texas. Another notable difference is the overlap between student fathers and first-generation students. Twelve percent of student fathers in Oregon are also first-generation students compared to 51% of student fathers in Texas.

Figure 3: Comparing Non-Parental Male Students to Student Fathers, 2020



Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2020). 2019-20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:20). U.S. Department of Education.

[1] Congress.Gov defines Pell Grants as need-based aid that is intended to be the foundation for all need-based federal student aid awarded to undergraduates. Unlike loans, students do not need to repay Pell Grants.

Table 6: Student Father Demographics, Six States and United States, 2020

Attribute	United States	California	Illinois	Michigan	Minnesota	Oregon	Texas
	n = 877,184	n = 118,278	n = 25,242	n = 23,815	n = 18,463	n = 9.156	n = 73,818
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Adult Learner	91	90	86	91	95	94	82
First-Generation	36	47	48	36	36	12	51
Received Any Pell	43	35	44	36	35	41	36
Income Below Poverty Level	24	15	35	14	11	10	25
Veteran	24	17	10	NA	NA	NA	29
Rural Student	21	15	25	53	33	23	20

Note: NA indicates insufficient cases to meet statistical reporting standards. "Rural" effectively indicates everyone outside of a medium suburbanized or urbanized area and includes (Suburban Small; Town Fringe; Town Distant; Town Remote; Rural Distant; Rural Remote).

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2020). 2019-20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:20). U.S. Department of Education.

The statistics tell us who becomes a student father. But what does it feel like to consider becoming one? The following spotlight introduces us to someone grappling with precisely this question. Erikson is a composite character drawn from the 23 student fathers interviewed for this study.

Erikson: A Father.

Erikson is a single father who works construction. He is the custodial parent of his three-year-old daughter, and being her father is the most important part of his life. One sentiment that student fathers express is that they want to model the value of education for their children. As Erikson explained, "I thought it would be responsible for me to show my daughter that when I'm encouraging her to pursue her education, I'm also demonstrating that getting a college degree is a worthwhile endeavor."

Moving from Demographics to Experience: Critical Questions About Student Fatherhood

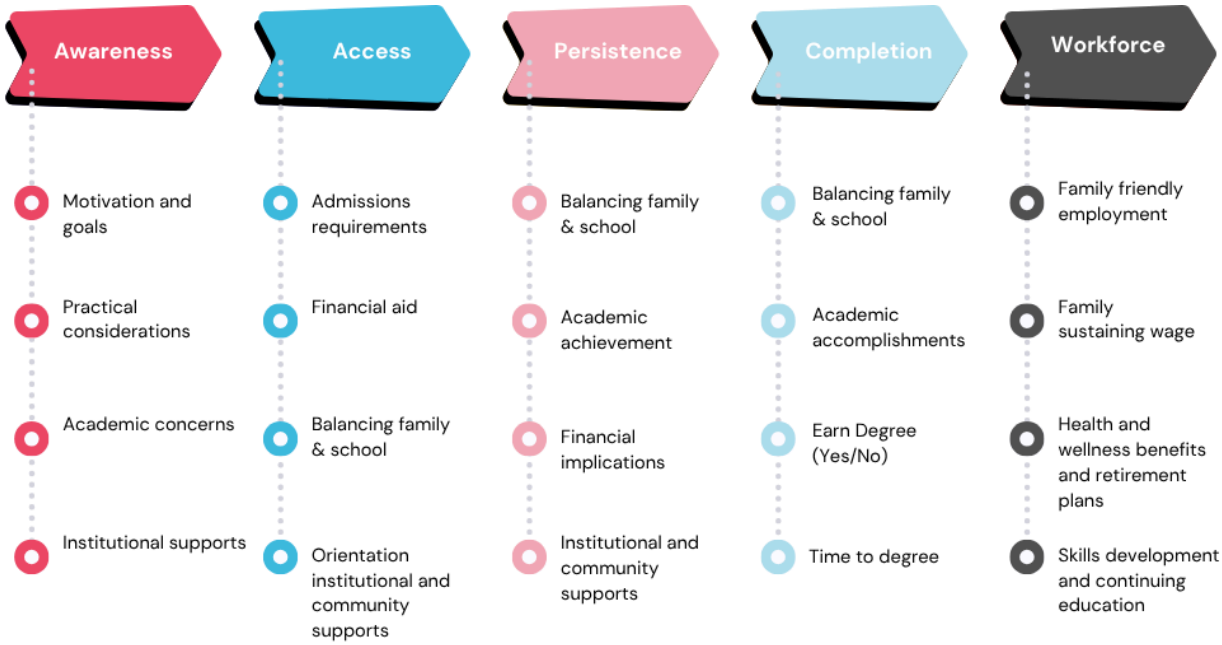
Demographics do not tell the whole story of how student parents navigate their educational workforce journeys. While we can track who they are through traditional measures, we also need to understand what they experience—the daily challenges of balancing coursework with childcare, the moments of doubt and breakthrough, the informal support networks they build, and the critical decisions they make at transition points. These lived experiences shape their persistence, success, and pathways in ways that numbers alone cannot capture.

One way to frame the student experience is through five interconnected stages (see Figure 4). This framework tracks student parents longitudinally, combining demographic profiling with experience mapping to identify critical transition points and support needs throughout their academic journey.

- **Awareness** is when individuals recognize higher education as a viable and valuable path for their circumstances, becoming cognizant of both the facilitators and barriers they may encounter in actualizing this educational experience. For student fathers, this involves seeing themselves as capable of succeeding in higher education while managing family responsibilities.
- **Access** builds on this awareness as individuals actively apply to become students and enroll, transitioning from the concept of being a student to becoming one. This stage involves learning what it takes to achieve enrollment while navigating admission requirements, financial aid, and family considerations that may influence their educational choices.
- **Persistence** represents the ongoing effort to pursue their academic degree while balancing the complex demands of academic and personal life. Student fathers must continuously navigate competing priorities and adapt to changing family and academic circumstances throughout their educational journey.
- **Completion** is framed expansively to include not only earning a credential (Yes/No), but also considering the time-to-degree and academic accomplishments. This recognizes that student fathers may follow non-traditional timelines and that success can be measured in multiple ways beyond binary degree attainment.
- **Workforce** encompasses making the transition to the workforce, establishing economic stability for their families, securing benefits, and advancing their careers. This stage reflects the belief that graduates become lifelong community members, making their workforce success integral to institutional success as well.

While presented linearly, student fathers may cycle back through stages to pursue additional credentials or career changes, and sometimes experience stages simultaneously, such as working while completing their degrees. Additionally, those who successfully navigate later stages often become important role models and supporters for others in the awareness and access phases, creating a valuable feedback loop within the student father community.

Figure 4: Student Father Journey Map and Key Data Elements



The student-father journey unfolds within a complex ecosystem where success depends not only on individual determination but on the alignment and support of multiple interconnected systems. At each of the five stages—Awareness, Access, Persistence, Completion, and Workforce—student fathers navigate five distinct but overlapping ecosystem levels that can either facilitate or constrain their educational progress (see Table 7):

- **Family and partner dynamics** provide the most intimate layer of support or challenge, influencing everything from initial educational aspirations to daily study schedules.
- **Community influences** create the social context that shapes perceptions of education's value and feasibility, while institutional infrastructure determines how well colleges and universities accommodate the unique needs of student parents.
- **Economic factors**—both personal financial stability and broader economic conditions—significantly impact decision-making at every stage, from initial enrollment through career transitions.
- **Policy environment** establishes the structural supports and barriers that student fathers encounter, from federal financial aid programs to employer education benefits to local childcare policies.

Understanding these ecosystem interactions is crucial because interventions targeting only one level—such as institutional support without addressing childcare policy or family dynamics—are unlikely to produce sustainable improvements in student father success. This multi-level perspective reveals that supporting student fathers requires coordinated efforts across family systems, community organizations, educational institutions, economic structures, and policy frameworks, making a compelling case for comprehensive, evidence-based policy approaches that address the whole ecosystem rather than isolated components.

Table 7: Ecosystem Factors to Consider in Supporting Student Fathers Across Educational Stages

	Awareness + Ecosystem Factors:	Access + Ecosystem Factors:	Persistence + Ecosystem Factors:	Completion + Ecosystem Factors:	Workforce + Ecosystem Factors:
Family/ Partner Dynamics	Spouse/partner attitudes toward education, extended family support or skepticism, children's ages, and care needs	Childcare arrangements, household responsibility negotiations, partner's work flexibility	Ongoing childcare coordination, homework space at home, family schedule flexibility	Long-term support through degree completion, celebration of milestones, and shared sacrifice recognition	Career choices that support family needs, work-life balance, and modeling for children
Community Influences	Peer networks, cultural attitudes toward fathers in education, role models, and mentors	Local childcare options, transportation access, and peer support groups	Study groups with other student parents, neighborhood support systems, and childcare co-ops	Peer acknowledgment, mentorship opportunities for newer student parents	Mentoring other student fathers, community leadership roles, and giving back
Institutional Outreach	Recruitment strategies, visibility of student parent services, and representation in marketing materials	Application process accommodation, financial aid packaging for families, student parent orientation programs	On-campus childcare, flexible scheduling, student parent resource centers, and academic advising	Degree completion support, internship/ practicum flexibility, and graduation ceremony accommodations	Alumni engagement, ongoing relationship, institutional advocacy
Economic Environment	Job market conditions, financial aid awareness, and cost-benefit perceptions	Family financial stability, emergency funds, and benefits that support enrollment	Continued financial aid, emergency assistance programs, and part-time work opportunities	Career services for non-traditional timelines, family-friendly job placement support	Family financial stability, community economic contribution, and intergenerational mobility
Policy Environment	Federal/state messaging about higher education value, workforce development priorities, employer tuition assistance policies, social services eligibility, and awareness	Federal/state financial aid programs, SNAP/WIC enrollment, employer education benefits, healthcare coverage options, childcare subsidies	Ongoing benefit eligibility, employer flexibility policies, healthcare continuity, emergency assistance programs,and transportation support	Workforce development program coordination, professional licensing support, career pathway programming, and benefits transition planning	Tax base contribution, reduced social service dependence, workforce development return on investment, and intergenerational poverty reduction

Awareness

Erikson: A Father, Future College Student

Like many student fathers, Erikson is over 25—in fact, he is 35. He went into construction right out of high school and has been pretty successful earning a living and taking care of his daughter. However, he is realizing that his body is feeling the effects of working a day at the construction site, and he never seems to be promoted. Now, as he considers going back to school, doubt creeps in. It's been seventeen years since he sat in a classroom, and he wonders if he can balance coursework with full-time work and single parenting. "How am I going to study after a ten-hour day?" he asks himself. "What if I'm not smart enough anymore? What if I fail and waste money we don't have?"

Central to improving higher education institutions and systems, as well as expanding access to young men and student fathers, is first understanding “How many fathers could be attending college but are not?” Our estimates focus on fathers with at least a high school education (presumably because college typically requires this baseline).

Here are our estimates based on the Current Population Survey (2023):

- 39.7 million male parents live with their children.
- 28.3 million male parents live with children under 18.
- 11.3 million male parents live with children under 18, and have a high school degree or equivalent, or have some college experience without completing a degree.
- 875,000 student fathers are currently enrolled in higher education.

When accounting for fathers already pursuing higher education, the target population becomes clearer. After excluding the approximately 875,000 fathers currently enrolled in higher education, we estimate that **10.4 million fathers** with high school diplomas or some college experience represent the target population for potential college enrollment. This substantial group includes both fathers who have never enrolled in higher education and those who have started, but not completed, their higher education journey, highlighting the significant potential for educational engagement and re-engagement among this population.

Motivation and Goals.

In this section, we draw from the interviews with student fathers. For student fathers, the process of connecting to higher education involves two crucial phases: first, contemplating the possibility of attending college, and then taking concrete steps toward enrollment. This journey unfolds differently across two distinct profiles of student fathers. Some are young men transitioning directly from high school who must simultaneously envision themselves as both new parents and college students. Others are established men returning to education later in life, reassessing their potential as learners while balancing family responsibilities. Understanding how these different groups of fathers initially consider and ultimately begin their college journeys provides essential insights into creating effective pathways and support systems that honor their unique circumstances and motivations.

Pursuits Right After High School

The younger fathers did not experience a gap in their transition from high school to postsecondary education. Their continuous enrollment may be due to family support that facilitated their enrollment. One young father was enrolled in a dual enrollment program at his high school and worked at a major grocery chain in the area. His mother had encouraged him to enroll in an advanced manufacturing program at the local college, which would provide both educational opportunities and a paid apprenticeship experience at a major manufacturer in the community. The other younger student father was able to attend college away from home and remain virtually connected to his young child, who resided with the mother during the week and with the student father's mother on the weekends.

Among the younger fathers, one message repeatedly shared is that becoming a parent at a young age isn't always an accident, as people often chided them. One younger father, who enrolled in ROTC as a college student, spoke about the decision he and his wife made to have their first child while he was still enrolled and before he was assigned to active duty. They had a family support system that would not move with them once they were assigned to a duty station:

> "I didn't even end up sticking with it (College) because it was just, I was a failure to launch. Once I got to college, I was a failure to launch." – Student Father Age 34

A shared experience for several student fathers over 25 was encapsulated by another student father, who said, "I was a failure to launch." Several student fathers aged 25 or older enrolled directly after high school but were drawn to other activities (e.g., sports or music), or, did not connect with the college experience, particularly classes. In most instances, they left with no college credit. They went on to find employment with seemingly reasonable compensation.

Several other student fathers over the age of 25 shared that after high school, they became involved in street life, and the justice system had an impact on a couple of the adult student fathers. One adult student father recounted that the death of his father was an unbearable loss that diverted him from the path to higher education for nearly a decade.

Between Encouragement and Doubt: Voices that Shaped Their Return to Education

Student fathers over the age of 25 described the doubt that swirled in their heads from conflicting messages they had heard from others when considering returning to school. The themes included student debt, models of masculinity, who is respected in their community, a man's role and responsibility within his family, and the attempt to recreate one's youth by joining a fraternity:

- *"A real man sacrifices his own dreams for his family."* This powerful message echoed in the minds of many student fathers, positioning their educational aspirations as selfish pursuits that competed with family responsibilities. Frequently, student fathers wrestled with the belief that prioritizing their education, even temporarily, represented a failure of their fundamental duty as providers and protectors.
- *"What are you trying to do, play frat boy at your age?"* This dismissive question confronted many returning student fathers, implying their educational pursuits were merely attempts to experience college social life they had presumably missed earlier.

Such comments suggested these men were childishly chasing experiences rather than seriously investing in their futures.

Some men found themselves trapped in a paradoxical situation at work: Their employers actively discouraged them from pursuing higher education, insisting they were too valuable in their current roles. Their manager selfishly retained them because they were exceptional employees, often dangling the promise of future advancement. Yet, when opportunities for promotion arose, these same men were passed over, with management citing their lack of formal credentials as the deciding factor.

At the April 2025 event at Oakland Community College, panelists on "Men and Student Fathers: Pathways to Education, Workforce and Family Success in Michigan and Beyond," shared insights from their work supporting men returning to education. They highlighted several discouraging messages these men commonly encounter:

- *Friends and Family who Started College and Not been Successful: (*e.g., "Some College, No Degree"), and others warned them not to go back to school because they would become saddled with debt. For reference, Fry and Cilluffo (2024) found that among borrowers who attended some college but did not complete a bachelor's degree, the median debt was between $10,000 and $14,999 in 2023.
- *"Will she still want me if I can't afford the fancy chocolates and roses?"* This question underscored the tension between traditional expectations of masculinity and the new financial reality of living on a student budget.
- *"In my neighborhood, the guy who did four years in prison gets more respect than the one who spent four years in college."* This stark observation highlighted the community value systems that many student fathers navigated, where educational pursuits were sometimes viewed with less admiration than other life paths—even those involving incarceration. For these men, returning to education meant not only swimming against financial currents, but also challenging deeply entrenched community perceptions about what commands respect and defines masculine success.

Institutional Trauma: When Systems Fail Students

We encountered minimal reports of institutional trauma from students' high school or previous post-secondary experiences, with one significant exception.

This solitary case involved a student whose college was abruptly closed by the United States Department of Education during the program. The shutdown created a devastating situation where the student was left with partial academic credits but no degree, while still carrying a substantial amount of student loan debt. This financial burden continued to impact his life until the federal government eventually discharged the student loans.

This example illustrates how institutional failures can create lasting trauma that complicates a student's educational journey and influences their approach to returning to college later in life.

The Readiness Factor: When Personal Awakening Meets Opportunity

Regardless of what occurred immediately after high school, the student fathers over age 25 typically were employed when they chose to enroll in college. Four catalysts drove their return to education: (1) the birth or impending birth of a child, (2) coming to terms with the physical toll of their occupation, (3) an educational opportunity that presented itself at the right time, and (4) the realization that they needed a credential to advance their careers.

> "…And I wanted to work on a family. So we did. My wife and I had already been together for maybe a decade. And when we had our first child. Ah! I kind of had an epiphany saying, Hey, you know. Let's do this right now. So I decided to become a student." – Student Father Age 38

> "…And it (going to college) was a move that I made just because, looking at my son, he's learning a lot about college and school right now. My nine-year-old. And I just wanted to be somebody that he could look up to because, myself I didn't finish high school." - Student Father Age 27

> "As a student father, I've missed a lot more of my children's lives than what I would have liked to. But I know that it's worth it. Every chance that I get, I talk with my children, and I convey to them the importance of what I'm doing, and, you know, early on, they go, well, 'Daddy's going to school so he can get a better job.' I was like, 'Well, that's part of it, but there's a reason why I want a better job, and it's because of you guys.'" - Student Father Age 46

Fatherhood transformed the educational motivation for many returning student fathers, shifting it from purely personal advancement to setting a meaningful example. Their children's watchful eyes created both pressure and purpose, as these men recognized that their actions would speak more convincingly than their words ever could. This dual motivation—improving their own prospects while modeling persistence for their children—often provided the crucial counterweight to voices of doubt that might otherwise have derailed their educational journey.

Two student fathers in their thirties realized they could no longer continue in their professions—landscaping and carpentry—because of the physical toll their work was taking on their bodies. They each discussed their decision to enroll in college to earn their degree and pursue a new career.

Several student fathers over age 25 participated in a College Promise program with a two-generation (2Gen) approach to education. 2Gen programs support both children (e.g., high school students) and their parents or caregivers in simultaneously obtaining a credential after high school. The men credited this program with inspiring them to reengage with their education. They also pointed out that the program had strong connections to the local community college system, which was very learner-friendly for adults. A representative from the community college system described their approach to working with adult learners as providing a "concierge-level service" so that each student succeeds. The 2Gen program worked with the student fathers to complete their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) (although one student father noted that it was much easier for him to complete his FAFSA, as he was already familiar with it from the prior year when his child submitted it). Another adult student over the age of 25 discussed how easily he could obtain transcripts from previous higher education institutions.

For many adult student fathers, the decision to return to college coincided with a sobering realization about their career trajectory: Despite initially finding jobs with seemingly

reasonable compensation after leaving college, these men eventually encountered significant barriers to advancement. One adult student, a father who held several industry-recognized certifications, shared that having an associate's degree would help him with promotions at his current employer. Similarly, another adult student father who aspires to be an entrepreneur in the construction field expressed that having an associate's degree would make his contract bids more competitive.

One adult student father's experience powerfully illustrated the harsh realities of today's workplace. He described a troubling employment trajectory where he repeatedly found himself in shrinking industries, resulting not only in multiple job losses but also in a downward spiral of compensation. Each new position came with a lower wage than the previous one, creating an alarming financial decline for his family.

Practical Considerations.

Student fathers face a complex web of financial considerations when making educational decisions. The compelling data on lifetime earnings benefits must be weighed against the immediate realities of supporting a family, creating a challenging decision-making process that goes far beyond simple cost-benefit calculations.

Weighing Barriers Against Benefits

Many student fathers want to attend higher education but face barriers, including location, cost, time constraints, or cognitive challenges that limit enrollment. For those who can pursue college, the decision must justify the investment. Higher education yields significant lifetime earnings gains, with benefits increasing at each level: Associate's degree (+18%), Bachelor's degree (+66%), Master's degree (+98%), and Doctoral degree (+145%) (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025). Research indicates bachelor's degrees offer a 9% annual rate of return—better than most traditional investments (Zhang et. al., 2024). However, not all degrees provide the same return on investment (Itzkowitz, 2021). Therefore, understanding which programs offer the best value while aligning with personal interests, skills, and goals presents a significant challenge for student fathers.

The Reality of Immediate Financial Impact.

The following budget analysis illustrates the stark financial reality facing student fathers when considering higher education (see Table 8). Using the example of a single father with one child working as a construction laborer in Chicago, these data reveal how educational pursuits can create immediate financial hardship despite long-term benefits.

This analysis reveals several critical insights: A single male construction laborer with no children, maintaining full-time employment (Profile #1), enjoys a comfortable margin of nearly $15,000 annually. This margin decreases to approximately $10,000 (Profile #2) when education costs are factored in.

If they have a child, they immediately experience a financial crisis. Due to the added costs, they are now experiencing a $9,900 deficit if they have a child (Profile #3). However, the transition to college attendance exacerbates the immediate financial crisis. Profile #4 shows that having a child while attending college creates a deficit of more than $14,000, primarily due to increased childcare costs (of nearly $11,000 annually).

Most dramatically, Profile #5 indicates that not working can potentially lead to an $84,000 deficit. The second most dramatic profile is Profile #6, which demonstrates that relying solely on campus employment also creates an unsustainable deficit of more than $69,000.

The $74,000 swing between Profile #3 (working full-time, with one child) and Profile #5 (attending college without employment) illustrates why the promise of long-term earnings gains may feel abstract to fathers facing immediate financial pressures. **For many student fathers, the question is not whether higher education offers better lifetime returns, but whether they can afford to pursue higher education without jeopardizing their family's basic needs in the present.**

Table 8: Single Parent Financial Scenarios, Chicago, IL

Category	Profile #1	Profile #2	Profile #3	Profile #4	Profile #5	Profile #5
Marital/Partner Status	Single Male	Single Male	Single Male	Single Male	Single Male	Single Male
Family	One child	One child	One child	One child	One child	One child
Employment Status	Constr. Laborer	Constr. Laborer	Constr. Laborer	Constr. Laborer		Campus Job
Education Status		Attending College		Attending College	Attending College	Attending College
			One Child	One Child	One Child	One Child
Middle Pay Level Salary (May 2023 for Chicago-Naperville-Elgin, Il, In, WI)	$69,370	$69,370	$69,370	$69,370	$0	$9,600
Education (2024-2025 In-District Two-Year Tuition and Fees)	$0	$4,711	$0	$4,711	$4,711	$0
Family Budget Chicago, IL (Cook County)						
Housing	$16,788	$16,788	$20,194	$20,194	$20,194	$20,194
Food	$4,570	$4,570	$6,767	$6,767	$6,767	$6,767
Childcare (Four-Year-Old)	$0	$0	$10,947	$10,947	$10,947	$10,947
Transportation	$11,387	$11,387	$12,657	$12,657	$12,657	$12,657
Healthcare	$4,864	$4,864	$7,295	$7,295	$7,295	$7,295
General Necessities	$7,186	$7,186	$9,071	$9,071	$9,071	$9,071
Taxes	$9,637	$9,637	$12,371	$12,371	$12,371	$12,371
Total Annual Family Budget Costs	$54,432	$54,432	$79,302	$79,302	$79,302	$79,302
Total Education and Family Expenses	$54,432	$59,143	$79,302	$84,013	$84,013	$79,302
Difference: Salary and Expenditures	$14,938	$10,227	-$9,932	-$14,643	-$84,013	-$69,702

Note: Campus job earnings are based on $15 per hour for 20 hours per week, over 32 weeks.

Sources: United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (May 2023); Economic Policy Institute Family Budget Calculator, January 2025; College Board, Annual Survey of Colleges; NCES, IPEDS Fall Enrollment data (October 2024).

Academic Concerns.

Prospective student fathers face significant concerns about their academic readiness that institutions of higher education must recognize. Many fathers considering a return to school express anxiety about how much the educational landscape has changed since they last attended school.

The Core Issue: In interviews with prospective student fathers, the question, "Am I too old to even try this?" emerged as a common concern that reflects anxiety about technological competency and academic readiness. Fathers who have been out of school for years worry about navigating online learning platforms, digital submission systems, and other technology-integrated aspects of modern education. These concerns about their ability to keep up academically can prevent them from even attempting enrollment.

What We're Seeing: Through conversations with fathers considering higher education, several fathers over age 25 expressed concerns about technological advances in education, wondering if they would feel overwhelmed by the digital tools and platforms that define college learning today. This sentiment exemplifies broader concerns about their ability to succeed as students after time away from academic environments.

What We Don't Know: While national data from the National Center for Education Statistics' Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS) include questions about students' confidence in their ability to succeed academically, these items are not typically presented in relation to student fathers at the national, state, or campus level. We're observing these patterns of academic anxiety and technological concerns through our interviews with fathers considering higher education; however, we lack comprehensive data to understand how widespread these issues are or whether they differ significantly from those of other returning student populations.

Institutional Supports.

It is worth noting that although higher education may be free, it does not necessarily mean that students, particularly those with children, will attend. Recently, Gallup (2025) found that 12% of respondents considering a four-year degree and 10% thinking of a two-year degree stated that resolving childcare needs is an essential factor in deciding whether to enroll. Carrillo and colleagues (2017) similarly identified childcare as the most significant obstacle these individuals face in pursuing higher education. Access to affordable care or flexible class schedules can be a significant barrier to enrollment. Designating this population as specifically eligible for child care subsidies is one way to increase access to child care.

Developing a Social Media Campaign to Attract Fathers to Become Students

One way to improve the visibility of young men and student fathers is to tell their stories through institutionalized channels, such as college or university communications, marketing, or featuring them as part of an ambassador or mentor program and sharing that with external media. Research (Small et al., 2007) has found that sharing a compelling narrative resulted in a 108 percent increase in donations compared to a similar argument with just statistical evidence. Compelling storytelling is crucial to all facets of change management because it has the potential to elicit physiological responses and action (Zak, 2015). Simply

put: Powerful narratives stimulate the brain to pay attention, involve a more cognitively immersive experience, and when narratives involve emotion, they may also trigger physiological responses, which aid in remembrance and engagement. In addition to improved outreach to young men and student fathers, highlighting their stories has a powerful signaling effect that student fathers are not only visible and welcome but a key part of the university community.

Many fathers answered the question, *"If we were to run a social media campaign to attract fathers to become parenting students, what message or key points should we emphasize? Who should be the spokesperson?"* The synthesis presents (1) the primary message – what are we saying, (2) the target audience – who do we need to say it to?, (3) the key barriers to address – what's stopping them?, (4) the essential support message – how do we help them?, (5) the messenger strategy – who delivers it?, and (6) the campaign positioning – what's our overall approach?

Primary Messages

"Family First, Education Second." Position education as serving family needs, not competing with them. Frame it as a strategic family investment.

"Do It for the Kids." Lead with fatherhood as the primary motivator. Children are more likely to pursue higher education when they see their parents as college graduates:

- "It's not only for you; it's for your kids." (Student Father Age 44)
- "Education is a must. Majority of kids will follow. Make it a tradition in my family to be a college graduate." (Student Father Age 50)
- "I think the message should just be: 'Don't get discouraged. Think about your future. Think about the life that you want to have for your children." (Student Father Age 27)
- "So that's another thing that we want to set a good example for them and understand that it starts with us. If our child sees us not pursuing higher education, not pushing for those things, they're most likely not going to do that as well." (Student Father Age 27)

"Fatherhood is Your Superpower." Fathers have a purpose greater than themselves.

Target Audience

The "Career Advancers." Fathers with 5-15 years of work experience seeking advancement, not entry-level restart. Address adult concerns: retirement, homeownership, and school districts.

- "Do you want to advance your career? Education doesn't hurt it, it actually can help." (Student Father Age 49)

The "In-Betweeners." Men who need support systems for growth, not crisis intervention.

Key Barriers to Address

Isolation. "You're not alone." Show the student father community exists and is vibrant.

- "Having fathers know they're not alone. And... the aspect of not having to be perfect." (Student Father Age 42)

Stigma. Reframe isolated concerns as not a failure or "catching up" to peers or colleagues.

Masculinity. Make school "cool" for dads: "Smart," "forward-thinking," and "provider behavior."

Essential Support Messages

- Campus resources specifically for fathers exist.
- Childcare assistance and flexible scheduling are available.
- Clear financial return on investment and highlight some "pot of gold" outcomes.
- Kids can be involved: Integration, not separation.

Messenger Strategy

Diverse Student Father Voices. Multiple ethnicities and backgrounds for relatability. No single spokesperson for all student fathers.

"You Could" Messaging. Personalizing frames as possibilities and opportunities, not obligations.

Authentic Success Stories. Real fathers balancing both roles successfully, showing wins in fatherhood *AND* academics.

Campaign Positioning

Education as a Strategic Family Investment. Campaign led by relatable father voices sharing authentic experiences, not aspirational messaging.

Access

Erikson: A Father Preparing for College

Erikson is now actively working to enroll in school, but the process feels overwhelming. He's trying to navigate an admissions system that seems designed for traditional students, not someone who's been out of school for seventeen years. The financial aid forms are confusing—he's never filled out a FAFSA before and worries about making mistakes that could cost him money. Between his construction job and caring for his daughter, he's stealing moments to research programs and fill out applications, often late at night when she's asleep. The biggest question haunting him is whether he'll be doing this entirely alone. He doesn't see other fathers in his situation, and the college websites show smiling young students in study groups—not exhausted single dads wondering if there's any support for someone like him.

Admissions Requirements.

At the community college level, applications typically include information about the applicant's address, high school, intended major, high school transcript, college transcript (if the student has previously enrolled in college but did not earn a degree), and details about the academic program they intend to enroll in at the college. Greater insights are necessary to understand better what this process is like for student fathers.

During the interviews, several fathers discussed their high school academic experiences. They shared that they were doing well in school, but personal circumstances (e.g., a death in the family) led them to leave high school, sometimes with a diploma and other times without. Even those who started college immediately after high school said it was more about the non-academic activities that contributed to their academic downfall than their ability to complete the work. Other fathers who may have experienced personal difficulties in their younger years were applying for college with a solid record of work and achievement, which raises the question of whether their experiences would qualify for awards of credit for prior learning.

Financial Aid.

Improving messaging and visibility may increase college interest among young men and student fathers, but interest alone does not guarantee enrollment. Many low-income men and fathers are eligible for Promise programs, grants, and scholarships; however, accessing these resources often requires completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). While FAFSA standardizes loan awards and disbursement, the application process itself may create barriers for low-income men and fathers managing busy lives. More research is needed to understand the specific challenges this population faces and their FAFSA completion rates.

Several states have recently launched free postsecondary programs targeting adult learners (see Table 9). In 2024, Massachusetts Governor Healey allocated over $117 million for the two statewide Promise programs, including MassReconnect, which empowers approximately 1.8 million residents over 25 to potentially earn postsecondary credentials at public community

colleges (LeBlanc, 2024; Marceau, 2024). Michigan Governor Whitmer signed an Executive Directive (2025) to reconnect boys, men, and fathers with higher education because only one-third of the 207,000 students enrolled in Michigan Reconnect, the Promise program for adult learners in the state, are men.

Louisiana is a recent example of Reconnect Programs being modified to better support education and the workforce. Louisiana Governor Landry expanded the state's Promise program in 2025 to cover free tuition for students 19 and older pursuing in-demand fields at public two-year institutions.

Table 9: Selected Policy Initiatives to Support Postsecondary Access for Student Parents, Selected States

State	Initiative	Outcome
TUITION		
Louisiana	Reconnect Program	Transitioned last-dollar promise to first-dollar promise
Massachusetts	Reconnect Program	Connect up to 1.8 million residents aged 25+ with a high school diploma or equivalent to free community college.
Michigan*	Reconnect Program	Registered 207,000 students for tuition-free college (as of February 2025).
Minnesota*	North Star Promise	Nearly 17,000 students have received North Star Promise scholarships in the first year (as of January 2025).
Oregon*	Oregon Opportunity Grant	More than 30,000 students receive the Oregon Opportunity Grant annually, which can cover the cost of attendance at most community colleges and some public four-year universities.
ORIENTATION/ STUDENT SUCCESS		
Kansas	Adult Learner / Student Parent Program (campus initiative)	Wichita State University created an online bridge program for adult learners/student parents
Texas*	HB 1361; Senate Bill 412; 459	Established a liaison in higher education to assist student parents with college readiness and support.

Note: * Indicates states with statutory student parent data collection.

Balancing Family and School.

Student fathers approach higher education with fundamentally different priorities than traditional college students. Rather than adopting a "student first, life second" mindset, they maintain their identity as fathers as their primary, permanent commitment—viewing their student status as a temporary means to fulfill their parenting responsibilities better.

A consistent theme emerged throughout the interviews with student fathers over age 25: their identity as fathers always took precedence over their temporary role as students. These men approached higher education with the clear understanding that fatherhood was their primary, permanent commitment—a "24/7," lifelong responsibility that could not be compromised. Their student status, by contrast, represented a time-limited investment that would eventually come to an end:

> "You always have something going on, whether they're sick or you have to specifically time-manage between your classes and their activities. For example, today, my daughter's participating in a May Day celebration at her school (a European festival traditionally held on May 1, marking the unofficial start to summer), where they're doing a Maypole, and she's in the leading position. So it's very important to her. And you know, oftentimes this is week-to-week stuff. So it's really just preparation and schedule. And just trying to manage all this parent stuff on top of your professional stuff or your educational stuff. This is particularly challenging because college is very demanding." – Student Father Age 38

This hierarchy of identity—father first, student second—influenced how these men navigated conflicts between academic and parenting responsibilities. When faced with competing demands, their children's needs consistently took priority. Rather than viewing this as an obstacle to academic success, many described how their commitment to fatherhood actually strengthened their educational persistence. They recognized that completing their education, though temporarily demanding, would ultimately enhance their capacity to fulfill their more important and permanent role as fathers.

Orientation, Institutional and Community Supports.

When institutions incorporate deliberate planning and discussion at the start of students' academic journeys, students are more likely to be retained, graduate, and graduate on time (Community College Research Center, 2025; Denley, 2021). These programs can connect or reconnect students to higher education. The Wichita State University (KS) Adult Learner Community and Connections program is an exemplary initiative that supports adult learners. The 2,200 adult learner and student parent program launched as an eight-module asynchronous online program designed to aid students with technology and support in their first semester at the institution (Mowreader, 2024; 2025).

At the April 2025 College Promise convening at Farragut Career Academy (Chicago, IL), Brian Barney's story served as a vivid example of how institutional and community support can transform educational transitions for adult learners. At 49, Brian's journey back to education wasn't without its challenges, particularly in an environment that wasn't always conducive to learning. However, navigating the complex world of higher education systems—from understanding financial aid applications to mastering registration processes—became more manageable thanks to his unique advantage of having watched his son go through the same experience as a Hope Chicago scholar. Through Hope Chicago's two-generation model, which provides direct support for both high school seniors and their parents to pursue postsecondary

education, Brian gained valuable insight into what was needed to successfully enroll in school at National Louis University (IL). More importantly, Brian's success was supported by a comprehensive ecosystem designed to help adult learners overcome barriers and achieve their educational goals. This interconnected network of organizations works collaboratively across Chicago, with Hope Chicago at the center, ensuring that families receive guidance every step of the way through what could have been an overwhelming process. The ecosystem extends beyond Hope Chicago to include high schools that help bridge the gap between students and their parents, as well as postsecondary success, and community colleges that serve as accessible entry points for adult learners returning to education. Brian rates his overall experience as “nearly perfect,” describing it as “very easy” once he overcame the most significant obstacle: his own self-doubt and hesitation about moving forward. Organizations across Chicago work to make stories like Brian's possible, including perspectives shared by Hope Chicago leadership and educational advocates at schools like Benito Juárez Community Academy (IL) and City Colleges of Chicago (IL), all of whom contribute to understanding how this collaborative ecosystem functions to support adult learners in their educational transitions.

Persistence

Erikson: A Father First, Student Second

Erikson is now enrolled in a degree program at the community college, and his days have become a careful balancing act between fatherhood and student responsibilities. When his daughter needs help with homework or wants to play catch in the backyard, he closes his textbook without hesitation. He has learned that her childhood takes precedence over his studies—you can always take longer to graduate, but you can't relive her childhood. Money is tighter now that he's cut back his construction hours. Before, when bills piled up, he could always pick up an extra shift, but those days are gone. Fortunately, the community college connected him with childcare services and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), resources he had never known existed. Despite the challenges, when he looks at his transcript showing a 3.50 GPA, Erikson feels a pride he's never experienced before—not just in his academic achievement, but in the example he's setting for his daughter.

Balancing Family and School.

Student fathers face a critical barrier to academic success: time poverty, which is characterized by insufficient time to fulfill parental, educational, and personal responsibilities simultaneously (Yates, 2024). This condition can have adverse outcomes for student parents, creating a cascade of challenges that can hinder their educational progress. Research findings and interviews with student fathers consistently reveal how their demanding schedules create this problematic dynamic (Conway et al., 2021; Haleman, 2004; Yates, 2024). When classes require attendance on alternate days, involve extracurricular activities, or demand group projects extending beyond the classroom, student fathers must choose between academic requirements and family obligations—a choice that traditional students rarely face.

The problem is compounded by institutional structures that prioritize “traditional” students aged 18-24. At most universities, approximately 85% of courses are offered between 9:00 AM and 3:00 PM, Monday through Friday (Ad Astra, 2018)—hours that may conflict with the schedules of full-time workers, such as many student fathers. Additionally, childcare responsibilities, school pick-ups, and family routines may also conflict with the dominant meeting patterns of most colleges and universities, particularly earlier in the morning or later in the afternoon. This scheduling framework effectively excludes many student fathers from full participation in their education.

Managing Competing Demands

Despite these structural barriers, student fathers develop sophisticated strategies to navigate their dual responsibilities. Their days become “a series of hand-offs of children and responsibilities”—coordinating morning routines, school drop-offs, meal preparation, homework supervision, and bedtime rituals while attending classes, completing assignments, and pursuing their educational goals.

Many prioritize their children's educational communities over their own. As one father explained about his kindergarten daughter's school: “Community is really important to me… I hang out every morning, I drop her off for a half hour, I go into the class… I know her gym teacher, I know her music teacher… I make an effort to try to communicate with some of the other dads.” This investment in their children's school community often comes at the expense of engagement in their own academic institutions.

The Support Network Divide

The presence or absence of family support networks creates dramatically different experiences for student fathers. Those with extended family nearby can rely on grandparents and relatives for childcare handoffs and emergency support. Others manage essentially alone, facing particular challenges when navigating joint physical custody arrangements with limited backup options.

Childcare costs add another layer of complexity. Millions of families spend between 8% and 16% of their median income on childcare, ranging from $6,522 to $15,600 annually in 2023 (Pyatzis & Livingston, 2024). Student fathers must carefully balance work income to maintain affordability. Some utilize on-campus facilities when available, while others pursue Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools (CCAMPIS) grants for Pell-eligible students. The stakes are high: research from the Institute for Women's Policy Research found that community college student parents with access to on-campus childcare are nearly three times more likely to graduate or transfer within three years (Gault et. al., 2020).

The nature of childcare needs also varies significantly by children's ages. Fathers with infants may bring children to class or rely heavily on family support, while those with teenage and tween daughters navigate complex transportation decisions and increased emotional support needs that require active engagement beyond basic supervision.

Emerging Policy Solutions

Recognition of these challenges is driving policy innovation. California pioneered the first statewide response with 2022 legislation providing priority registration[2] for student parents (See Table 10). This policy addresses a critical state workforce need: California requires over two million additional postsecondary credentials to meet its 70% postsecondary attainment target, and among the 6.8 million Californians aged 25-54 with high school diplomas but no college degrees, 57% of whom are parents. As the legislation notes, "student parents will play a critical role in both growing higher education enrollments and the number of college graduates in the state" (California Legislative Information, 2022).

Under California law, student parents receive priority registration for courses, and institutions are required to notify them of available campus resources and support (Frawley, 2022). This represents a significant step toward making higher education more accessible to adult learners, though broader systemic changes in scheduling, childcare access, and financial support remain necessary.

Recently, Georgia established student parents as a priority group for childcare subsidies, and to date, more than 6,700 student parents have been approved for the subsidy (Steed et. al., 2024). In addition to providing childcare, the program also delivered family-centered coaching to support student parents in setting and pursuing educational or workforce goals.

[2] A policy designated to ensure that specific students can enroll course sections that lead to certificate and degree attainment. Common groups that may receive priority registration. Among the 6.8 million Californians aged 25-54 with high school diplomas but no college degrees, 57% include scholars, student-athletes, veterans, persons with disabilities, and student parents, ensuring access to courses that fit work and childcare schedules.

Table 10: Selected Policy Initiatives to Support Postsecondary Persistence for Student Parents, 2025

State	Initiative	Goal	Grantee	Data Collection Requirement
CHILDCARE				
Georgia	Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) Student Parent 2Gen Pilot Program	Enabled 6,700 student parents to have priority status for childcare subsidies	Institutions of Higher Education	Yes
Washington	Postsecondary Benefits Promotion Pilot	Connect students who are income-eligible for public benefits to benefits and resources.	Institutions of Higher Education	Yes
Minnesota*	Student Parent Support Initiative	Helping colleges and community organizations develop and implement services that support student parents across the state.	Institutions of Higher Education/ Organizations in Minnesota	Yes
United States	Head Start Program	On-Campus Head Start programs. Kids on Campus is an effort of The Association of Community College Trustees and the National Head Start Association (NHSA).	Institutions of Higher Education / Head Start Organizations	Yes
United States	Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS)	Aids about 3300 parents through child care subsidy annually	Institutions of Higher Education	Yes
REGISTRATION				
California*	Assembly Bill 2881	Provided priority course registration for student parents	Institutions of Higher Education	Yes

Note: * Indicates states with statutory student parent data collection.

Academic Achievement.

Student fathers balance the competing demands of academic pursuits and parental responsibilities in ways that may fundamentally reshape their paths to academic achievement. While traditional measures of academic success focus primarily on grade point averages, a comprehensive understanding of how fatherhood influences academic performance requires examining a much broader spectrum of scholarly and professional development activities. These include experiential learning opportunities, such as study abroad programs, internships, and research experiences; scholarly contributions, including publications, conference presentations, and grant awards; professional development activities, like earning certifications and serving as teaching assistants; and post-graduation outcomes, such as graduate school acceptance. By comparing student fathers to their childless peers across these multidimensional indicators of academic achievement, we can better understand whether parental responsibilities create uniform challenges across all domains of academic engagement or whether certain types of activities are more vulnerable to the time, financial, and logistical constraints that accompany parenting during college years.

Another dimension of academic learning involves applying classroom knowledge to real-world contexts. At the May 2025 convening in San Antonio, Jericho Doherty shared his experience as a 27-year-old student father at San Antonio College (TX), where he is pursuing a degree in kinesiology with the intention of becoming a high school football coach. Despite completing only his first semester in the spring of 2025, Jericho is already finding immediate applications for his coursework in his volunteer role, coaching seven- and eight-year-old football players.

Jericho's experience illustrates how student fathers often create synergies between their academic and parental lives. His introductory frameworks of learning class fundamentally changed his coaching approach, helping him understand how young children learn and think. Rather than relying on the shouting and intimidation tactics he observed from other coaches, Jericho began employing pedagogical strategies from his coursework to teach plays and football concepts in age-appropriate ways. This practical application of academic learning not only benefits the children he coaches but also deepens his own understanding of educational principles, which will serve him well in his future career as a high school coach.

Beyond Time Poverty: The Challenge of Time Alignment for Student Fathers

Wladis and colleagues (2018) define time poverty as "insufficient time to devote to college work (i.e., a lack of available time to maintain academic well-being)." Time poverty is a significant challenge for student fathers. Their day is filled with mundane tasks of daily life (e.g., working, commuting), time devoted to meaningful activities (e.g., being a student), moments spent with loved ones – their children - and time dedicated to well-being and sleep. This is a lot to balance within a 24-hour day.

Student fathers must navigate academic and work schedules that may not align with their children's schedules and the broader rhythms of school life, highlighting the core of the time alignment challenge:

- *Children's Schedules.* Children, particularly those of school age, have their own schedule. For example, a middle schooler in Ann Arbor, MI, is in school from 8:15 AM until 3:03 PM, and on early release days, they get out at 12:15 PM. Never mind the no-school days and vacation weeks. This suggests a layer of complexity that student

fathers must accommodate that is rarely, if ever, considered by the more than 6.1 million men who are childless and enrolled in higher education.

- *Spouse/Partner/Family Support Schedules.* Student fathers may have to navigate their spouse or partner's work schedules in addition to their own, which often involve evening shifts and weekends. Either or both may work full-time, part-time, seasonal, temporary, or on-call schedules. They may work traditional 9.00 AM-5.00 PM hours, night shifts, rotating shifts, split shifts, or flexible hours.
- *Academic Schedules.* Student fathers must carefully consider their academic schedule when balancing their educational responsibilities with parenting duties. While some institutions offer evening and weekend classes, higher education appears to have significant scheduling inflexibility outside of the "primetime hours" of 9:00 AM - 3:00 PM, Monday through Friday. The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA Faculty Survey Core National Instrument (2025) illustrates this gap. This comprehensive survey asks numerous questions about faculty identity and activities, including advising, teaching, and research, yet it overlooks crucial timing information. For instance, one item asks faculty to report "how many hours per week on average" they spend on various professional and personal activities, but notably fails to inquire when these activities take place. This data limitation reflects a broader missed opportunity to support better the scheduling constraints that significantly impact student fathers' ability to align academic requirements with parenting responsibilities.
- *Peer Schedules.* A couple of student fathers described how their life schedules often conflicted with those of their classmates, who were predominantly age 18 to 24 and lived on campus, having no family responsibilities. Their schedule misalignments frequently affected the scheduling of meetings to work on class assignments and projects, as well as to participate in social events.

Several student fathers participated in online learning programs, including both synchronous and asynchronous options. They expressed a preference for asynchronous learning, as they valued the flexibility to access materials and complete assignments at their own pace. One father shared that he watched class videos while rocking his child back to sleep in the early hours of the morning.

Academic Time Elasticity

The student fathers interviewed universally shared an experience of prioritizing their children's or partners' needs over completing class assignments. They described staying up with a sick child in the middle of the night, or giving their wife a break when their newborn wouldn't stop crying and needed attention. For these fathers, this is what they signed up for as dads, partners, and husbands.

Many student fathers found empathetic and flexible faculty members, often parents themselves, when they informed them about missing class or not completing an assignment on time due to their child's illness and their need to provide care. However, not all students had the same experience. One father reported a lack of flexibility, which resulted in zeros on assignments in some classes or grade reductions for late submissions. He found this very frustrating because he viewed himself as a serious, dedicated student who prioritized his values and aimed to fulfill his responsibilities.

A new study from Cornell University may facilitate discussions about balancing the needs of faculty and students regarding academic deadlines. Ruesch and Sarvary (2024) experimented

with two sets of deadlines in classes: an ideal date and an extension without penalty (EWP) date. They reported that 41% of students utilized the EWP option once, and 37% did so twice (Ruesch & Sarvary, 2024). One benefit of this policy shift is that it empowers students to manage their time as they see fit.

Course exams and final exams scheduled at different times than their class periods can disrupt the carefully crafted schedule of a student father. One student father shared that evening exams or early morning exams (e.g., before or at the time of school drop-off) were particularly challenging to manage. When asked about drop-off childcare options during final exams, he replied that he stood in line with fellow students and faculty for the few available spots. Several student fathers brought their children to the exams and had them play quietly in the background.

Financial Implications.

The employment patterns show student parents generally, and student fathers specifically, are working at higher rates and longer hours than their peers without children. Specifically, they are more likely to work for pay (82% compared to 75% of male students), work for pay in a job related to their major (43% to 30%), and are 20 percentage points more likely to work more than 40 hours per week in a job related to their major (34% to 14%) (National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2020).

The poverty and food security data underscore these economic pressures. Nearly a quarter of student fathers nationally live below the poverty level, with particularly high rates in Illinois (35%) and Texas (25%). The fact that about one-third lack high food security suggests that many are struggling to access necessities.

In the interviews, student fathers discussed issues with their housing. Some could not afford to live near campus because of the high costs of housing. For those living farther away, this led to longer commutes and the burden of expensive on-campus parking or the challenge of finding parking in the surrounding neighborhood, making it more difficult to manage parenting activities. One father shared that while he enjoyed living on campus with his children, he encountered policies that were not family-friendly: his children could not use the on-campus bus system, and when one child turned 18, that child could no longer live in campus housing.

Across the six states, more than two-thirds of student fathers are working for pay while enrolled in school (see Table 11). The most notable difference in student father experiences across the six states is employment in jobs related to their major while enrolled. This ranges from 39% of fathers in Illinois to 68% of student fathers in Oregon. More than half of student fathers reported working more than 40 hours per week.

The interstate differences are striking and likely reflect varying state policies, cost of living, and economic conditions. Illinois exhibits concerning patterns, with the highest poverty rate (35%) and the lowest food security (65%). At the same time, Minnesota performs better across most metrics, with only 11% below the poverty level and 70% experiencing high food security.

Among the state differences, Oregon's employment patterns are particularly noteworthy, with 68% of student fathers working in jobs related to their academic major – significantly higher than in other states. This could indicate better alignment between educational programs and local job markets, or different industry concentrations that allow students to find relevant work.

Table 11: Financial Resources and Economic Status of Student Fathers, Six States and United States, 2020

Attribute	United States	California	Illinois	Michigan	Minnesota	Oregon	Texas
	n = 877,184	n = 118,278	n = 25,242	n = 23,815	n = 18,463	n = 9.156	n = 73,818
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
In-State Resident	71	88	76	88	76	78	74
Pell (Received Any Pell Grant)	43	35	44	36	35	41	36
High Food Security	68	69	65	64	70	59	66
Income Below Poverty Level	24	15	35	14	11	10	25
Job While Enrolled: Working for Pay	82	77	77	82	83	71	79
Job While Enrolled Related to Major	43	46	39	50	44	68	34
Job While Enrolled Worked More Than 40 Hours	57	60	51	62	58	59	60

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2020). 2019-20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:20). U.S. Department of Education.

Institutional and Community Supports.

Supporting student fathers requires intentional institutional efforts to address their unique needs and challenges. As adult learners juggling multiple responsibilities, student fathers require campus environments that acknowledge their unique circumstances and provide suitable resources. However, many institutions have yet to develop comprehensive support systems specifically designed for this population.

Accessing Campus Resources

Many colleges strive to support students in both their daily and academic lives. They may do this by directly supporting students or connecting them with local, state, or federal resources. Regarding the types of support for daily living, campuses may provide access to food, housing, childcare, and transportation. They may offer assistance with technology, learning management systems, registration systems, and academic support. Bharadwaj, Shaw, Rich, and Bryant (2023) concluded, based on their survey of students, frontline advisors, and non-academic support providers, that awareness of available student support services differed between students and institutional providers. They also found that awareness of services is not sufficient in and of itself. Students need to feel that when they utilize support services, their needs are being addressed – in other words, they see the relevance to their circumstances.

The culture of accessing campus resources varied among the student fathers. The fathers in the 2Gen program reported receiving laptops as part of their program and being directly connected to personalized assistance programs designed to support their success, aiming to simplify their daily lives and help them manage their schedules. They also received assistance

in completing the necessary paperwork to return to college and maintain their enrollment. Similarly, student fathers at one university discussed receiving weekly emails about funding opportunities, including fellowships, job postings, and internship opportunities.

The majority of student fathers did not report accessing campus resources. One mentioned obtaining diapers from a resource center for a semester, but decided not to access this resource the following semester due to the paperwork he would need to complete. He did not feel it was worth the effort. This same student father talked about the lunch food that was available on some days on campus.

Building Belonging Through Visibility

Central to supporting student fathers is improving their visibility on campus. Higher education media has described student fathers as the "invisible of the invisible" on college campuses—a clear indication that institutional systems were not designed with their needs in mind (Palmer, 2024). However, with additional guidance, institutions can develop more effective engagement and recruitment strategies.

Sacramento State (CA) offers a promising model through its "Student Parents Resources" page, which enables prospective and current fathers to sign up for program updates, access research and policy information, serve as student-peer ambassadors, and connect with campus resources. This initiative gained recognition in both statewide support organizations and national higher education media (Mowreader, 2024).

The Power and Absence of Peer Connections

Our interviews with student fathers revealed a stark divide in their experiences with peer connections. While some actively sought and found community among fellow fathers, others described feeling profoundly isolated despite their efforts to connect.

Some of the student fathers we interviewed actively sought connections with other fathers, both within their academic programs and across campus. These relationships provided essential peer support and shared understanding of the unique challenges they face.

One student father described his intentional efforts to build these connections:

> "I make an effort, rather, try to communicate with some of the other dads, actually. Like, I've got a couple of the dads that I talk to, uh, specifically with the interest of, like Dads. Hey, mom's talk. They got their group, like, as dads, we can... We can share our dad's stuff. Yeah, so it's really important to me to integrate into the community there." – Student Father Age 33

However, many student fathers experience profound isolation despite their family support systems. This loneliness manifests in multiple ways: age gaps with younger, childless classmates living on campus; limited connections in online learning environments; and the general sense of being outnumbered and misunderstood.

One father captured this experience powerfully:

> "It's been a lonely experience, and I have my whole family with me, and it's still been a very lonely experience… I come home to two beautiful boys and a wife. And I'm still very lonely, cause I don't have friends here, right? So I think that's the biggest… that's one thing that really stands out to me right now is just how lonely the experience can be. With no guarantee of a payoff." – Student Father Age 38

This isolation represents a critical gap that institutions must address to improve retention and success among student fathers.

Completion

Erikson: A Father First, College Graduate Second

Erikson earned his Associate's degree at the community college with his daughter cheering him on from the audience, becoming the first in his family to earn a college degree. He completed his degree in two years and became a member of the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society for maintaining a GPA of 3.50. His daughter is also excelling in school and tells him constantly about her own college plans. The example he set by prioritizing her childhood while pursuing his education has come full circle—she now sees higher education not as a distant dream, but as an expected part of her future.

Balancing Family and School

When asked about misconceptions regarding student fathers, a student preparing to graduate in December 2025 identified what he saw as the two biggest misconceptions about being a student parent: first, that “there's no support out there for parenting students,” and second, that “you'll have a very difficult time being successful in college and balancing your family life.”

These assumptions reflect a complex reality that student fathers must navigate. While support systems do exist—ranging from organizations that offer educational funding and childcare assistance to community resources beyond university walls—many students discover these opportunities only through trial and experience. This creates a significant gap between available support and student awareness, often leaving fathers to overcome perceived barriers that may be more surmountable than initially believed.

Understanding how these misconceptions influence actual outcomes provides essential context for examining the educational achievements of student fathers. The following analysis explores three key dimensions of degree completion: academic accomplishments, degree attainment, and time to graduation.

Academic Accomplishments

While prospective employers may not inquire about college GPA during the hiring process (Iqbal, 2024), earning a high GPA correlates with positive post–graduation outcomes. Students with a 3.00 GPA or higher typically experience benefits, including more job offers, greater alignment between employment and undergraduate field of study, increased likelihood of pursuing graduate education, and modest salary advantages (Madonna University, 2023).

Nationally, 69% of student fathers earned a 3.00 or higher GPA (see Table 12). There was considerable variation across the six states for student fathers, ranging from 81% in Minnesota to 45% in Illinois.

Academic Secrets of Success

Most student fathers did not view their approach as revolutionary. When asked about the secret to their academic success, they acknowledged a straightforward formula: (1) attending class consistently, (2) completing the assigned work, (3) actually reading the materials, (4) utilizing campus support resources (e.g., writing and math centers), and (5) communicating with professors. There was no grand revelation or complex strategy—just a commitment to these fundamental practices that many students overlook. The mundane nature of their advice highlights how academic success often stems from the consistent application of fundamental practices rather than extraordinary insights. One slight variation was that several student fathers spoke about taking care of themselves, which typically involved playing a sport or working out.

Academic Identity: When Passion Meets Purpose

Perhaps it was because, for many of the student fathers interviewed, being in classes represented a proper alignment of the stars—they knew what they wanted to study and were now immersed in their chosen field. The intellectual engagement and sense of purpose they found in their academic pursuits made nearly all the scheduling challenges and other responsibilities worthwhile. Despite the juggling act of fatherhood and academics, many expressed deep satisfaction in pursuing knowledge that aligned with their interests and aspirations. They had discovered their academic identity.

Kuh (2008) established that specific undergraduate opportunities designated as “high impact practices (HIPs)” are positively associated with learning and retention. These opportunities included research with faculty and internship or field experience. While not a central focus of this analysis, College Promise remains interested in learning more about student fathers' engagement in these beneficial experiences. Several student fathers discussed their work in virtual and in-person internships, highlighting how they were gaining different skills and insights compared to their classes. They noted that this was reinforcing their commitment to their chosen fields. Another student father is in an apprenticeship program at his community college, where he is gaining hands-on experience and career readiness.

Earn Degree (Yes/No)

Receiving a diploma represents a pivotal moment of academic achievement. Several of the student fathers we spoke with were celebrating Father's Day and graduating from college simultaneously. The significance of these two major life events coinciding was deeply meaningful to them.

Data reveal substantial variations in degree completion rates among student fathers across states (see Table 12). At the associate degree level, 14% of student fathers nationally earned a degree, but this ranged dramatically from just 5% in Oregon to 34% in Minnesota. Bachelor's degree completion shows a similar pattern, with 19% of student fathers earning degrees nationally. However, Minnesota again stands out as a clear outlier, with 43% of student fathers completing bachelor's programs.

Table 12: Degree Completion of Student Fathers, Six States and United States, 2020

Attribute	United States	California	Illinois	Michigan	Minnesota	Oregon	Texas
	n = 877,184	n = 118,278	n = 25,242	n = 23,815	n = 18,463	n = 9.156	n = 73,818
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
GPA: 3.00+	69	69	45	59	81	80	61
Earned Associates Degree in 2020 (Percent Yes)	14	11	12	25	34	5	14
Earned Bachelor's Degree in 2020 (Percent Yes)	36	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Earned Associate's Degree in 2020 (2018 Cohort: In Two Years)	18	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Earned Bachelor's Degree in 2020 (2016 Cohort: In Four Years)	23	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

Note: NA indicates insufficient cases to meet statistical reporting standards. "Earned Associate's Degree in 2020 (Percent Yes)" refers to the percent of student fathers who earned an Associate's Degree in 2020 from their institution. The estimate may have considerable variation due to small sample sizes or the institution's composition. For example, if an institution has a large number of students enrolled, but they did not complete, the percentage will be lower. "Earned Associate's Degree in 2020 (2018 Cohort: In Two Years)" refers to the percent of student fathers who began in 2018 (June to September) and earned their degree in 2020. Similar principles apply for "Earned Bachelor's Degree in 2020 (Percent Yes)" and "Earned Bachelor's Degree in 2020 (2016: Cohort: In Two Years)."

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2020). 2019-20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:20). U.S. Department of Education.

Time-to-Degree.

The terms 'two-year' and 'four-year' colleges are relics of a bygone era when students marched lockstep through higher education. These labels are like calling smartphones 'phones'—technically correct, but missing the reality that fewer students actually follow the traditional timeline. Even the United States Department of Education College Scorecard (2025) reports 'the share of students who graduated within 8 years of entering this school for the first time' for two- and four-year institutions. Yet despite this documented shift, many higher education professionals still believe that student parents and working adults just need 'a little more time' to graduate—a framing that minimizes the structural barriers these students face and treats extended timelines as minor deviations rather than fundamentally different educational paths.

The completion data reveal stark disparities: Among entering four-year students, males complete their degrees on time at a rate of 49%, while females achieve on-time completion at a rate of 57%. Student parents face far steeper challenges, with only 23% completing four-year degrees on the traditional timeline—less than half the rate of male students and barely one-third of the female completion rate (National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2020). Notably, student fathers complete at a rate of 36% compared to student mothers at 19%, suggesting that parental responsibilities, rather than gender alone, create the primary barrier to timely completion (see Table 12).

This national picture, however, may not capture the full complexity of local student experiences. The broad datasets that inform policy discussions often lack the granular detail needed to understand the specific barriers different student populations face, highlighting the limitations of relying solely on aggregate statistics to guide institutional decisions.

Workforce

Erikson: A Father First, Employee Second

For Erickson, the equation is simple: Family comes first, everything else second. As a single father, he has made intentional choices to ensure he can be present in his children's lives, opting to work to live rather than live to work. The opportunity to work for his internship sponsor upon graduation represents more than just post-degree employment—it's a chance to align his work life with his values, offering predictable rotating shifts and comprehensive benefits that support both his financial stability and his commitment to being the father his children need.

Student fathers are entering the workforce at an unprecedented moment of opportunity. By 2035, the United States economy is expected to create more than 96 million jobs that require postsecondary credentials—positions offering median salaries exceeding $90,000, which is 60% above the national average (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025b).

This represents more than just job growth: It means a pathway to transformative economic mobility. With the economy projected to add 19 million new positions by 2035 (+9%), and nearly half of current credentialed workers approaching retirement, employers will actively seek qualified candidates (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025a). The demand is so significant that an estimated 29.5 million additional workers with postsecondary credentials will be needed over the coming decade.

Student fathers are uniquely positioned to seize this opportunity. They bring maturity, motivation, and life experience that employers value, while their commitment to providing for their families drives academic and professional success. The timing couldn't be better: as 24.4 million parents currently hold high school degrees or some college experience, there's a substantial population ready to complete their education and fill these high-demand roles (United States Census Bureau, 2023).

The financial incentives are compelling: Postsecondary education opens doors to the highest-earning career paths, with 98% of the Top 100 occupations requiring credentials beyond high school. These positions offer median salaries exceeding $132,000—more than double the national average (see Table 13). For student fathers, this isn't just about career advancement; it is about securing their families' financial future and breaking the cycle of economic limitation.

The transition from higher education to these emerging workforce opportunities represents a critical moment where student fathers can leverage both their educational achievements and their unique strengths as motivated, experienced learners committed to long-term success.

Table 13: Employment Projections by Occupation Category: Growth, Education Requirements, and Salaries, US and Six States

	Total Jobs			Economically Prosperous Jobs			Top 100 Occupations Jobs		
Region	Projected Number of Jobs	Percent Requiring Postsecondary Credential (PSEC)	Median Annual Salary	Projected Number of Jobs	Percent Requiring PSEC	Median Annual Salary	Projected Number of Jobs	Percent Requiring PSEC	Median Annual Salary
California	28,673,140	39	$47,049	14,755,144	67	$77,898	2,619,373	99	$112,827
Illinois	8,916,051	40	$57,437	4,174,043	72	$77,335	915,446	98	$128,403
Michigan	6,361,635	38	$57,454	2,953,248	68	$77,558	645,050	98	$127,159
Minnesota	4,250,490	39	$57,841	2,058,867	69	$76,725	398,136	99	$129,195
Oregon	3,022,868	38	$49,523	1,028,640	77	$76,216	248,974	98	$109,499
Texas	24,491,783	31	$51,643	10,965,860	71	$79,718	2,511,134	99	$132,302
United States	246,343,563	39	$56,285	115,249,530	71	$83,680	22,763,446	98	$132,317

Source: United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. “Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, 2025.”

States and the federal government are implementing comprehensive data-driven accountability systems that better track workforce outcomes for all students, with student fathers among those who benefit from improved data visibility (see Table 14). California's Cradle-to-Career Data System and Washington's economic mobility infrastructure integrate educational, social service, and workforce data to capture previously invisible outcomes, while Oregon provides centralized workforce planning resources. This movement toward outcome-based accountability, reinforced by Texas's Credentials of Value[3] program and federal House Resolution 1, ties educational program funding directly to graduates' economic success. These coordinated efforts represent a shift from fragmented services to integrated data systems that can identify and address barriers to economic mobility through postsecondary education, with student fathers gaining from these broader systemic improvements.

[3] Certifications, licenses, degrees, or related qualifications that are recognized by employers in a sector, or have demonstrated the ability to provide in-demand skills, or earnings above those with a high school diploma. Some states have sought to codify “credentials of value” to include guaranteed earnings above those with a high school diploma with the ability to pay off the cost of the education within ten years.

Table 14: Selected Policy Initiatives to Expand Economic Opportunity for Student Parents

State	Initiative	Data
California*	Cradle-to-Career Data System	A comprehensive data system designed to incorporate a host of educational characteristics, social services, student experiences, and educational outcomes, that would not be possible without integrating student parent data into broader education, social service, and workforce data.
Oregon	Workforce and Talent Development Program	One-stop for career planning, information on the labor market, and timely reports on education and the workforce
Texas*	Credentials of Value	Establishes program-level outcomes tied to economic opportunity and affordability
Washington	Economic Mobility	Developed a statewide data infrastructure to understand better student parent needs, and identified the importance of postsecondary education on economic mobility, particularly for first-generation students, who are disproportionately student fathers.
United States	House Resolution 1 (119th Congress (2025-2026))	Establishes program-level outcomes tied to the economic opportunity of program graduates; may eliminate program aid if benchmarks are not exceeded.

Note: * Indicates states with statutory student parent data collection.

Family Friendly Employment.

From the outset, these student fathers were intentional about their academic direction. Whether continuing their education or engaging in professional immersion, they maintained a clear vision and the confidence to achieve their goals. Even before entering the workforce, the student fathers interviewed were already considering their future careers from multiple perspectives.

The Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey (2018) found that 58% of people choose higher education to secure a good job or career—a finding consistent across all educational pathways and demographic subgroups. The student fathers in this study embraced a comprehensive definition of a "good job" that extended beyond salary alone. For them, meaningful employment encompassed financial stability, opportunities for career advancement, a positive work environment, and most importantly, family-friendly employers who understood their dual responsibilities as students and fathers.

This emphasis on family-friendly employment reflects practical realities these fathers face. Research by Sims (2014) demonstrates that low-income working parents are disproportionately likely to work nonstandard hours without access to paid leave benefits such as sick time or personal days. These nonstandard schedules—typically including weekends or shifts from 6:00 PM to 6:00 AM on weekdays—create significant childcare challenges that can undermine both work performance and family stability.

The student fathers themselves echoed these concerns. One participant articulated his desire for family-friendly employment that would provide schedule predictability and autonomy, allowing him to determine his work hours while retaining the option to earn overtime wages when additional income was needed. This perspective highlights how student fathers seek not just employment but positions that balance their complex responsibilities with opportunities for financial advancement.

Family Sustaining Wage.

Several younger student fathers approached college education with pragmatism, making career choices based not just on passion but on financial necessity. Having previously earned minimum wage or slightly higher hourly wages, they sought degrees that would lead to decent annual salaries. One student father had calculated the expected difference in annual income based on a higher hourly wage rate once he earned his degree.

This pragmatism becomes understandable when examining what constitutes a "family sustaining wage"—a concept that varies significantly depending on the measurement framework used. Three different approaches reveal the complexity of this challenge and help explain why these student fathers view education as an essential economic strategy:

- **Federal Poverty Guidelines as Baseline.** The most basic measure uses federal poverty thresholds. Minimum wages range dramatically across states, from $7.25 federally to $16.50 in California, representing annual incomes between $15,080 and $34,320 (see Table 15). According to the Department of Health and Human Services (2025), the poverty guidelines indicate that the federal poverty level for a family of two is $21,150—a threshold that minimum wage employment in states using the federal rate often fails to meet. While California, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, and Oregon all have higher hourly rates than the federal government, the challenge of living on these wages remains substantial.
- **Regional Cost-of-Living Reality.** A more comprehensive measure comes from the United Way's Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) Budget (2025), which examines actual costs of housing, childcare, food, transportation, healthcare, technology, and miscellaneous expenses across regions. Their analysis (2025) reveals a stark reality: **in no counties in the United States could a family of one adult and one child live sustainably on less than $17/hour ($35,360 annually)**. Even at $20/hour ($41,600 annually)—corresponding to 200% of the federal poverty level—only 47% of counties in the United States become financially viable for single-parent families (United Way, 2025).
- **Economic Mobility Aspirations.** The third measure focuses on wages that provide genuine economic opportunity. The Lumina Foundation (2025) “Credentials of Value” framework aims for 75% of the United States labor force to earn credentials yielding 15% more than high school graduates by 2040, establishing a family-sustaining wage target of $55,614 annually.

These three frameworks—*survival, sustainability,* and *mobility*—illustrate why student fathers view their educational investments through such a pragmatic lens. The gap between the current minimum wage and the level required for basic family sustainability creates a compelling motivation for degree completion.

Table 15: Federal and Regional Hourly Rate and Estimated Annual Earnings

Region	2025 Hourly Rate	Full-time Employment	Annual Earnings
Federal	**$7.25**	**2080**	**$15,080**
California	$16.50	2080	$34,320
Illinois	$15.00	2080	$31,200
Michigan	$10.56	2080	$21,965
Minnesota	$11.13	2080	$23,150
Oregon	$14.70	2080	$30,576
Portland Metro Area	$15.95	2080	$33,176
Non-Urban Area	$13.70	2080	$28,496
Texas	$7.25	2080	$15,080

Note: 2080 represents the standard yearly work hours for a full-time employee.

Source: U.S. Department of Labor. Wage and Hour Division. State Minimum Wage Laws. Source https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/minimum-wage/state

Health and Wellness Benefits & Retirement Plans.

For student fathers who previously held hourly positions, the opportunity to receive benefits such as healthcare, vacation, and other perks became an attractive factor in securing a job after earning their degrees. This transition reflects a recognition that employment must provide more than wages—it must support their roles as both providers and caregivers.

Geographic Disparities in Benefits

Data from the Baccalaureate and Beyond Study (2020) reveals striking variations in benefit access for full-time fathers across states (see Table 16). Michigan shows only 41% of fathers receiving any benefits in their first job after graduation, compared to 71% in Illinois.

Health insurance availability remains consistently high across states (74-94%), while retirement plan access varies significantly from 71% in Michigan to 94% in Minnesota. Time-off benefits show the narrowest range (71-89%), suggesting broad employer recognition that fathers need flexibility.

Table 16: Employer Benefits for Full-Time Fathers, Six States and United States, 2020

Attribute	United States	California	Illinois	Michigan	Minnesota	Oregon	Texas
	n = 90,826	n = 7,760	n = 3,003	n = 3,175	n = 1,325	NA	n = 7,346
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
First Job: Any Benefits (Yes)	68	60	71	41	50	NA	64
Holidays/ Vacation/ Sick Leave (Yes)	89	71	80	76	89	NA	82
Health Insurance Plan Offered (Yes)	90	94	74	94	94	NA	88
Retirement Plans Offered (Yes)	86	87	78	71	94	NA	90

Note: NA indicates insufficient cases to meet statistical reporting standards.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B 2016/2020). U.S. Department of Education.

The Family Leave Policy Gap

While employer benefits data show recognition of fathers' financial needs, paid family leave policies reveal stark inadequacy in supporting caregiving roles (See Table 17). The federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) provides 12 weeks of unpaid leave, creating an impossible choice between financial stability and family caregiving for fathers transitioning from hourly work, where any time off meant lost wages.

Among the six states analyzed, only California, Minnesota, and Oregon have comprehensive paid family leave programs. Illinois and Michigan do not offer paid leave. Texas offers minimal voluntary programs with a two-week minimum requirement. California offers up to 52 weeks of various types of leave annually.

Table 17: Paid Family Leave Programs, Six States and United States, 2025

State	Enacted / Effective	Participation	Parental Leave	Family Caregiving Leave	Personal Medical Leave	Military Care Leave	Safety Leave	Total Paid Leave Available in One Year
United States	**1993/ 1993**	**Voluntary**	**12 Weeks**	**12 Weeks**	**12 Weeks**	**26 Weeks**	**None**	**12 Weeks**
California	2002/ 2004	Mandatory	8 Weeks	8 Weeks	52 Weeks	8 Weeks	None	52 Weeks
Illinois	None	Voluntary	None	None	None	None	None	None
Michigan	None	Voluntary	None	None	None	None	None	None
Minnesota	2023/ 2026	Mandatory	12 Weeks	12 Weeks	12 Weeks	12 Weeks	12 Weeks	20 Weeks
Oregon	2019/ 2023	Mandatory	12 Weeks	12 Weeks	12 Weeks	None	12 Weeks	12 Weeks
Texas	2023/ 2023	Voluntary	At Least 2 Weeks	At Least 2 Weeks	None	At Least 2 Weeks	None	At Least 2 Weeks

Source: Bipartisan Policy Center (2025). “Features of State Paid Family Leave Programs,” and The Standard (2024). Status of Paid Family Leave Laws in Each State."

Skill Development and Continuing Education.

Student fathers in this study recognized their associate's degrees as gateways to expanded career opportunities. Many who had temporarily left their jobs or continued working while enrolled anticipated gaining access to promotions and positions that had previously been unavailable despite their practical experience. One entrepreneurial student father believed his business credentials would enhance the credibility of his contract bids, positioning him as a qualified business leader in competitive markets.

These expectations align with broader workforce projections and educational demands. According to the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 72% of future jobs will require some college education or a college degree, with demand for higher education credentials expected to continue growing (Carnevale et al., 2023). The United States Census Bureau (2023) also projects significant increases in demand for degrees over the next decade: Associate's degrees by 10%, Bachelor's degrees by 12%, and advanced degrees (Master's or Doctorate) by 15%.

The financial implications of educational advancement are substantial. Consider a single father working in construction in Chicago who was earning $69,370 (see Table 18). With a bachelor's degree, he could transition into a project management specialist role, earning $104,220, and establish a foundation for continued career progression along this pathway.

However, the employment landscape is evolving beyond traditional degree requirements. While Sigelman and colleagues (2024) found little evidence that hiring managers prefer candidates without college degrees over those with degrees, an expanding skills-based hiring system is

gaining attention and traction (The Paper Ceiling, 2025). This shift emphasizes the importance of both transferable and occupational skills in career advancement.

Career progression requires continuous skill development beyond initial degree completion. Transferable skills—those applicable across various jobs and industries—provide flexibility and adaptability in changing markets. Occupational skills, specific to particular job functions, ensure competency in specialized roles. Together, these skill sets enable workers to navigate evolving career pathways and capitalize on educational investments throughout their professional lives.

Table 18: Skills and Career Pathways in Construction, Chicago, Illinois

Variable	Construction Laborers	Project Management Specialist	Construction Managers	Architectural and Engineering Managers
Mean Annual Salary (2023)	**$69,370**	**$104,220**	**$120,080**	**$162,410**
Education	High School Diploma or Equivalent	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree
Transferable Skills	Detail Oriented	Detail Oriented	Project Management	Continuous Improvement Processes
	Customer Service	Project Management	Management	Problem Solving
	Good Driving Record	Problem Solving	Quality Control	Communication
Occupational Skills	Construction	Xactimate	Commercial Construction	Subcontracting
	Carpentry	Landscaping	Subcontracting	Change Orders
	Power Tool Operation	AutoCAD	Procore	Project Management
	Landscaping	Project Management		

Source: United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. “Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, May 2023.”

The Misconceptions of Being a Student Father

Student fathers face numerous misconceptions that could undermine their capabilities and commitment as both parents and students. The most pervasive myths center around assumptions of incompetence, lack of planning, and inability to balance responsibilities. These

stereotypes often stem from societal biases and misunderstandings about contemporary fatherhood.

These false assumptions can create unnecessary barriers for student fathers who are already navigating complex challenges. The responses reveal that fatherhood often serves as motivation rather than limitation, and that student fathers are capable of success when provided with appropriate support and recognition. Addressing these misconceptions is crucial for creating more inclusive educational environments that support the growing population of student parents.

One of the final questions student fathers answered was, "*What would you say are the biggest misconceptions about being a parenting student or a parenting student father?"* In their words, here is what they shared.

Breadwinner Role Expectations

Student fathers face intense pressure to prioritize immediate income over education. One father explained, *"A lot of people think that you can't do it. That a dad has to be out there and he has to be the breadwinner… He has to go to work and get the money. I didn't want to leave my job, and leave it for my wife to have to take care of and pick up more hours. Because like I said, I was the sole breadwinner."* – Student Father Age 27

Assumptions of Academic Incompetence

Many student fathers report that others assume they will not succeed academically due to their parental responsibilities. As one participant noted, *"We probably won't get the job done,"* and *"People don't see us as succeeding."* – Student Father Age 49. However, student fathers often push back against these assumptions with more nuanced perspectives.

One student father acknowledged the challenge while rejecting the idea that it's uniquely impossible: *"It's hard – Everything in life is hard."* **—** Student Father Age 20. Another provided a balanced view: *"Really hard but not a waste of time, and not as hard as you may think."* **–** Student Father Age 44.

Many student fathers expressed frustration with the automatic assumption that they need accommodations. One student father stated, *"Being a father is not a handicap. Like it's a superpower, not a handicap. And I'm sick of it being treated like it is going to hamper or hold me back in some way"…"Why is the instant knee-jerk reaction to tell me how I'm going to struggle, because I'm a parent… I'm here on a mission. I'm here to do it 100%."* – Student Father Age 34

The "Life is Over" Mentality

Multiple student fathers challenged the notion that having children ends personal growth and achievement. One participant emphasized: *"Having a kid is not the end of the world…People think, like, once you have a kid, you have to give up everything. You don't*

have to, as long as you have that support system." – Student Father Age 22

Another student father echoed this sentiment, *"It's a really big misconception that once you have a child, your life is done. You know, you got to commit. You have no more personal goals for yourself."* – Student Father Age 27

Gender Stereotypes About Involvement and Care

Student fathers encounter assumptions about their level of involvement compared to mothers. One single student father stated, *"That I'm not as involved as any mother would be in my daughter's life."* He further explained: *"Being a single dad. Again, a lot of people hear some of that, and it immediately…as a society, we're used to just, like, you must be a shit dad. Why?…What did you do wrong? Why didn't it work?"* – Student Father Age 33

Flipping the Script – The Motivational Impact of Fatherhood

Contrary to misconceptions about fatherhood being a hindrance, many student fathers described it as their primary motivation. One father powerfully stated, *"It is the thing that gets me up in the morning. It is the thing that makes me powered to be able to cram through sessions. You know, if I were not a parent, I would not be able to go through and do these school classes late at night. I would not do it… But because I'm doing it for something that's not* [just about] *me."* – Student Father Age 34

Summary of Key Findings

Finding #1: A Double Bind: Scarcity and Inconsistency in Student Father Data

The data landscape for student fathers faces a compounding challenge: not only are data scarce, but when institutions do collect information about student fathers, they employ different methodologies, categories, and survey instruments. This creates a double bind where limited data becomes less valuable due to incomparability across potentially comparable units. Data scarcity hinders a comprehensive understanding, while inconsistency prevents the meaningful comparison and aggregation of existing data.

Finding #2: Inconsistent and Uncertain Consideration of Student Fathers Across Journey Stages

Like a kaleidoscope, our student journey mapping reveals different views of where student father data appears depending on how we turn the lens to examine each stage (see Figure 4). Focusing specifically on student fathers is not robust—and in some places, it's even hard to see them at all. While one cannot say with certainty that student fathers are absent from the minds of administrators, for policymakers, researchers, and funders, it can be hard to see the documentation of their consideration. Sometimes, student fathers may be considered in planning, and sometimes not — and even when they are, it is often unclear or implicit. This systematic ambiguity extends beyond data collection issues to fundamental questions of

whether academic and administrative units even recognize student fathers as present in their student populations, much less in their service design and journey mapping.

Finding #3: Inconsistent State-Level Attention to Student Father Issues

Based on our review of available data and publicly accessible resources, our analysis revealed significant variability in how states address student father issues, with student father-specific activities identifiable in only a small number of states. This pattern may reflect both actual inconsistencies in state-level programming and the limited visibility of existing efforts through standard data collection methods. The uneven landscape is particularly notable, given that education is increasingly operating as a state and local responsibility, with states establishing educational institutions, developing curricula, and setting academic standards. While many states have developed sophisticated longitudinal data infrastructure, the extent to which student father data is systematically incorporated into these systems remains unclear from publicly available information. While additional state-level activities may exist beyond what was readily accessible through our methodology, our findings highlight the need for more systematic and transparent documentation of how student fatherhood intersects with the multiple educational, socioeconomic, and developmental factors that comprehensive educational and workforce data systems are designed to capture.

Limitations

This research provides valuable insights into the experiences of student fathers and identifies key policy gaps affecting this population. However, several important limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. Our student father journey map may not capture all critical activities at each stage of the educational experience, as the complexity of balancing parenthood with academic pursuits likely involves challenges that extend beyond what was documented through our research methods.

The interview data were subject to self-selection bias, as student fathers who volunteered to participate may have different experiences or motivations than those who chose not to participate. Correspondingly, those who did not persist or participate may have other educational journeys and experiences. Additionally, the study did not include student fathers who were unsuccessful in their educational pursuits, potentially missing critical insights about barriers to completion. Limited triangulation between student father perspectives and those of academic and administrative staff may result in an incomplete picture of the institutional obstacles and available resources.

This analysis provided a thorough examination of policy varieties across different geographic areas, which limited the generalizability of the findings to regions with varying support structures or regulatory environments. State officials in every state were not contacted, meaning effective policies and practices that impact student fathers may be underreported.

Conclusion

Significance and Implications

Student fathers navigate their education and transition to the workforce while facing unique challenges that researchers and policymakers have largely overlooked. These fathers confront

immediate financial pressures that cannot wait for future earning potential, complex time management demands that differ from traditional students, and the need to prioritize children's schedules over academic requirements – all while challenging fundamental assumptions about student parent support in higher education and workforce development.

The dual data challenge—the difficulty in both identifying student fathers and tracking their outcomes—has profound implications for policy development. At the federal and state levels, agencies lack the comprehensive data needed to design targeted funding programs or develop evidence-based legislation. Institutionally, colleges struggle to develop effective retention strategies without understanding who their student fathers are or which services promote their success.

This data gap is particularly problematic given states' extensive involvement in higher education governance. States control operating authorization, funding and appropriations, approval of new programs and degrees, tuition and fee policies, infrastructure and construction decisions, distance education regulations, compliance oversight, and strategic direction—all areas where student father friendly policies could be integrated. Without accurate data on this population, states are making critical decisions about higher education policy without understanding how these choices affect nearly one in ten students.

The population overlap adds another layer of complexity: when nearly half of adult learners are also student parents, and 91% of student fathers are adult learners, policies must account for these intersections rather than treating these as separate populations.

Policy Recommendations

States have extensive authority over higher education through multiple governance mechanisms. Rather than creating entirely new programs, states can leverage existing regulatory and funding structures to support student fathers. Drawing from insights gained through our analysis of 11 states with relevant policies (California, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, Texas, and Washington), we recommend integrating student father support across these key areas of state authority:

Operating Authorization and Regulatory Compliance

- **Data Collection Requirements**: Require institutions to collect and report parenthood status as part of existing student data systems. “We can't support what we don't see.”
- **Family-Friendly Standards**: Incorporate student parent accommodation requirements into institutional authorization standards, including childcare access and flexible scheduling policies.

Funding and Appropriations

- **Performance Funding Integration**: Include student parent retention and completion rates in strategic planning processes and potentially, performance-based funding formulas.
- **Targeted Appropriations**: Allocate specific funding streams for student parent support services, including emergency financial assistance and childcare subsidies.
- **Financial Aid Reform**: Restructure state financial aid to account for immediate financial pressures. For example, allowing emergency grants for childcare expenses or expanding eligibility timelines.

New and Refreshed Programs and Degrees

- **Accelerated Pathways**: Approve and incentivize programs designed with student fathers' time constraints in mind, including competency-based education and stackable credentials.
- **Evening and Weekend Programs**: Prioritize approval for degree programs offered during non-traditional hours.

Tuition and Fee Policies

- **Student Parent Fee Structures**: Develop differential tuition policies that can account for part-time enrollment patterns typical among student fathers.
- **Fee Waivers**: Expand fee waiver programs to include student parents, particularly for application and enrollment fees that create barriers.

Infrastructure and Construction

- **Family-Friendly Facilities**: Require new construction and major renovations to include family-friendly elements such as lactation rooms, family restrooms, and children's spaces.
- **Childcare Infrastructure**: Prioritize funding for on-campus childcare facilities in capital improvement plans.

Distance Education and Online Programs

- **Digital Access Initiatives**: Expand broadband access policies to ensure student parents, particularly those in rural areas, can participate in remote learning opportunities.
- **Flexible Delivery Requirements**: Establish standards for online programs that accommodate non-traditional schedules and work-life balance.

Strategic Direction and Goals

- **Adult Learner Integration**: Revise statewide higher education goals to explicitly include student parent success metrics.
- **Timeline Flexibility**: Expand traditional completion requirements (100%, 150% completion) with a focus on improving student parents outcomes for 200% completions that better account for student parents' non-linear educational journeys.
- **Cross-Agency Coordination**: Align higher education policies with workforce development and social services to create comprehensive support systems that encompass basic needs, work-based learning, and credit for prior learning.

Systemic Changes Needed

Our findings suggest that current support systems are inefficient due to missing or fragmented data, which prevents effective coordination and delivery of services at scale. Key areas for transformation include:

- **Time and Scheduling**: Accept the reality that student parents operate on different timelines, requiring flexible class scheduling and reconsideration of faculty and campus space utilization.
- **Financial Support**: Provide comprehensive financial counseling that accounts for immediate family needs, not just future earning potential.
- **Academic Pathways**: Address impediments in major requirements, such as lab schedules, and improve transfer and articulation policies to support non-linear educational journeys.
- **Basic Needs**: Ensure access to affordable childcare, family-friendly housing, healthcare for students and their children, and broadband access for remote learning flexibility.

The Path Forward: From Analysis to Impact

This landscape analysis reveals a significant opportunity for policy change. While student fathers face substantial barriers, states already possess the regulatory and funding mechanisms needed to address these challenges. The varied approaches observed in our analysis suggest that coordinated policy action could yield substantial improvements without requiring entirely new institutional frameworks.

The convergence of adult learner and student parent populations creates a unique policy window. As states increasingly focus on adult learner success and workforce development, policies that support student fathers can advance multiple strategic priorities simultaneously. This alignment of interests—supporting fathers, increasing degree completion, and strengthening the workforce—provides a compelling case for comprehensive policy reform.

Most substantially, our analysis demonstrates that student father support is not a niche issue requiring specialized solutions, but rather, a lens through which to examine and improve existing higher education policies. The areas where states have authority —such as funding formulas and program approval—are precisely the areas where targeted changes could create a systemic impact for this population and others facing similar challenges.

Final Thoughts

Student fathers represent a significant but largely invisible population in higher education. Their success requires not only awareness of their existence but also fundamental changes in how institutions collect data, design policies, and deliver services. The overlap between adult learners and student parents suggests that investments in supporting student fathers may yield benefits for multiple student populations.

Moving forward, our work shifts from analysis to implementation. Armed with clear evidence of the challenges student fathers face and specific policy solutions that can address them, we will work directly with legislators, state agencies, and institutional leaders to turn these recommendations into enacted policies. The time for more studies has passed – student fathers need policy action now.

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Appendix A: Methodology

Utilizing a case study methodology, College Promise will lean on six study sources that may have some potential overlap during the team's investigation. These six sources are (1) documents, (2) archival records, (3) interviews and surveys, (4) direct observation, (5) participant observation, and (6) physical artifacts. Our aim with the case study approach is to compare experiences and data collected on student fathers across states and then establish a national standard of practice.

The Student Father Interviews

This study of student fathers was conducted from January 1, 2025, to June 30, 2025, across six states: California, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, and Texas. For student father participant recruitment, the researchers employed a convenience sampling method. College Promise professionals in each of the six target states provided contact information for potential participants who were registered college students in spring 2025. The College Promise research team then invited these student fathers to participate in confidential one-hour structured interviews, offering a $50 honorarium for their time. Following data collection, the research team conducted a content analysis of the interview transcripts.

The student father component of the study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample size was limited to approximately 23 student fathers across six states, which restricts our ability to generalize findings to the broader population of student fathers nationwide. Additionally, our participant pool was predominantly composed of student fathers aged 25 and older, which may have underrepresented the experiences of younger student fathers.

Our purposive sampling approach focused on student fathers who were actively managing both academic and parental responsibilities. While we did not intentionally exclude those who discontinued their education, our recruitment methods naturally resulted in participants who were currently enrolled. This created an unintended selection effect, potentially capturing the experiences of more academically persistent individuals rather than providing balanced insight into the challenges that lead to attrition among student fathers.

Furthermore, as with all qualitative research, researcher bias may have influenced data collection and interpretation despite efforts to maintain objectivity. Participants may also have provided socially desirable responses, particularly regarding their parenting and academic commitment, and retrospective accounts may have been affected by recall limitations.

The MyPromise Tool

The MyPromise Tool is a comprehensive database designed to track and categorize Promise programs nationwide. To identify programs for inclusion in the database, College Promise staff

work directly with Promise program staff and, wherever possible, independently verify data related to each program. The websites of each institution/program were then reviewed to confirm whether the program met the minimal definition of (1) a program that supports college attendance at an accredited college or university as defined by the United States Department of Education, (2) a program that has a public-facing website, and (3) a program that covers tuition for a career technical education (CTE) certificate, toward a two-year degree, or a four-year degree; or provides dual credit classes or early college programming that leads to a certificate and/or degree in an accredited K12 school, college or university. Clarity and completeness of program information may vary across programs.

Three Convenings

As part of the Landscape Analysis initiative, College Promise partnered with prominent educational organizations to convene three strategic gatherings in 2025. These events brought together a broad coalition of stakeholders—including representatives from Promise programs, P20 educational institutions, charitable and nonprofit organizations, as well as business and government sectors—to address the academic and economic challenges confronting young men and student fathers.

The journey began at Oakland Community College in the Detroit area on April 10, where 86 participants from 32 organizations gathered to discuss systemic barriers that prevent young men from achieving success. Michigan was chosen because of the Reconnect Program. The event highlighted the importance of cross-sector teamwork, with Bishop Vann of Second Ebenezer Church notably saying that “collaboration is the new currency,” while student father Brandon Keyes, a graduating senior at the University of Michigan, shared his story of juggling education, work, and parenting that began as a Michigan Reconnect student. The final session featured Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer signing an Executive Directive to expand access to college and skills training for men across the state.

The initiative continued at Farragut Academy High School in Chicago on April 29, where 74 registrants from 40 organizations gathered to learn about Hope Chicago's innovative two-generation Promise program, which supports both high school students and their parents simultaneously. Participants learned about Hope Chicago's unique collaborative model, which involves local high schools, such as Farragut, the City Colleges of Chicago, the University of Chicago, and community colleges, working together to create seamless educational pathways for entire families. The highlight was a compelling two-generation panel featuring Hope Parent Scholar Brian Barney, who shared how Hope Chicago transformed his academic journey, along with discussions about culturally responsive systems that serve both youth and adult learners.

The capstone event occurred at the Alamo College District, home of the Alamo Promise, in San Antonio on May 29, with 81 registrants from 31 organizations. This gathering combined data presentations, policy discussions, and cross-sector working sessions. The Urban Institute shared comprehensive state data that showed how traditional supports often overlook the unique needs of parenting students. Student father Jericho Doherty from Alamo Colleges District emphasized the vital importance of feeling “seen and supported in every part of the journey.”

Participants left the events with increased awareness, practical tools, and clear action steps, having engaged in technical assistance sessions focused on scaling successful models through enhanced outreach, data collection, and student-centered program planning.

Increasing Prosperity for Young Men of Michigan
April 10, 2025 | Oakland Community College | Auburn Hills, MI

8.30 AM **Welcome**

Bob Ballard, Co-Chair, College Promise National Advisory Board
Peter Provenzano, Chancellor, Oakland Community College

9.00 AM **A Decade of Promise: Lessons Learned and New Opportunities**
Moderator: Rosye Cloud, Interim CEO, College Promise
Wytrice Harris, Senior Director, College Success & Partnerships, Detroit Promise
John Jones, President and CEO, HOPE Toledo

9.45 AM **Men and Student Fathers: Pathways to Education, Workforce and Family Success in Michigan and Beyond**
Moderator: Kimberly Hurns, Vice Chancellor for Student Services, Oakland Community College
Amber Angel, Program Officer, ECMC Foundation
Stephon Gaskin, Student, Oakland Community College
Edgar L. Vann, II, Bishop, Second Ebenezer Church
Vester Waters, Manager, Adult Degree Completion, Detroit Reconnect
Beverly Walker-Griffea, Director, MiLEAP

10.45 AM **Break**

11.00 AM **Special Guest Remarks and Commitment**
Brandon Keyes, Student, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor
Gretchen Whitmer, Governor of Michigan

11.45 AM **Wrap Up and Concluding Remarks**

College Promise & Hope Chicago
April 29, 2025 | Farragut Career Academy | Chicago, IL

8.30 AM **Welcome**
Janice K. Jackson, CEO, Hope Chicago
Virag Nanavati, Principal of Farragut Career Academy
John Barnshaw and Catherine Millett, College Promise
Aarti Dhupelia, Executive Vice Chancellor-Chief Student Experience Officer, City Colleges of Chicago
Dom McKoy, Executive Director, UChicago To&Through Project, Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice

9.30 AM **A Decade of Promise: Lessons Learned and New Opportunities**
John Barnshaw and Catherine Millett, College Promise

10.00 AM **Break**

10.15 AM **Workshop: Aligning Educational and Economic Opportunities**
The Increasing Significance of Student Parents in Higher Education

10.45 AM **Chicago's Two-Generation Approach to Advance Student Success and Economic Opportunity**
Moderator: Catherine Millett, Senior Leader, College Promise
Jedianis Mercado, Hope Scholar and Student at Loyola University
Brian Barney, Hope Parent Scholar
Cameron Hardamon, Chief Impact Officer, Hope Chicago
Yesenia Olvera, Director of Postsecondary Success, Benito Juárez Community Academy
Norma Mejia, Community Partner & Adult Learner Liaison, City Colleges of Chicago

11.45 AM **Wrap Up and Concluding Remarks**
Michele Howard, Chief Program Officer, Hope Chicago

Student Fathers: Advancing Educational and Economic Opportunity
May 29, 2025 | Alamo Colleges District | San Antonio, TX

9:00 AM **Welcome & Opening Remarks**
Mike Flores, Chancellor, Alamo Colleges District
Rosye Blancas Cloud, Interim CEO, College Promise

9:15 AM **Data-Driven Insights: Understanding Student Fathers**
John Barnshaw, Senior Leader, College Promise

10:00 AM **Scholarship America: One Scholarship Away Video**

The State of Male College Enrollment & Student Fathers
Nathan Sick, Senior Research Associate, Work, Education, and Labor Division, Urban Institute

11:00 AM **Panel: Best Practices for Supporting Male Students and Student Fathers**
Rodell Asher, Director of District-wide Student Engagement and Leadership, Alamo Colleges District
Jericho Doherty, Student Father, Alamo Colleges District
Saúl Valdez, Program Officer, ECMC Foundation
Wesley Wells, VP for Student Success, St. Philip's College
Moderator: Rosye Blancas Cloud, Interim CEO, College Promise

11:45 AM *Lynn Barnes, Jr., Senior Vice Provost for Strategic Enrollment, The University of Texas at San Antonio*

12:00 PM **Lunch**

1:00 PM **Technical Assistance & Scaling Solutions**
Interactive Workshop: Facilitated by College Promise & Alamo Colleges District

2:15 PM **Panel | Outreach & Awareness: Engaging Policymakers, Employers, & Communities**
Emily Calderón Galdeano, Ed.D., Interim CEO, UP Partnership
Stacy Oksenberg, Sr. Vice President/CHRO, YMCA of Greater San Antonio
Bryan Ashton, Managing Director, Trellis Strategies
Moderator: Stephanie Vasquez, Chief Program Officer, AlamoPROMISE

3:00 PM **Call to Action: Expanding Impact Across College Promise Programs**
Amber Angel, Program Officer, ECMC Foundation

Appendix B: Statewide Promise Programs

Table B1: Statewide Promise Programs and Adult Reconnect Promise Programs with Eligibility Criteria

State	Statewide Promise Program	Reconnect Promise for Age 25+	Reconnect Eligibility		
			No College Degree	Graduate State High School	First Time College Student
Alabama					
Alaska					
Arizona	Arizona Promise	Arizona Promise			
Arkansas	Arkansas Future Grant	Arkansas Future Grant			Yes
California	California Promise	California Promise			
Colorado	Career Advance Colorado	Career Advance Colorado			
Connecticut	Pledge to Advance Connecticut	Pledge to Advance Connecticut			
Delaware	Delaware SEED Scholars	Delaware SEED Scholars		Yes	
Florida	Bright Futures				
Georgia	Georgia HOPE Scholarship	Georgia HOPE Scholarship			
Hawaii	Hawai'i Promise	Hawai'i Promise			
Idaho		Idaho Opportunity Scholarship		Yes	
Illinois					
Indiana	Indiana Workforce Ready Grant	Indiana Workforce Ready Grant	Yes		
Iowa	Future Ready Iowa	Future Ready Iowa			
Kansas	Kansas Promise Scholarship	Kansas Promise Scholarship			
Kentucky	Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship Program	Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship Program	Yes		
Louisiana	MJ Foster Promise Program	MJ Foster Promise Program	Yes		
Maine	Free College Scholarship	Free College Scholarship			
Maryland	Maryland Community College Promise Scholarship	Maryland Community College Promise Scholarship		Yes	
Massachusetts	MASSGrant	MassReconnect	Yes		
Michigan	Michigan Promise Scholarship	Michigan Reconnect	Yes		
Minnesota	North Star Promise	North Star Promise	Yes		

State	Statewide Promise Program	Reconnect Promise for Age 25+	Reconnect Eligibility		
			No College Degree	Graduate State High School	First Time College Student
Mississippi					
Missouri	My Missouri "MyMO" Scholarship Promise	Missouri FastTrack			
Montana	Grizzly Promise	Grizzly Promise			Yes
Nebraska	Nebraska Promise	Nebraska Promise			
Nevada	Nevada College Kickstart Program				
New Hampshire	Community College System of New Hampshire Promise Program	Community College System of New Hampshire Promise Program			
New Jersey	Garden State Guarantee				
New Mexico	New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship	New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship			
New York	Excelsior College Promise Program	Excelsior College Promise Program			
North Carolina	Next NC Scholarship	Next NC Scholarship			
North Dakota					
Ohio					
Oklahoma	Oklahoma's Promise				
Oregon	Oregon Promise	Oregon Opportunity Grant	Yes		
Pennsylvania					
Rhode Island	Rhode Island Promise	Rhode Island Reconnect	Yes		
South Carolina					
South Dakota	Build Dakota	Build Dakota			
Tennessee	Tennessee Promise	Tennessee Reconnect			
Texas					
Utah	Utah Promise	Utah Promise			
Vermont					
Virginia	Virginia's G3 Program	Virginia's G3 Program			
Washington	Washington Opportunity Grant	Washington Opportunity Grant			
West Virginia	West Virginia Promise	West Virginia Promise			
Wisconsin					
Wyoming	Hathaway Scholarship	Hathaway Scholarship			

Appendix C: Student Parent Education Surveys

Table C1: College Promise Analysis of Student Parent-Related Items from United States Surveys, 2025

Coding	Abbreviation	Most Recent Relevant Item (e.g. Do you have children?)	Response
Marital/Family Status			
	BPS	Number of student's dependents (children and others) in [year 2011-2012]?	
	RNL ASPS	Marital Status 1 - Single 2 - Single with children 3 - Married 4 - Married with children 5 - Marital - Prefer not to respond (Q.12)	
	WSBCTC	Family Status: Options are:	(1) Single w/ dependents (2) Couple w/ dependents (3) No dependents (4) Other (5) Not reported
Household Composition			
	ACS	How many people, including yourself, live or stay at this address?	INCLUDE… ✓anyone not related to you, like roommates and other families. ✓babies and children, related or unrelated, including grandchildren and foster children. ✓everyone staying here now who has no other place to stay.
	DSS	Child/Parent Information:	List each child for whom you are applying. Then, list the names of both parents.
	CPS	Are there any other persons 15 years old or older now living or staying there?	(Who have not been listed.) ; Have I missed any babies or small children? Enter line number of parent of (name of person talking about) (0 - 16)
	NEFE	Do you?	(Living alone, With a spouse, With your own children under 25 years old who also provide financial support to children who live in another household or who provide unpaid care, help, or financial support to adult relatives or friends who need assistance?
	OSU	Respondents were asked to report on how many children they have in each age group.	
	SDS	With whom do you live? (check all that apply)	(Alone; Spouse, partner, or significant other; Roommate(s); Children; Parent(s) or guardian(s); Other family; Other (please specify))
	CCAMPIS	Requests Data on Sex, Number of Children; Number of Hours; and Level of Student	

Coding	Abbreviation	Most Recent Relevant Item (e.g. Do you have children?)	Response
	HMS	What is the current number of children or other dependents living in your household, for whom you are responsible?	(None; 1; 2; 3; 4 or More)
Child Custody and Living Arrangements			
	CCSSE	Do you have children who live with you and depend on you for their care?	(Yes; No)
	Gallup_StudExp	Do you care for a child under age 18?	(Yes; No)
	UCOP	Do you have dependent child(ren) who currently reside with you?	(No, I do not have children; Yes, I have child(ren) who reside with me fulltime(50% or more of the time); Yes, I have child(ren) who reside with me parttime(less than 50% of the time); Yes, I have child(ren), but they do not currently reside with me)
	NCHA	Are you a parent or guardian of a child under the age of 18 or do you have primary responsibility for someone else's child/children under the age of 18?	(Yes; No)
	NMCSES	Are you a parenting student?	(Parenting Student; Non-Parenting Student)
	Edu_Northwest	Are you the parent or guardian to any biological, adopted, step, or foster children who live in your household?	(Yes; No)
	Everett_CC	Are you pregnant, in the process of adopting, a parent (with at least part time custody) or guardian of a dependent child? A dependent child is defined as a child younger than 19 years of age or a student younger than 24.	
	FFCT	Are you pregnant, a parent (with at least part time custody) or guardian (officially or unofficially) of a dependent child?	(Yes; No)
	Hope_Ctr_BN	Are you the parent, primary caregiver, or guardian (legal or informal) of any children?"	(Yes; No)
	SMNS	If you are a parent or guardian with at least part time custody (official or unofficial), how many dependent children do you have in each age group?	
	OHE	Are you the parent or legal guardian of or can claim as a dependent a child under the age of 18?	(Yes; No).

Coding	Abbreviation	Most Recent Relevant Item (e.g. Do you have children?)	Response
	HECC	Are you a parent, are you serving as a parent, or are you a legal guardian of a child/children while you are enrolled at [insert college or university name]?	(No, I am not a parent, serving as a parent, nor a legal guardian. Yes, I am a solo/single parent or guardian. Yes, I am a parent/guardian and share parenting responsibilities with someone who lives with me. Yes, I am a parent/guardian and share parenting responsibilities with someone who does not live with me.)
	SWS	Are you a parent, primary caregiver, or legal guardian to any children?	
	TCSG	Are you a person who has primary or joint custody of a dependent or minor child?	
Child Demographics and Characteristics			
	ATUS	How many children are under age 18 residing in the household ? (Scale Variable)	
	MA_FamCargiver	How many children do you have in each of the following age ranges?	Enter 0 if you don't have any children in an age range; Aged 0 - 1 year (1); Aged 2 - 3 years (2); Aged 4 - 5 years (3); Aged 6 - 12 years (4))
	MCC	Which one of the following statements applies to you?	(I have children who are age 5 and younger and/or I'm expecting a baby; I have children who are age 6 to 18; I have children who are in both of the above age groups; I don't have children in the above age groups; Prefer not to answer)
	SM_Paying_College	Who do you currently live with? Check all that apply.	(Nobody, I live by myself; A roommate or several roommates who I am not related to; My romantic partner or spouse; My romantic partner or spouse's parents; My child(ren); My mother; My father; My stepparent; My sister or brother or half/step siblings; Extended family (grandparents, cousins, nieces and nephews, etc.); Other)
	THECB	How many people, including yourself, live in your household?	(Marital Status: Married; Single; For each child, First/Last Name; Date of Birth; City of Birth; Country of Birth; Country of Citizenship; Gender; Male; Female)
Financial Support and Dependency			
	B&B	Indicates whether the respondent had any dependents in the month of completion of the 2015-16 bachelor's degree.	(Dependent child(ren); Other dependent(s); Both dependent child(ren) and other dependent(s); No dependents)
	C2C	How many children are dependent on you for more than half of their financial	(Zero; One; Two; Three; Four or More)

Coding	Abbreviation	Most Recent Relevant Item (e.g. Do you have children?)	Response
		support?	
	CSU-F	A dependent is broadly defined as a child or adult for whom you provide care and/or financial support. The dependent does not need to be a biological relative. N/A – respondent adds dependents	
	CSAC	How many children are dependent on you for more than half of their financial support?	
	FAFSA	Do you now have or will you have children who will receive more than half of their support from you between [date] and [date]?	(Yes; No)
	IBHE	Do you now have or will you have children who will receive more than half of their support from you between [date] and [date]?	(No; Yes, Single parent; Yes, Married parent; Don't Know)
	IRS-1040	Enter the number of Dependents: If more than four dependents, see instructions and check here .If you checked the Head of Household or Qualifying Surviving Spouse box, enter the child's name if the qualifying person is a child but not your dependent.	
	MI_StudParent	Do you now have or will you have children who will receive more than half of their support from you between [date] and [date]?	(Yes; No)
	MissCTC	How many children younger than 18 years of age are you responsible for and live in your household?	(0; 1; 2; 3; 4; 5+)
	NPSAS	Do you [{if before July 1, 2020} now have, or will you have, children who [{if before July 1, 2020} will receive {else} received] more than half of their support from you between [July 1, 2019] and [June 30, 2020]?	(1 = Yes 0 = No)
	SLEDS	Dependent Care (Child or Elder) – Efforts related to providing childcare or adult care assistance.	
	SIPP	Identifies if adult is a reference parent to any household children under 18 years old; How many children the respondent receives Social Security income on behalf of.	
Pregnancy and Reproductive History			
	GSS	How many children have you ever had? Please count all that were born alive at any time (including any you had from a previous marriage).	(None; One; Two; Three; Four; Five; Six; Seven; Eight or More; Don't Know)

Coding	Abbreviation	Most Recent Relevant Item (e.g. Do you have children?)	Response
	NLSY	Have you ever been pregnant?	(Yes; No)
Caregiving Time and Responsibilities			
	NSSE	About how many hours do you spend in a typical 7-day week doing the following? g. Providing care for dependents (children, parents, etc.)	Response options: 0, 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, 21-25, 26-30, More than 30 (Hours per week)
	HERI-CSS	Since entering this college, how much time have you spent during a typical week doing the following activities? Performing household/childcare duties Over 20]	(Hours per week: None, < 1 hr/wk, 1-2 hrs/wk, 3-5 hrs/wk, 6-10 hrs/wk, 11-15 hrs/wk, 16-20 hrs/wk, Over 20 hrs/wk]
	TFS	During your last year in high school, how much time did you spend during a typical week: Providing care for dependents (children, parents, etc.)	(Response categories: None, Less than 1 hour, 1-2, 3-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, Over 20)
	HERI-YFCYS	Since entering this college, how much time have you spent during a typical week doing the following activities? Performing household/childcare duties	(Hours per week: None, < 1 hr/wk, 1-2 hrs/wk, 3-5 hrs/wk, 6-10 hrs/wk, 11-15 hrs/wk, 16-20 hrs/wk, Over 20 hrs/wk]

Note: ACS: American Community Survey: ATUS: American Time Use Survey: B&B: Baccalaureate and Beyond: BPS: Beginning Postsecondary Students: C2C: California Cradle-to-Career Student Parent Data Collection: CCAMPIS: United States Department of Education Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS): CCSSE: Community College Survey of Student Engagement: CPS: Current Population Survey: CSAC: California Student Aid Commission: Student Expenses and Resources Survey: CSU-F: California State University-Fresno Student Survey: DSS: Commonwealth of Virginia : Department of Social Services Benefits Application: Edu_Northwest: Education Northwest #RealCollege Survey: Everett_CC: Everett Community College Student Parent Survey: FAFSA: Free Application for Student Financial Aid: FFCT: Family Friendly Campus Toolkit: Gallup_StudExp: Gallup State of Higher Education (The Student Experience): GSS: General Social Survey: HECC: Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission: HERI-CSS: UCLA HERI CIRP College Senior Survey: HERI-YFCYS: UCLA HERI CIRP Your First College Year Survey: HMS: University of Michigan Healthy Minds Student Survey: Hope_Ctr_BN: Hope Center Student Basic Needs Survey: IBHE: Illinois Board of Higher Education Student Parent Data Collection: IRS-1040: Internal Revenue Service - Form 1040: MA_FamCargiver: Massachusetts Family-Caregiver Survey: MCC: Monroe Community College: MI_StudParent: Michigan Student Parent Data Collection Requirement: MissCTC: Mississippi Community and Technical Colleges: Survey of Women: NCHA: American College Health Association - National College Health Assessment: NEFE: National Endowment for Financial Education (NEFE) Multigenerational Household Survey: NLSY: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth: NMCSES: Child Trends Survey of Parenting Students in New Mexico: NPSAS: National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: NSSE: National Survey of Student Engagement: OHE: Minnesota Office of Higher Education Student Parent Data Collection: OSU: Oregon State University: RNL ASPS: RNL Adult Student Priorities Survey: SDS: Penn State University Center for Collegiate Mental Health Standardized Data Set: SIPP: U.S. Census Survey of Income and Program Participation: SLEDS: State-Local Economic Development Strategies Database: SM_Paying_College: Sallie Mae Paying for College Survey: SMNS: Lee

College - Single Mother's Needs Survey (Materially Similar to FFCT): SWS: Student Financial Wellness Survey: TCSG: Technical and Community College System of Georgia: TFS: UCLA HERI CIRP The Freshman Survey: THECB: Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board: Apply Texas: UCOP: University of California Office of the President Undergraduate Experiences Survey: WSBCTC: Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.