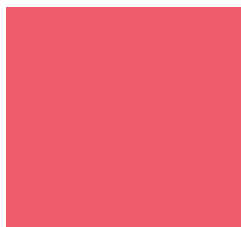


# NO MATTER WHAT OBSTACLE IS THROWN MY WAY

## Report from the Single Mothers' Career Readiness and Success Project

Sandy Goodman and  
Mina Reddy, Ed.D



WORLD EDUCATION



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**A**lmost nine million families in the U.S. are headed by single mothers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Most support their families on very low incomes, with inadequate funds for childcare, affordable housing, and health and dental care (Women Employed, 2011).

Single mothers make up an increasing part of the postsecondary student population in the United States. In the 2011–2012 school year, there were more than 2 million single mother college students, representing 11 percent of undergraduates. Eighty-nine (89) percent of single mother students were low-income, with 63 percent in poverty. Women of color are more likely to be single parent students (Institute for Women’s Policy Research [IWPR], 2017).

Consciously and specifically addressing the needs of single mothers is an essential part of any equity and completion agenda for colleges. Although similar in many ways to other nontraditional students, single mother students bring both a unique set of strengths and additional barriers to program completion. Yet, until recently, their particular experiences and challenges as a distinct student population have not gained the attention or resources required to address their needs effectively. To remedy this, a growing movement has emerged to give voice to student parents and to better understand and address their needs. This report aims to further that understanding.

## INTERGENERATIONAL BENEFITS

With a powerful motivation to improve the lives of their families and set a positive example for their children, many single mothers pursue education and training that will lead to better-paying work and a meaningful career. Postsecondary education and training have the potential to reap life-changing benefits for single mothers and their children in the areas of employment, quality of life, and children’s outcomes. Investment in childcare, additional financial aid, and case management pays off through increased tax returns and reduction in public benefits costs (IWPR, June 2018). Single mothers, however, face daunting obstacles related to finances, childcare, and personal issues.



## THE SINGLE MOTHERS' CAREER READINESS AND SUCCESS PROJECT

In order to better understand the needs of single mother students and the programs that have been created to support them, World Education embarked on an 18-month project, supported by ECMC Foundation. The Single Mothers' Career Readiness and Success Project involved identifying and documenting program models and service strategies, and, to a lesser extent, institutional and public policies, implemented in community college settings, to support single mothers. These strategies were aimed at increasing their rates of persistence and completion, leading to greater career and economic opportunities, and success for themselves and their families. The project began with a literature review and was followed by interviews with staff and students at 17 community colleges with programs and services that support single mother students. Information from these sources is compiled in this report.

### KEY PRACTICES

Through the literature review and interviews, we identified key practices that support single mother students. These include personal support (counseling and advising); academic support; financial support; childcare; workforce development; family-friendly space and events; and community partnerships. A common thread throughout these programs and services is the centrality of relationship-building, communication, and collaboration among staff, between staff and students, among students, and with community partners for successful implementation of these supports. There is a web of connections among all these areas. In most of the programs featured, a small staff or even a single staff person is responsible for providing the services or making the referrals. The support they provide is greatly enhanced by relationships developed across college departments and with community partners. In addition, cultivating opportunities for peer support, whether formal or informal, is a key factor for students to believe they can succeed, to learn about resources, and to reduce any feelings of isolation.

All the programs featured emphasize the crucial nature of **personal support**, developing a trusting relationship, and “meeting the students where they are.” With their many responsibilities, single mother students experience role strain, and they often feel guilt at having limited time with their children. Program staff take a holistic approach, demonstrating openness and concern with students' overall wellness and with their financial, family, emotional, and personal needs and interests that extend beyond their academic schedules and program requirements. They support students in remaining resilient as they identify solutions to challenges. Taking a case management approach, staff help students navigate services on campus and provide personalized referrals to community resources. This centralized and personalized approach is particularly important for single mothers with compressed time on campus.

Although the featured programs generally encourage students to take advantage of existing **academic support** and accelerated programs, having dedicated space makes it possible to provide tutors or advisors in a family-friendly program area, making it more feasible for busy student parents to access it.

Since many single mothers are driven by the need to improve their family's economic conditions, **workforce development and career preparation** is a focus of many of the programs. Career advising and coaching is embedded in the programs to help students identify education and career pathways leading to high-demand jobs that can result in family economic sustainability and mobility. Some of the programs use work-study to provide not only financial assistance but also new workforce experiences that prepare single mother students for further employment.

Colleges assist students with their **financial needs** in several ways and access a variety of sources to do so. Some programs are designed to be tuition-free. Some provide direct cash assistance for specific costs; these are often programs designed for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients. Colleges may develop sources of scholarships for single parents. Many colleges maintain emergency funds. Some programs offer a food pantry or snacks onsite, or loan books or laptops. Some colleges invest staff time in connecting students to public benefits for which they are eligible.

**Childcare** is essential for parents of young children. Some of the featured programs offer on-campus childcare or partner with Head Start. A few offer evening hours or care during school vacations. Many factors must be considered when assisting students with childcare needs, including schedules, cost, children's ages, location, and program quality. The colleges in this study have figured out a number of mechanisms to assist single parent students with this basic need, although many gaps persist.

To the extent possible, the featured colleges create a **family-friendly campus**, with spaces reserved for student parents where they can bring their children, workshops for parents, and fun events for families. These spaces and activities provide opportunities for students to build peer support and a sense of community.

**Partnerships** enable programs and students to tap into diverse funding sources, specialized resources, and professional expertise that it is rarely found in any one agency, campus, or program. Staff in single parent programs must be expert in outreach and partnership development and learn which agencies and programs provide what, how to identify students who might be eligible, how to best refer them, and how to sustain a mutual referral system. Through community partnerships, staff have at the ready referrals to housing agencies, food banks, multiservice centers, mental health agencies, childcare resources, dress-for-success, domestic violence centers, legal services, and community foundations.

In order to serve single mother students well, attention needs to be paid to **institutional capacity** to support this special population. This means collecting **data** on parenting status and following up with single mothers to offer services, and providing **professional development** to faculty and staff on the needs of single mothers and ways to be flexible without compromising standards. It also means collecting data on outcomes to evaluate programs and to make the case for needed programming. It means participating in **advocacy** for policies within and outside the institution that support single mothers' ability to access and complete a college education.



## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

### Institutional Capacity

- Recognize single mothers as a unique demographic and disaggregate data to better understand this population.
- Establish mechanisms for identifying single mothers at various junctures.
- Provide options for accelerated learning and time to completion and ensure that staff of student parent programs are well informed of these options and potential benefits to single mothers.
- Invest in staff time to develop community partnerships for mutual referrals and facilitated access to support services.
- Provide professional development for faculty and staff to better understand the needs of single mother students.
- Identify resources for developing institutional capacity.

### Programs and Services

- Attend to the full range of intersecting needs of single mothers.
- Recognize and address the varied needs of single mothers with children of all ages.
- Facilitate opportunities for peer support and building of social capital among single mother students.
- Provide career counseling to help students identify and pursue viable, realistic career pathways and credentials with local labor market value that lead to economic mobility and career advancement.
- Develop relationships with local employers in high-demand fields to enable opportunities for meaningful work-study, career exposure, and employment.
- Provide dedicated family-friendly space for students to study and receive services and organize family-friendly events on campus.

### Funding

- Include a full assessment of benefit eligibility in the application process and invest in dedicated, specialized eligibility screeners who can assess students' eligibility and help them access a full range of public benefits and potential funding to support their education.

- Leverage funding streams, such as Perkins and WIOA (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act), with provisions for special populations, including single mothers, women in nontraditional occupations, chronically unemployed or underemployed (previously “displaced homemakers” in Perkins Act).
- Leverage a diverse base of funding, including community and women’s foundations, to enable greater flexibility to accommodate single mothers who do not meet narrow eligibility rules determined by specific single-purpose funding sources.
- Raise flexible funds to provide emergency assistance grants.

## Advocacy and Policy

- Advocate for public policies and funding to support single mothers’ postsecondary success as a vehicle towards economic sustainability and mobility. This is especially critical at the state level, where there is tremendous flexibility in how states may implement federal funding streams like TANF and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).
- Invest in staff time to develop community partnerships and participate in coalitions that advocate for services and policies addressing the needs of single mothers.
- Raise policymaker awareness and advocate for policy changes about the “cliff effects” (i.e., the sudden loss of benefits, rather than a gradual reduction of support, when income goes up) that come into play as single mothers receiving public assistance return to the workforce.
- Connect single mother students’ needs to advocacy related to equity and inclusion, student basic needs, and college affordability.
- Include single mother students in advocacy efforts and invite state and local policy-makers to campus events to meet single mother students and hear their stories.

This report aims to further our understanding by sharing the insights and best practices we gleaned with educators, funders, investors, and policymakers so that, together, we can increase the opportunities and supports available to single mother students. We include examples from just 17 colleges, with the awareness that there are many others operating programs for student parents, in many cases as part of statewide initiatives, that we were unable to include, given the limited scope of this project. We hope that this report stimulates interest and resources for identifying additional program strategies and best practices.





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