



Survey of Parenting Students in New Mexico Helps Us Understand Their Needs

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Executive Summary

Nearly one in five undergraduate students in the United States is caring for dependent children. Data show that investing in the academic success of these 3.1 million students will pay lifelong dividends for these individuals and their states and could help higher education institutions meet enrollment and retention goals in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.ⁱ⁻ⁱⁱ Recent analyses illustrate that investing in student parents' success in college pays dividends for their own economic futures—and the fiscal and economic health of the state.^{iii-iv}

Supporting student parents through higher education is crucial for promoting economic mobility. In New Mexico, single mothers who graduate with an associate degree earn \$366,614 more over their lifetimes, save New Mexico \$26,842 in public benefits spending, and contribute \$105,138 more in taxes, all relative to those who are high school graduates. Results are even more striking when single mothers graduate with bachelor's degrees.^v Further, research from Virginia has indicated that each dollar invested in student-parent support programs can yield up to \$5.36 in increased tax revenue and public benefits savings.^{vi}

New Mexico has become a leader in supporting families with two-generation policies—that is, policies that support parents and children. The New Mexico College Student Experience Study was designed to provide higher education administrators and policymakers with essential data to better support parents who are students. We administered the New Mexico College Student Experience Survey to more than 3,000 students—including more than 1,000 pregnant or parenting students with children under age 18—across nine higher education institutions in New Mexico during the 2024 spring semester.

The results of our survey, presented in this report, provide an illustration of student parents in New Mexico and point to policy and practice reforms that may better support this important group of students.

Key findings

Student parents struggle to meet demands on their time as they care for multiple children and maintain intensive work schedules in addition to their academic responsibilities.

- One in three (33%) respondents to the survey identify as a parent or parent-to-be to a child under age 18.
- Parenting students often enroll part-time to balance academics, child care, and work—with the largest segment taking 6-11 credit hours, compared to non-parenting students who predominantly enroll full-time (12+ credits).
- Fifty-eight percent of parenting students work at least 30 hours a week, compared to 40 percent of non-parenting students.
- Fifty-four percent of student parents have more than one child under age 18.

To manage conflicting responsibilities, student parents show a strong preference for flexible courses with at least some online component (40% prefer online asynchronous, 25% prefer hybrid, and 8% prefer online synchronous).

Student parents' child care needs are not currently being met.

- Just 40 percent of student parents with children under age 13 indicated that their current child care arrangements cover all the hours for which they need care.
- Thirty-three percent of parenting students have no formal child care; another 33 percent rely on unpaid relatives or friends.

- Meanwhile, 30 percent of student parents prefer child care centers or preschools, 27 percent prefer unpaid family or friend care, 22 percent prefer on-campus child care, and 19 percent prefer drop-in child care options.
- The gap between student parents' current care arrangements and their preferences highlights the need for diverse child care solutions to improve retention and completion rates.

Many student parents would benefit from essential support services, including those tailored to parents.

- Insecurities related to basic needs are commonplace among student parents: 47 percent struggle with daily expenses, 60 percent worry about school costs, and 54 percent worry about running out of food.
- Sixty-two percent of student parents are first-generation college students and may benefit from targeted support programs like mentoring and advising.
- Mental health needs for these students are high: 45 percent of parenting students report poor or fair mental health, 44 percent screen for anxiety, and 28 percent screen for depression, emphasizing the need for accessible mental health services.

Student parents' desired supports and services reflect the need for flexible, supportive services on campus, including free family/children's activities and events (60%), family-friendly study spaces (57%), family-friendly tutoring (46%), outdoor play spaces (44%), drop-in on-campus child care (40%), and online tutoring (40%).

Despite everything on their plates, student parents remain motivated in school to achieve their economic and personal goals.

- Eighty-five percent of parenting students are pursuing a degree or certificate.
- Sixty-four percent of parenting students return to higher education to increase their earnings potential and 64 percent are motivated to return to inspire their children.
- Effective support can improve individual outcomes and contribute positively to the community, strengthening the workforce and promoting social mobility.

Policy recommendations

This study points to four overarching areas of opportunity for New Mexico's higher education administrators and policymakers to consider in order to help their parenting students graduate and improve their state's long-term fiscal picture. In addition, since almost one in five undergraduates across the United States is a parent, these recommendations could be beneficial in other states as well.

- 1. Create flexible learning environments.** As parenting students strive to complete degrees and certificates while balancing academic responsibilities with work and family responsibilities, institutions can accommodate their complex lives by offering flexible learning environments, including shortened academic terms, online learning options, and flexible classroom policies.
- 2. Offer comprehensive support services.** Colleges and universities can help student parents meet their basic needs—including financial security and mental health—so they can focus on their academic pursuits. Relevant supports for student parents include support meeting basic needs, first-generation student supports, counseling and mental health services, and career and financial planning.
- 3. Create family-friendly campuses with child care services.** Institutions can work to create family-friendly campus climates that celebrate student parents' identities as parents by investing in family-friendly initiatives, child care services, and student parent peer-mentoring programs.

- 4. Enhance data collection.** Colleges and universities are better positioned to support students when they are equipped with data that identifies these students as parents. Data collection efforts can help colleges identify student parents, share services with them, and track the impact of supportive initiatives.

The policy and practice recommendations outlined above are not only salient strategies for parenting students, but also for serving other significant student populations, including first-generation students and working adults, in addition to “traditional” students. Implementing these strategies provides multiple entry points for supporting student parents while also benefiting a diverse range of other students on campus. This holistic approach not only benefits students and their families but also strengthens the campus and community’s broader social and economic fabric by fostering a more educated and skilled workforce. Ultimately, these efforts contribute to the creation of vibrant, thriving communities, driven by the success and mobility of their members.



Introduction

Nearly one in five undergraduate students in the United States is caring for dependent children. Data show that investing in the academic success of these 3.1 million students will pay lifelong dividends for these individuals and their states and could help higher education institutions meet enrollment and retention goals in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.^{vii-viii} Recent analyses illustrate that investing in student parents' success in college pays dividends for their own economic futures—and the state's.^{ix-x}



Supporting student parents through education is crucial for promoting economic mobility. In New Mexico, single mothers who graduate with an associate degree earn \$366,614 more over their lifetimes, save New Mexico \$26,842 in public benefits spending, and contribute \$105,138 more in taxes, all relative to those who are high school graduates. Results are even more striking when single mothers graduate with bachelor's degrees.^{xi}

Parenting students earn grades on par with or better than their peers without children,^{xii-xiii} but are less likely to graduate as they navigate a system of higher education that was not built for them.^{xiv} When student parents are supported and succeed in higher education, their success benefits not only their own futures, but also those of their children and the higher education system as a whole.^{xv-xvi} Recent analyses based in Virginia demonstrate that each dollar invested in student-parent support programs can yield up to \$5.36 in increased tax revenue and public benefits savings.^{xvii}

Existing data are limited in how much they can tell us about student parents, since institutions of higher education generally do not collect this information.¹ To provide higher education administrators and policymakers with additional information on student parents, we designed and conducted a survey of student parents across nine institutions of higher education in New Mexico.

This report will first provide background on the New Mexico College Student Experience Survey, the findings of which inform the bulk of this report, within the context of recent developments in the state's higher education and child care infrastructure. Next, we review detailed findings from the survey, including demographic characteristics of parenting students in New Mexico, their educational goals, the challenges they face, their child care needs, and the educational supports and services they desire. We conclude with a discussion of these findings and their implications, and with a set of policy recommendations based on the findings. A methodology appendix follows the conclusion of the report.

¹ The best existing source of data on student parents is the 2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS: 20). The NPSAS: 20 contains data representative for the state of New Mexico. However, the study was not designed to study student parents, and questions tailored to this population are limited. For more information, see: Wine, J., Siegel, P., Haynes, H., & Hunt-White, T. (2024). 2019-20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS: 20): Data File Documentation. Institute of Education Sciences. U.S. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2024/2024482.pdf>

Background

The New Mexico College Student Experience Study

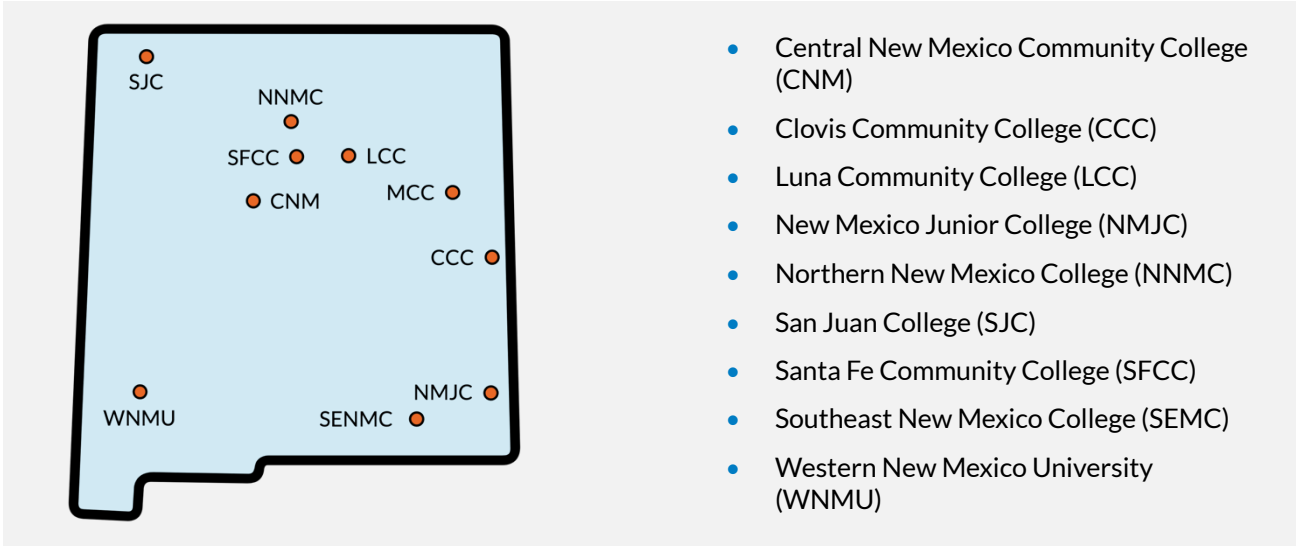
The New Mexico College Student Experience Study was designed to provide higher education administrators and policymakers with data to illuminate the needs of student parents and support their economic mobility through higher education. The goals of this project were threefold:

1. Develop a survey tool that can be used by the field to survey student parents at colleges and universities.
2. Raise awareness of the student parent population in New Mexico.
3. Provide data resources to the state and to individual colleges that can be used to improve supports for student parents.

With these goals in mind, this report provides data from participating colleges across the state. Separate from this statewide report, the participating colleges will also receive reports tailored to their institutions, along with de-identified raw data to facilitate deeper dives into their own students.

The higher education system in New Mexico is comprised of universities, two-year branch campuses associated with those universities, and independently governed community colleges. Nine institutions participated in this first year of the New Mexico College Student Experience Survey (see Figure 1), all of which belong to New Mexico Independent Community Colleges, a member institution for independent community colleges across New Mexico that was instrumental in recruiting colleges to participate in this study. These colleges represent a broad cross-section of the higher education landscape in New Mexico. WNMU and NNMC are regional colleges that offer associate degrees and bachelor's degrees. The other institutions are two-year independent community colleges. They range dramatically in size from approximately 750 students to 19,000 students.^{xviii}

Figure 1. Nine colleges participated in the 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey



The 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey was administered during the Spring 2024 semester, from approximately February 6 to April 4, 2024. More than 3,000 students responded, including more than 1,000 student parents (see Table 1 in the methodology appendix for response rates by institution). Throughout our results, “parenting students” refers to students who identify as an expecting parent or a parent to at least one child under age 18. For more information on the survey design, fielding, and methodology, please see the methodology appendix.

State policy context

The New Mexico College Student Experience Survey is a valuable tool for policymakers and administrators to evaluate the state’s priorities, especially in the context of recent policies to support families. New Mexico is the fifth-largest U.S. state, but it has a relatively small population of 2.1 million people.^{xix} While the state has the highest official poverty rate in the country, at 18.2 percent,^{xx} its supports for families stand out. New Mexico recently passed legislation investing in both higher education and early childhood. In 2020, the state established the New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship, which covers the cost of tuition and required fees for New Mexico residents



pursuing career training certificates, associate degrees, and bachelor’s degrees at public colleges and universities across the state.^{xxi} While enrollment in higher education has declined nationally, enrollment in New Mexico has grown for two consecutive years (2021-2022; 2022-2023).^{xxii}

On the early childhood side of things, New Mexico has expanded access to child care assistance in 2022 so that families with incomes up to 400 percent of the federal poverty line (approximately \$111,000 for a family of four) have access to free child care without a co-pay.^{xxiii} Within this policy context, student parents in New Mexico have some advantages over those in other states.

Presentation of Findings

Parenting students in New Mexico are diverse, yet distinct from students without children.

Student demographic characteristics

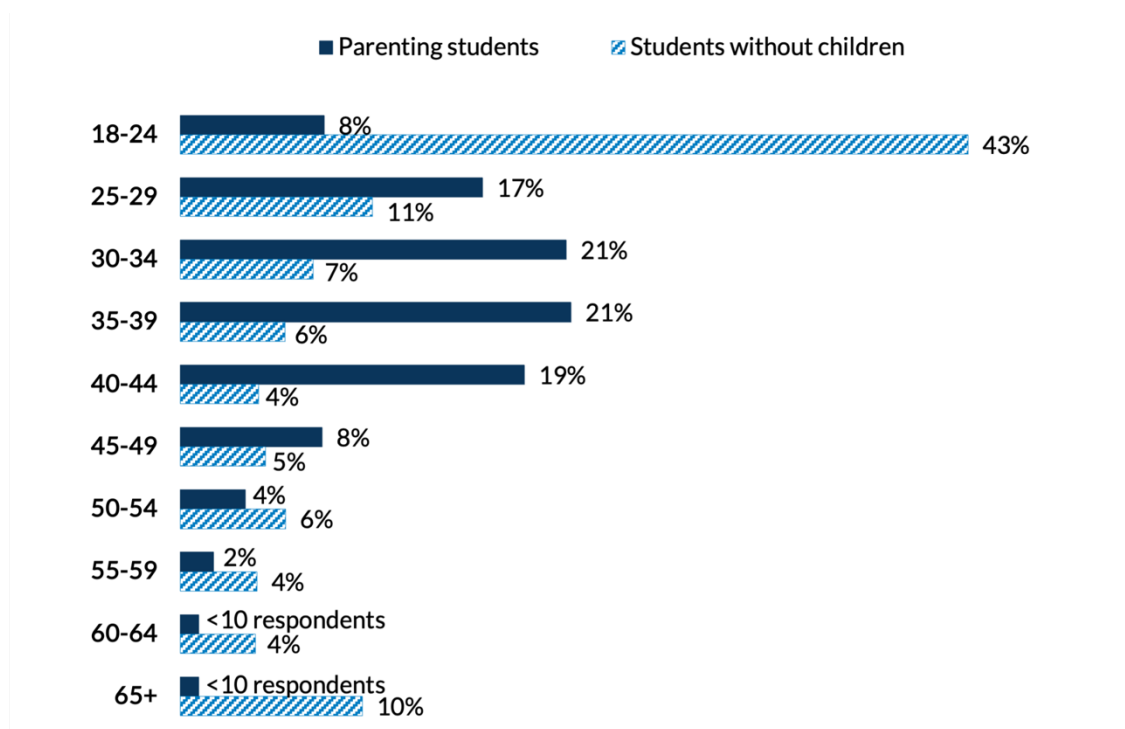
One in three (33%) respondents to the survey identify as a parent or parent-to-be to a child under age 18. Student parents tend to be older than their peers without children, and fewer are young adults ages 18-24 (see Figure 2). The median age of student parent respondents is 36, compared with a median age of 25 for students without children.

33%

of survey respondents identify as parents or expecting parents of children under age 18.

Figure 2. Parenting students tend to be older than their peers without children

Age of students, by parenting status



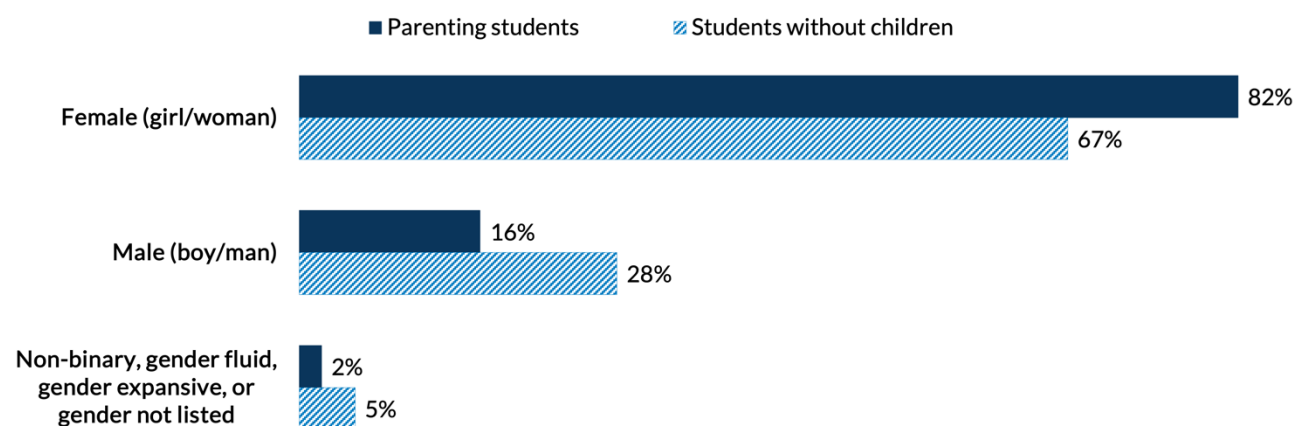
Source: 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey

Note: N = 3,229

While women are overrepresented on college campuses generally,^{xxiv} they are particularly overrepresented among parenting students. Among respondents, 82 percent of parenting students identify as female, compared with 67 percent of students without children (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. 82 percent of parenting student respondents are women

Gender identity of students, by parenting status



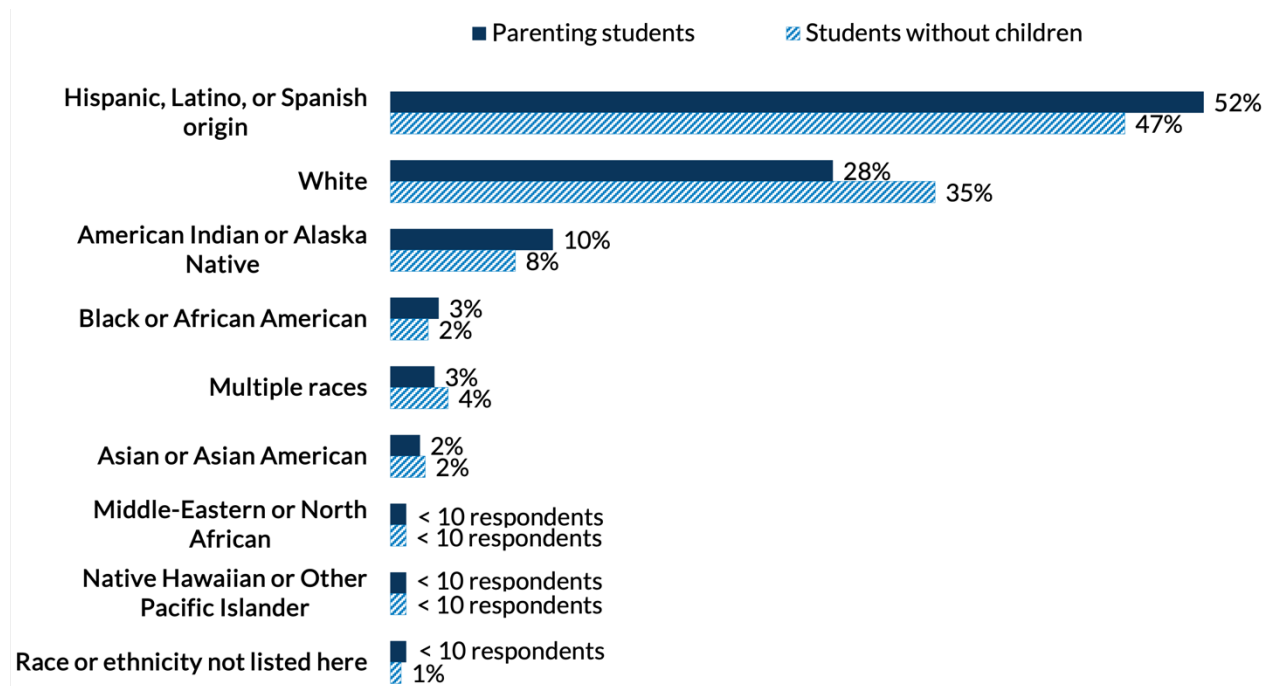
Source: 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey

Note: N = 3,182

Seventy-two percent of parenting student respondents identify as students of color—a rate 7 percentage points higher than for students without children. In particular, most student parents identify as Hispanic (52%; see Figure 4), compared to just under half of respondent students without children. The second-largest group of parenting students are White (28%), followed by American Indian or Alaska Native (10%).

Figure 4. More than half of parenting student respondents identify as Hispanic

Racial/ethnic identity of students, by parenting status



Source: 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey

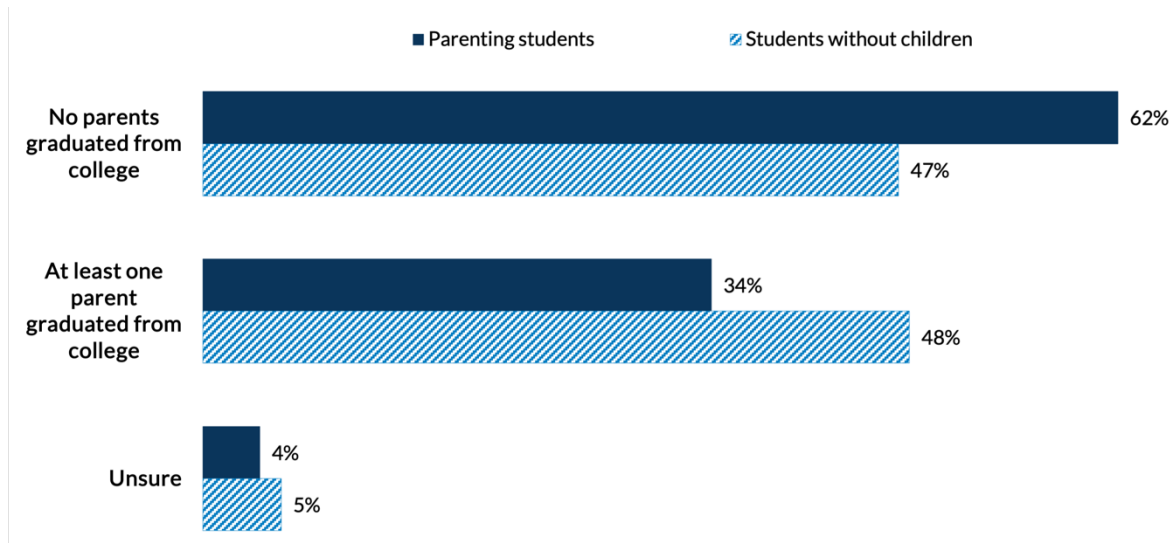
Note: N = 3,118. All groups other than Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin are non-Hispanic.

We also examined students' family experience with college. Here, we see a notable gap between students with and without children: About one third (34%) of student parents have a parent who graduated from college, compared to nearly half (48%) of students without children (see Figure 5). This family experience with higher education, or cultural capital, can be helpful in navigating the complex system of higher education; without it, first-generation college students have a more difficult path to persistence and completion.^{xxv}



Figure 5. Approximately one third of parenting students have a parent with a college degree

First-generation college student status, by parenting status



Source: 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey

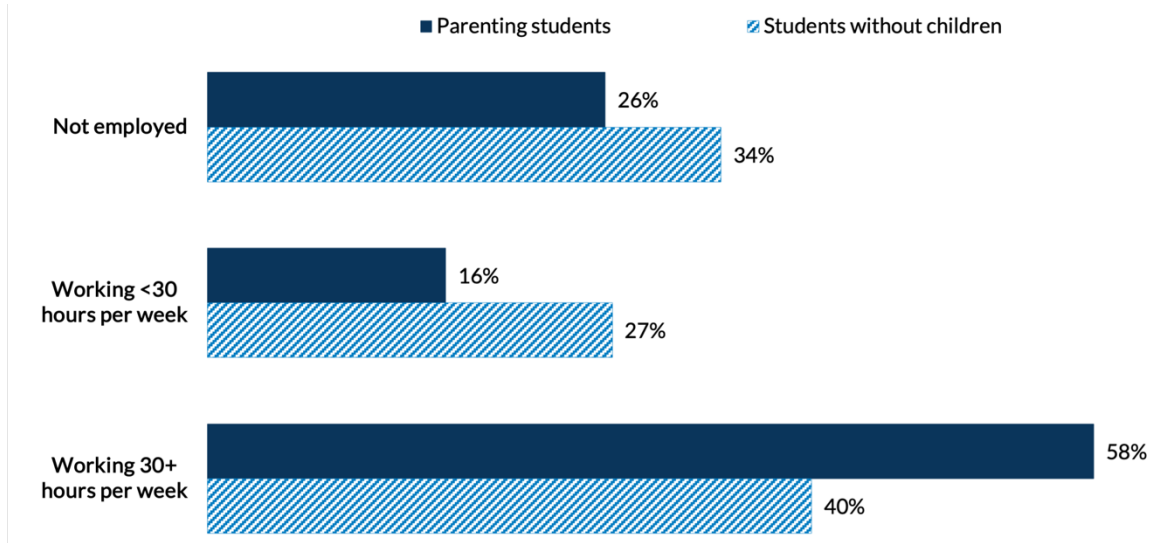
Note: N=3,241

Student parents juggle many responsibilities while in school. Besides managing their schoolwork, they also take care of their children and, often, work. As shown in Figure 6, three quarters (74%) of student parent respondents reported working while in school, with 58 percent working at least 30 hours per week.

74%
of student parent respondents reported working while in school.

Figure 6. Three quarters of parenting student respondents work while in school, with most working 30 hours per week or more

Students' employment status, by parenting status



Source: 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey

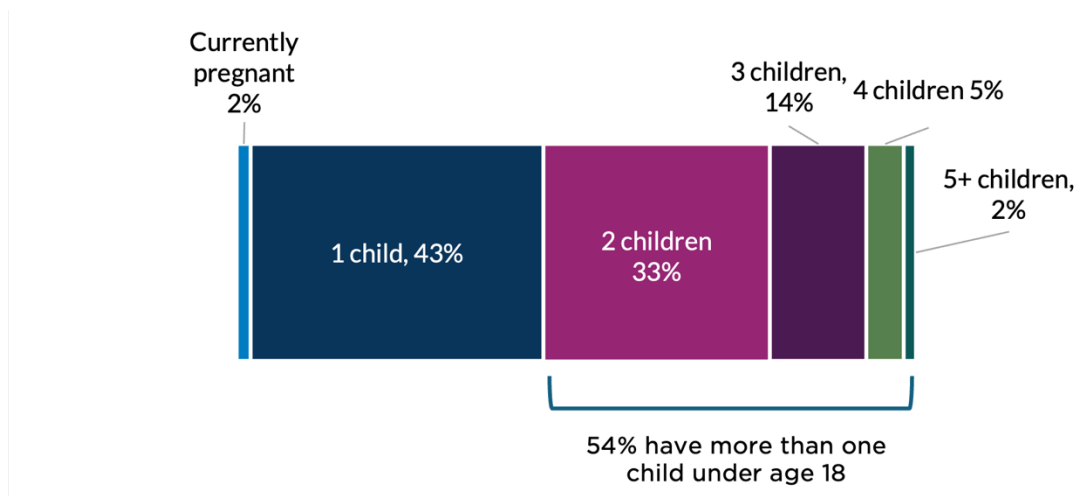
Note: N=3,578

Parenting characteristics

Most parenting students (54%) have more than one child under age 18, including 33 percent who have two children, 14 percent with three children, and 7 percent with four or more children (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. The majority of parenting students have multiple children

Number of children under age 18



Source: 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey

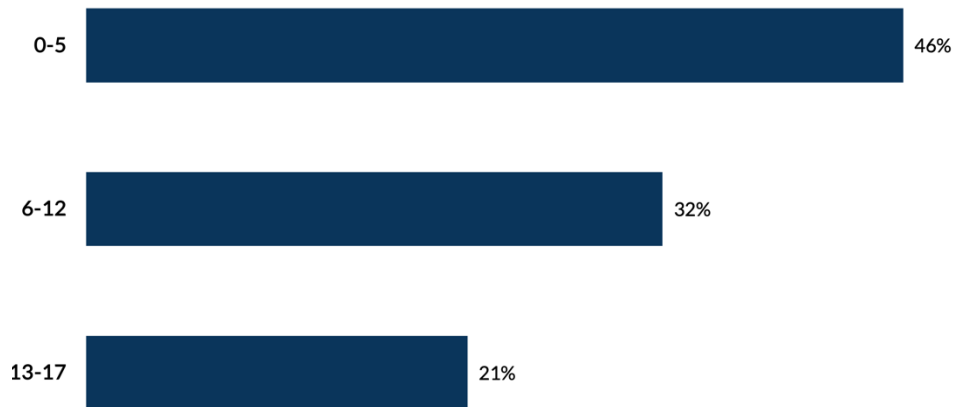
Note: N=1,172. Totals do not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Student parents are caring for children of all ages: Nearly half (46%) of student parents have a child younger than age 6 who may require additional child care (see Figure 8). At the same time, about one third (32%) of student parents have a youngest child ages 6 to 12, and about one fifth (21%) have a youngest child who is a teenager.²

² A number of student parents have children ages 18 or older, as well. Students with children older than age 18 are not the focus of this report, however, and students with children older than age 18 without any younger children are not included in this report as student parents.

Figure 8. Most parenting students are caring for children ages 6 and up

Age of youngest child



Source: 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey
Note: N=1,173

Over 40 percent of student parent respondents are raising at least some of their children on their own. Forty-four percent of mothers are single mothers and 35 percent of fathers are single fathers. Combined, means that 43 percent of student parents are single parents.

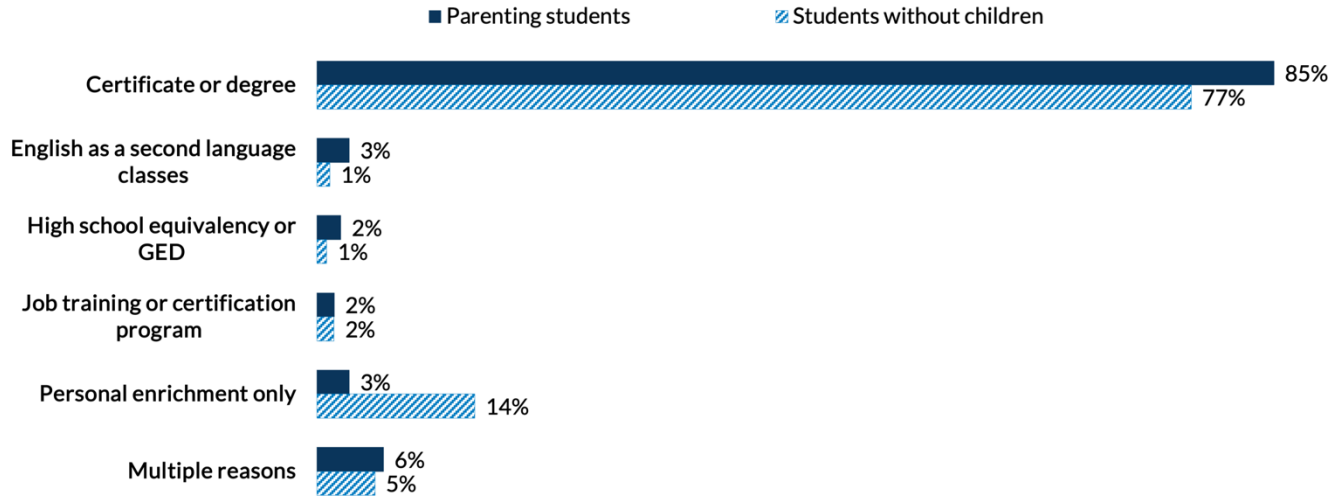
43%
of parenting student survey
respondents identify as a
single parent.

Parenting students in New Mexico are interested in obtaining a certificate or degree.

The vast majority of students who responded to the survey are taking classes toward a certificate or degree, regardless of whether or not they are parents. However, this goal is especially salient for parents, who have limited time to balance their responsibilities (see Figure 9). Among student parents, 85 percent reported taking classes for a certificate or degree, compared to 77 percent of students without children. This highlights the critical need for educational attainment among student parents as they strive for economic mobility and better opportunities for their families.

Figure 9. 85 percent of parenting students are taking classes toward a certificate or degree

Reported reasons for taking classes, by parenting status

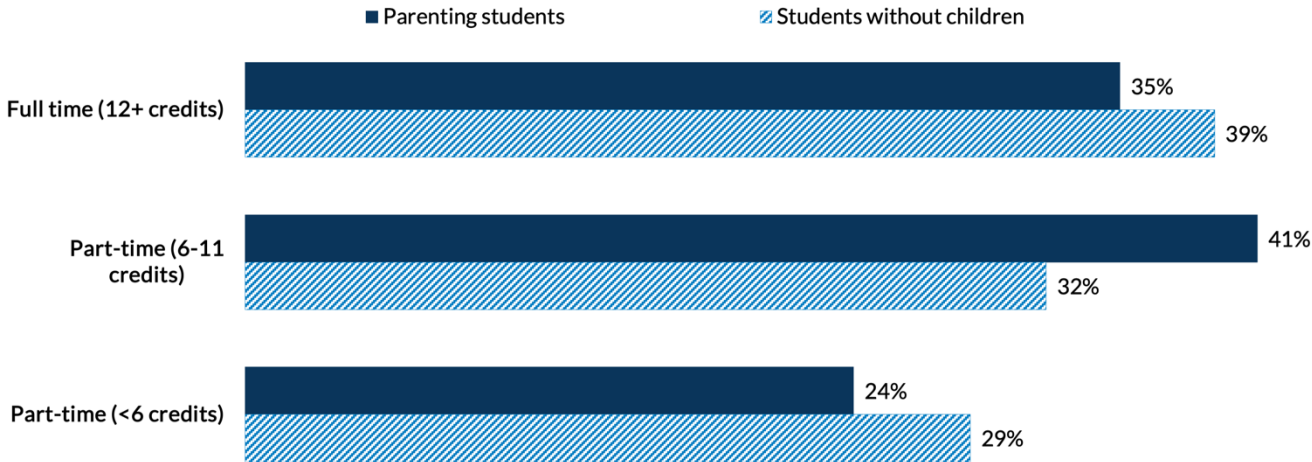


Source: 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey
Note: N=3,565

Because student parents must balance work, family, and school responsibilities, they predominantly enroll in school part-time. About two thirds of parenting students are taking classes part-time, with 41 percent taking 6–11 credits and 24 percent taking fewer than 6 credits (see Figure 10). In comparison, the largest group of students without children (39%) are taking classes full-time.

Figure 10. About two thirds of parenting students attend college part-time

Enrollment status, by parenting status



Source: 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey
Note: N=3,552

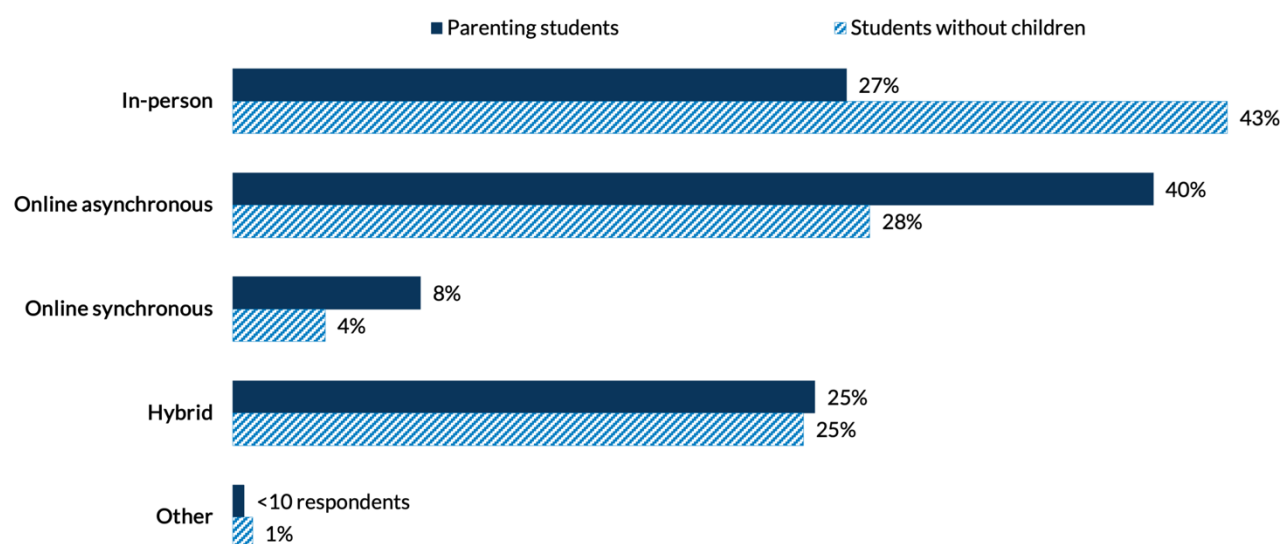
Student parents have a strong preference for flexible online course options, relative to students without children. Seventy-three percent of student parents prefer classes with at least an online component: Online asynchronous courses—which do not have set course times—are particularly popular among student parents (40%), likely because they allow for greater flexibility in balancing their educational, work, and family responsibilities. This preference suggests that student parents prioritize adaptable learning formats to better manage their busy lives.

“What has helped me the most is the different ways I can take my classes. I usually take online courses because I can do my assignments any time of the day I have free time and take care of my daughter as well.”

-Student parent survey respondent

Figure 11. Student parents prefer flexible online course options

Preference for class instruction format, by parenting status



Source: 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey

Note: N=3,311

Many students take a break on their journeys through higher education, especially student parents. Nationally, 52 percent of student parents leave without attaining a degree or certificate.^{xxvi} However, many student parents come back to continue their education: 60 percent of parenting students who responded to the survey are returning students, compared to half of students without children (50%).³

60%

of parenting students who responded to the survey are returning students.

Parenting students face unique challenges in balancing work, family, and education, yet many are determined to return to school. A significant driver for this decision is the desire to increase their earnings potential, a factor cited by 64 percent of parenting student respondents. Improving their financial situation is crucial for these students, as higher earnings can provide better opportunities and stability for their families. Additionally, these students’ motivations are aspirational, reflecting the multifaceted benefits of higher education. According to our survey, parenting students’ top reasons for returning to school are as follows:

³ This does not include students who took a break between high school and higher education.

- 64 percent of students wish to increase their earnings potential.
- 64 percent are motivated by the chance to be an inspiration for their children or other family members.
- 51 percent aim to fulfill their dream of earning a degree.
- 48 percent want to feel better about themselves for having completed a degree.
- 45 percent strive to finish education started a long time ago.

These reasons underscore the importance of higher education not just for economic mobility but also for personal growth and family inspiration.

Parenting students in New Mexico face many challenges while pursuing their educational dreams.

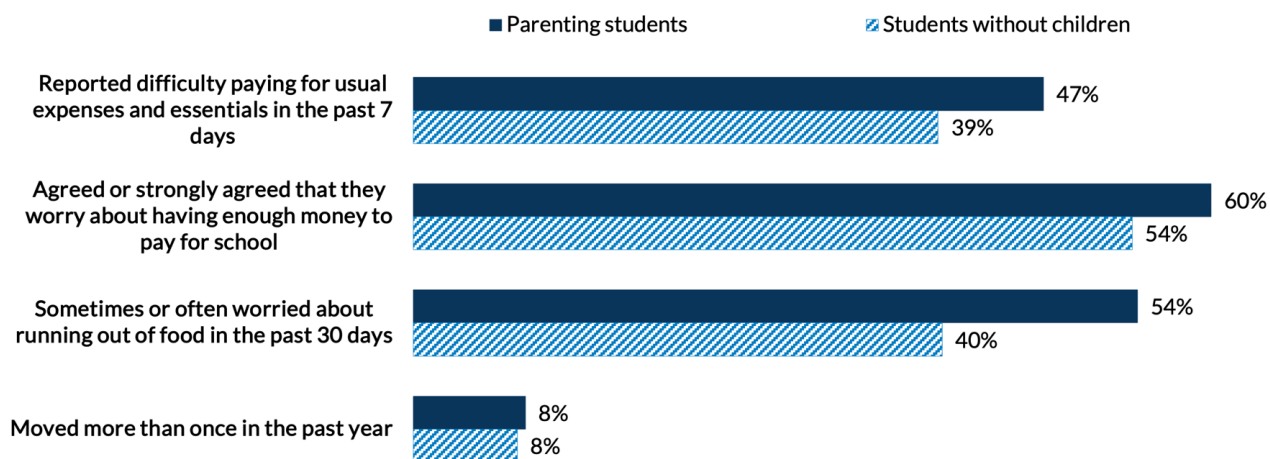
Financial insecurity

A significant number of college students struggle with instability in their finances and basic needs, including food insecurity^{xxvii} and housing insecurity.^{xxviii} These insecurities have repercussions for students' ability to succeed in school^{xxix} and, for student parents, for their family's well-being.^{xxx} Young parents in particular are especially vulnerable to financial insecurity.

47%
of parenting student respondents reported struggling to pay for usual household expenses *in the past 7 days.*

Nearly half of parenting student respondents (47%) reported finding it somewhat or very difficult to pay for usual household expenses and essentials *in the past seven days*, such as food, rent or mortgage, car payments, medical payments, or student loans (see Figure 12). In comparison, 39 percent of students without children reported similar difficulties. Additionally, a majority of student parents (60%) reported worrying about having enough money to pay for school. Many students also worry about basic needs insecurity specific to food and housing: Approximately half of student parents (54%) reported sometimes or often worrying about running out of food in the past 30 days before they got money to buy more. And, about 8 percent of students with children moved more than once in the past year, indicating instability in their housing situation.

Figure 12. More than half of parenting students worry about running out of food or paying for school
Students' financial security and stability, by parenting status

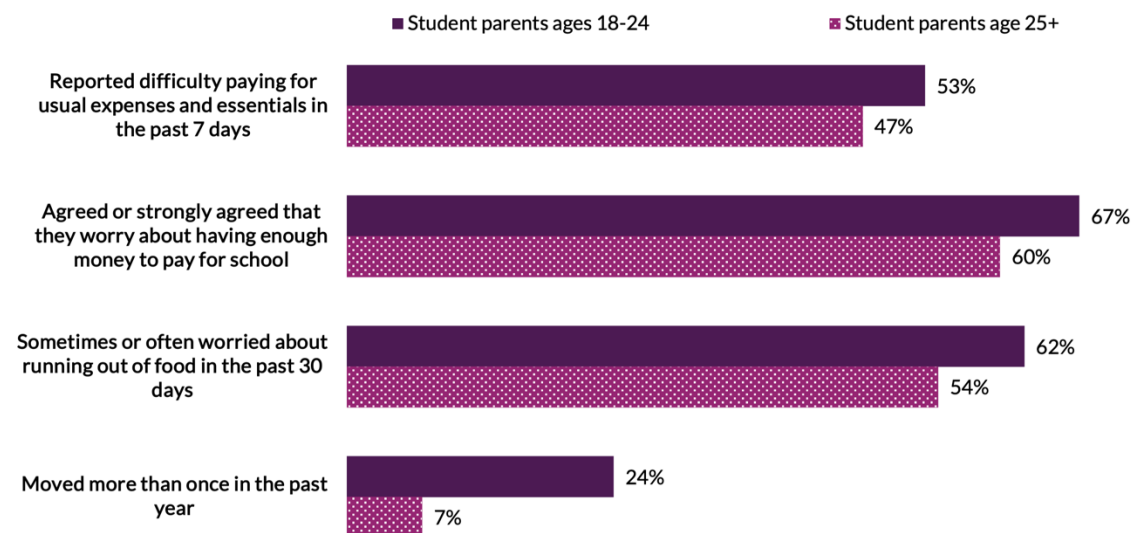


Source: 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey

Note: Ns range from 3,091 on the food security item to 3,373 on frequency of moving

When it comes to basic needs insecurity, younger student parents (ages 18–24) face significant challenges (see Figure 13). Over half (53%) of young student parents reported difficulty paying for usual household expenses and essentials, compared to 47 percent of student parents ages 25 and older. Additionally, 67 percent of young student parents worry about having enough money to pay for school, slightly higher than the corresponding figure of 60 percent among older student parents. Food insecurity is also a major concern, with 62 percent of young student parents sometimes or often worrying about running out of food, compared to 54 percent of their older counterparts. Housing instability is especially pronounced among young student parents, with 24 percent having moved more than once in the past year, indicating instability in their housing situation.

Figure 13. Young parenting students may be particularly vulnerable to financial insecurity
Students' financial security and stability, by age



Source: 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey

Note: Ns range from 1,006 on the food security item to 1,087 on frequency of moving.

Mental health

College students across the country are struggling with mental health, and students experiencing mental health challenges are more likely to drop out of college.^{xxxvi} Increasing rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation and attempts among college students were raising concerns even before the COVID-19 pandemic,^{xxxii-xxxiii} and the pandemic only exacerbated students' challenges.^{xxxiv}

Indeed, many survey respondents also expressed concerns about their mental health. Just under half of students with children reported fair or poor mental or emotional health (see Figure 14). In particular, 45 percent of parenting students reported fair or poor mental or emotional health, a rate similar to students without children (48%). However, student parents' rates of fair or poor mental health are very elevated compared to the general population of parents. According to the nationally representative National Survey of Children's Health (which uses the same measure), 8.1 percent of children's mothers and 4.8 percent of fathers reported fair or poor mental health in 2022.^{xxxv}

Moving to more specific measures, more than half of parenting student respondents (61%) agreed or strongly agreed that they lead a purposeful and meaningful life, compared with about half (52%) of students without children.^{xxxvi} This finding is consistent with previous research showing that older student parents, especially, are more likely to agree that they lead a purposeful and meaningful life, relative to students without children.^{xxxvii}

When it comes to symptoms of anxiety and depression, 44 percent of student parents and students without children reported symptoms that likely meet the criteria for Generalized Anxiety Disorder and 28 percent of students reported symptoms that likely meet the criteria for major depressive disorder.⁴ These rates are again elevated, relative to other parents with similar backgrounds: 33 percent of Latino parents with low incomes have frequent anxiety symptoms, and 26 percent have frequent depressive symptoms.^{xxxviii}

Across all measures, a slightly smaller proportion of student parents reported negative mental health outcomes than students without children, despite the additional stressors in their lives. While we did not test for statistically significant differences between students with and without children, our findings are consistent with recent national analyses.^{xxxix} As an emerging finding in the field, these differences are not yet fully understood. One hypothesis is that because younger students (ages 18–24) tend to have worse mental health than older students,^{xl} the older average age of parents relative to students without children may help explain these differences. In Figure 15, we present mental health findings among student parents by age, where we see small differences for young and older parenting students on two measures, and opposite findings for anxiety and depression.

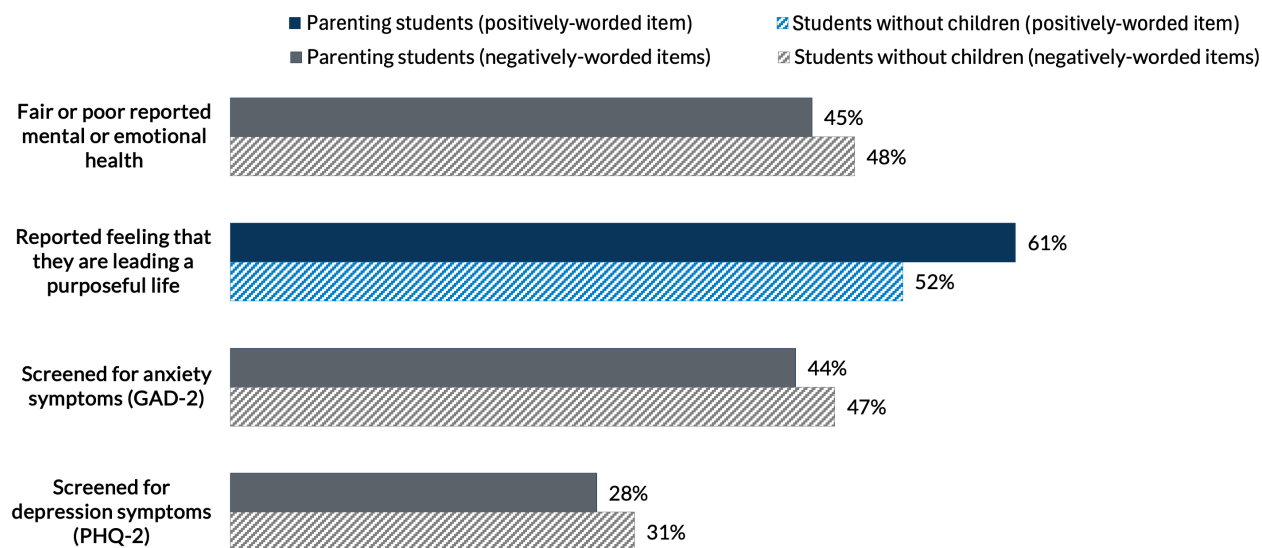


⁴ We used the validated Patient Health Questionnaire-2 (PHQ-2) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder-2 (GAD-2) measures to assess depression and anxiety, respectively. These two-item scales are frequently used in higher education settings, including Trellis Strategies' Student Financial Wellness Survey.

The emerging finding of student parents having more positive mental health than their peers without children warrants further investigation, including considerations of race, gender, age, and social class. Regardless, student parents still have high rates of mental health challenges that warrant attention.

Figure 14. Many college students in New Mexico struggle with their mental health, including parenting students

Students' mental health, by parenting status

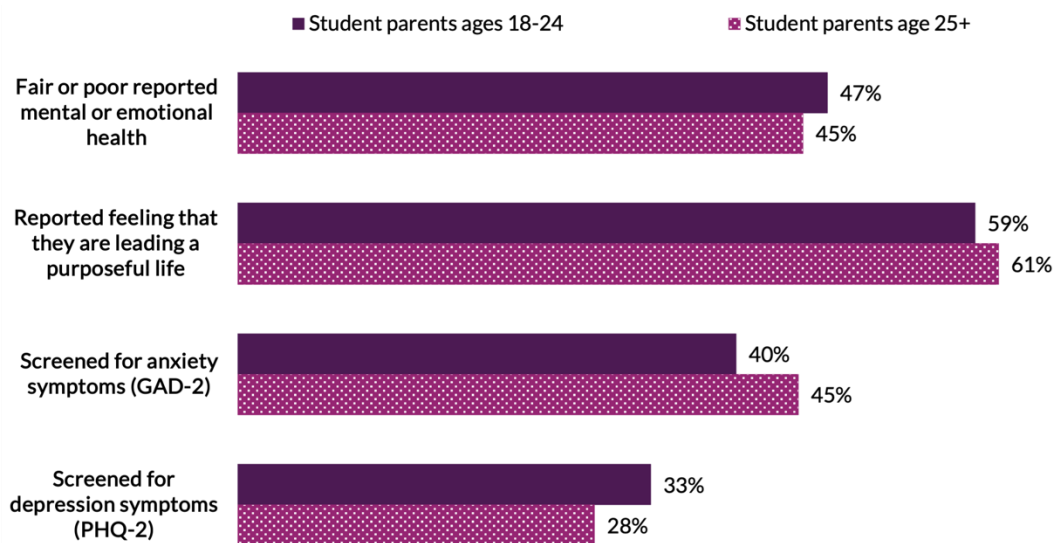


Source: 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey

Note: Ns range from 3,093 on depression screening to 3,332 on the global mental health and purposeful life items.

Figure 15. Both younger and older parenting students are vulnerable to negative mental health

Student parents' mental health, by age



Source: 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey

Note: Ns range from 1,017 on depression screening to 1,077 on the purposeful life item.

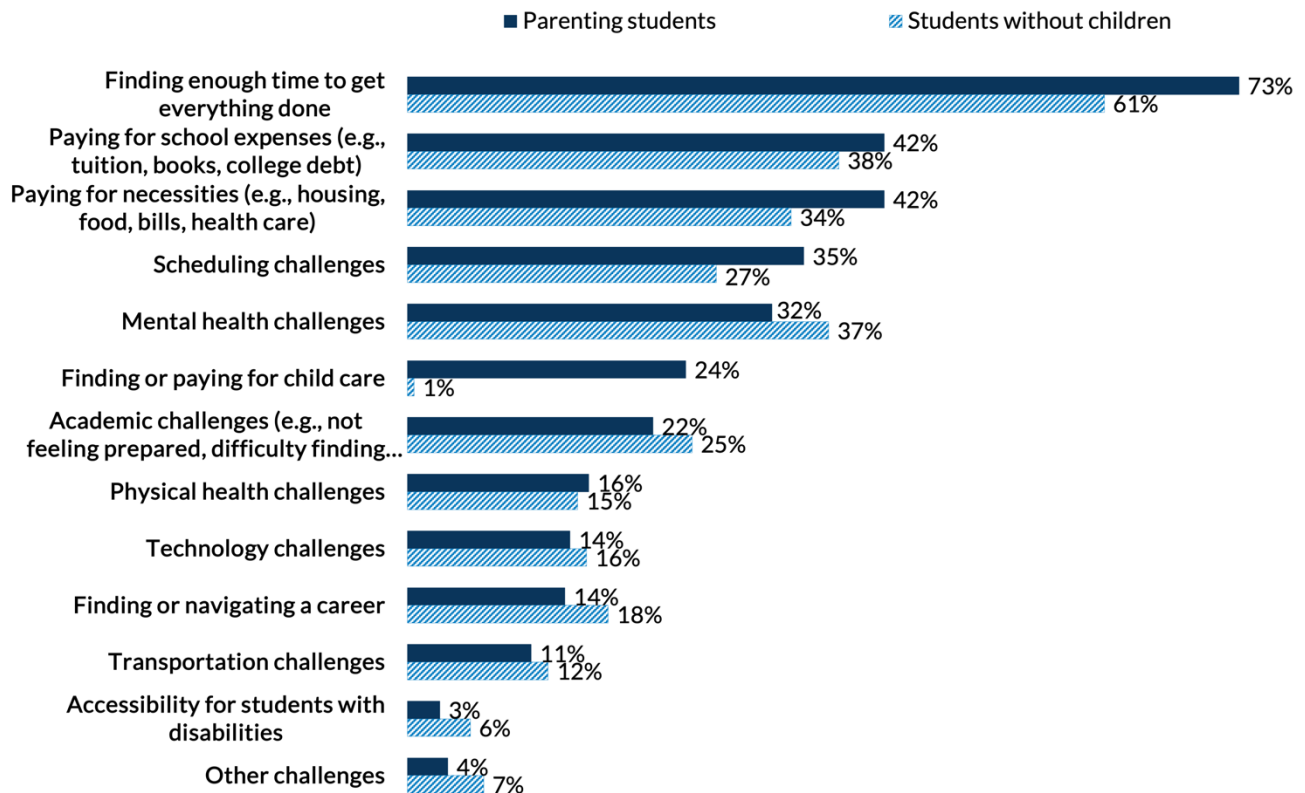
Additional challenges

Students face additional challenges beyond financial insecurity and mental health that can make it hard to reach their academic goals. We asked students to indicate whether any of a number of potential challenges make it difficult for them to reach their academic goals while at their current school (see Figure 16 for the full list of challenges). The most common challenge for both parenting students and students without children is finding enough time to get everything done, with 73 percent of student parents and 61 percent of students without children reporting this issue. Additionally, 35 percent of student parents also cited scheduling challenges as a hurdle. Beyond basic needs indicators, 24 percent of student parents reported that finding or paying for child care was a challenge. These difficulties are more common among student parents than academic struggles, highlighting the unique obstacles they face.



Figure 16. Nearly three quarters of student parents find it challenging to find enough time to get everything done

Challenges that make it hard for students to reach their academic goals, by parenting status



Source: 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey

Note: N=3,461

Parenting students in New Mexico have a range of child care needs and preferences that are not being met.

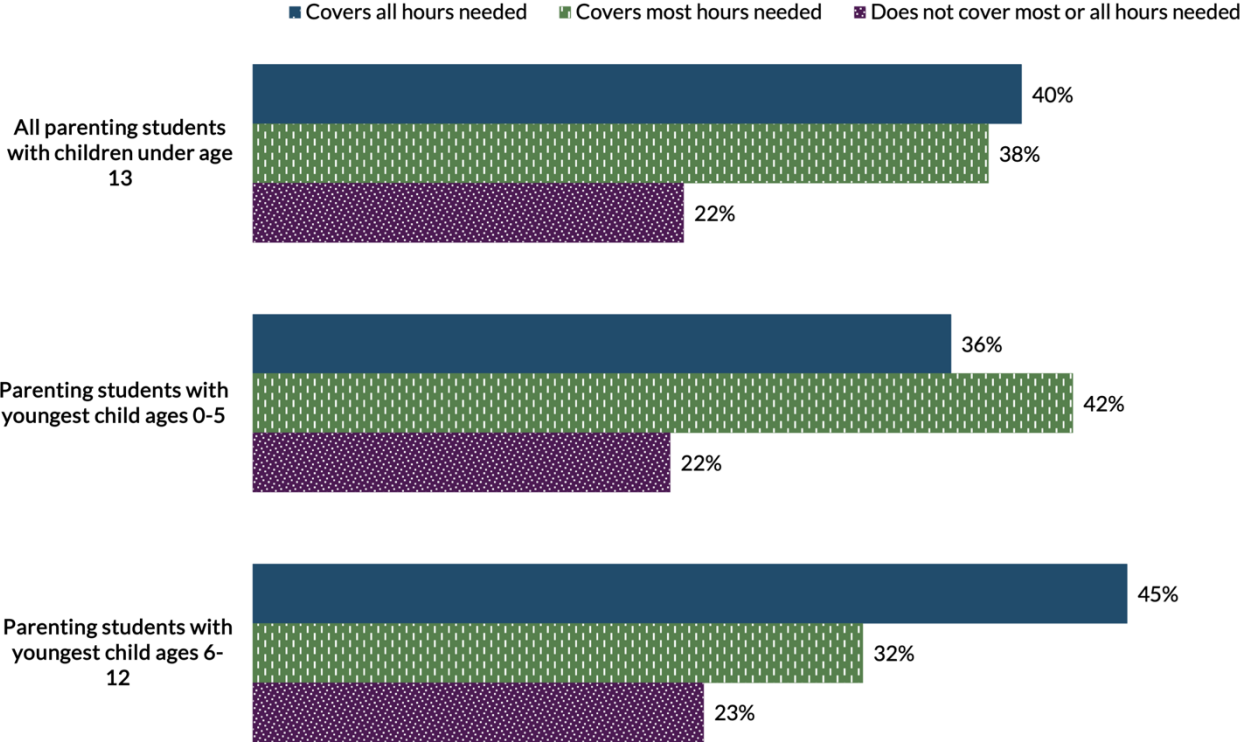
Reliable access to high-quality, affordable child care can help parenting students stay enrolled in college.^{xlii} But challenges finding and paying for high-quality child care are a major barrier to parenting students' success in higher education.^{xliii} This may be especially true for single mothers^{xliiii} and for parents with young children, given that the youngest children are typically not in school.^{xliiv-xliv}

We asked parenting students of children under age 13 about their current child care coverage and how well their child care providers' schedules cover the hours of care they need. Overall, just 40 percent of student parents with children under age 13 indicated that their current child care arrangements cover all hours for which they need care. The pattern is worse for students with younger children.

While 36 percent of student parents with children from birth to age 5 say that all hours they need for child care are covered, 1 out of every 5 students in this category report that their child care does not cover most or all hours needed (Figure 17). In contrast, 45 percent of student parents whose youngest children are ages 6 to 12 have all their child care hours covered—likely because older children can attend school, reducing the need for additional child care. This highlights the more substantial child care challenges faced by parents of younger children.

Figure 17. Just 40 percent of parenting students with children under age 13 say their current child care arrangements cover all hours they need

Current child care coverage of parenting students, overall and by age of youngest child



Source: 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey
 Note: N=876

When looking at current child care arrangements, the largest groups of parenting students said they have no child care arrangements (33%) or they rely on an unpaid relative or friend for child care (33%; see Figure 18).

For child care outside home settings, 23 percent of parenting students depend on a childcare center or preschool, and about 14 percent depend on a public school pre-K or a K-12 after-school program. Additionally, only 3 percent of parenting student respondents say they currently use on-campus childcare services.

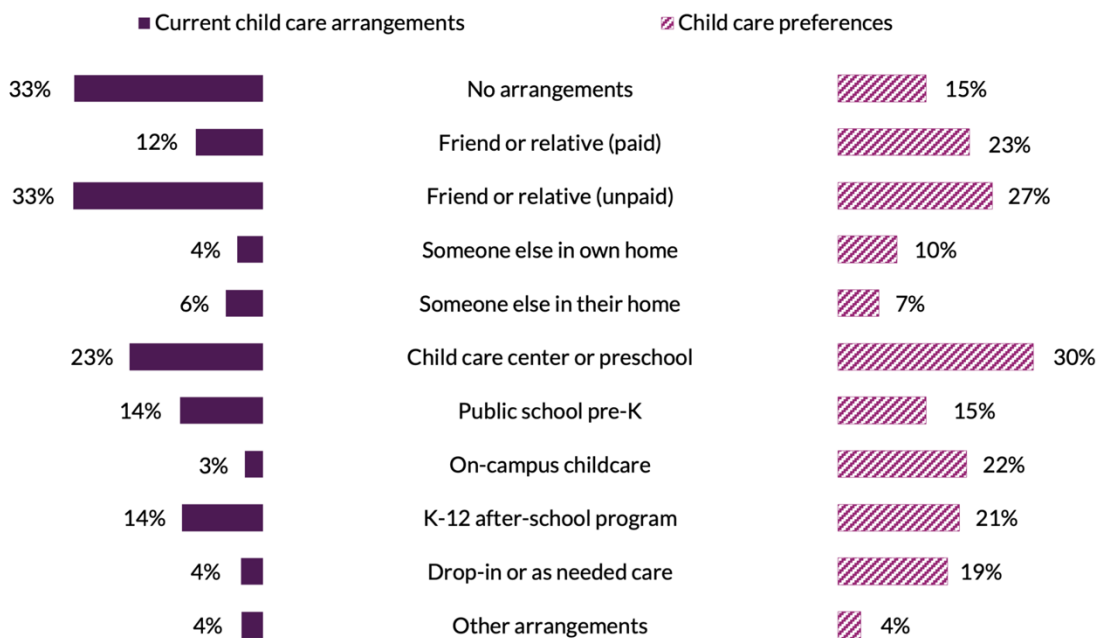
In contrast, when considering student parents' preferences for child care, 30 percent of parenting students would prefer to use a child care center or preschool, 27 percent want to rely on unpaid family or friend care, and 23 percent would prefer to pay a friend or relative.

Notably, 22 percent of parenting students indicated a preference for on-campus child care—much higher than the 3 percent currently using such services. This disparity is particularly striking, as a 2018 study found that parenting students who use on-campus child care were three times more likely to graduate on time than those who did not access campus child care.^{xvi} Challenges to accessing on-campus child care include small capacities and long wait lists, limited ages served, and hours that do not align with student parents' schedules.

22%
of parenting student respondents reported a preference for on-campus child care, compared to 3 percent who are currently able to use it.

Other preferences include public school pre-K (15%), K-12 after-school programs (21%), and drop-in or as-needed care (19%).

Figure 18. One third of parenting student respondents have no current child care arrangements
Current and preferred child care arrangements of parenting students with children under age 13



Source: 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey

Note: N=898 for current child care arrangements; 892 for child care preferences. This question was limited to parenting students with children under age 13. Responses total to more than 100% because respondents could select more than one child care arrangement for the child(ren).

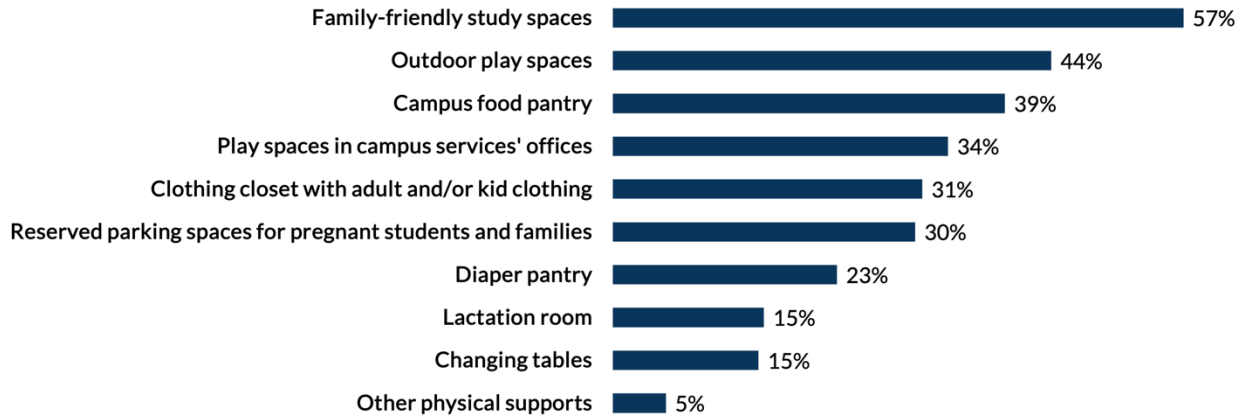
Parenting students in New Mexico desire family-friendly campus supports.

Colleges and universities can help mitigate challenges and support parenting students’ success by providing student supports and services that are tailored to these students’ specific needs.^{xlvii} We asked parenting students whether they would access various physical supports and parenting services if they were offered at their schools. The most popular support cited was family-friendly study spaces, which 57 percent of respondents indicate they would use (see Figure 19). Additionally, 44 percent of parents expressed interest in outdoor play spaces and 34 percent expressed interest in play spaces within campus services’ offices. These preferences highlight that institutions should consider creating supportive environments that address the practical and emotional needs of parenting students. Creating a campus environment with family-friendly study spaces can foster a sense of belonging and community among student parents

When asked what their college could do to support them more as a student parent, students elaborated on the services they need:

- “Hold on-campus family events so that parents can socialize with one another; have family safe enrichment events for the kids.”
- “Have resources available at all times, not just a specific day.”
- On-campus child care would be amazing for me. I would prefer to do in-person classes, as I feel I gain more from them, and having drop-in on-campus child care would allow me to attend in-person classes.”

Figure 19. Parenting students say they would use family-friendly study and play spaces at their campuses
Physical supports desired by parenting students at their campuses



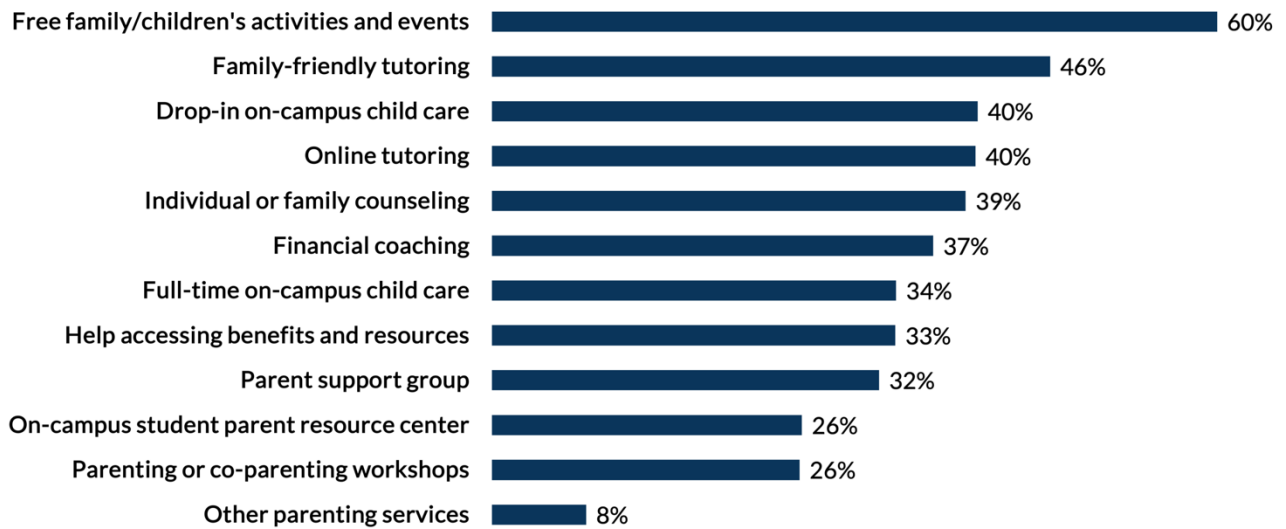
Source: 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey
Note: N=1,117

Among parenting students, the most desired services include free family and children’s activities and events—a service desired by the majority (60%) of respondents (see Figure 20). Additionally, 46 percent of parents expressed interest in family-friendly tutoring and 40 percent in online tutoring. Similar numbers desired drop-in on-campus child care for a few hours at a time (40%), individual and family counseling (39%), and financial coaching (37%). Thirty-four percent of parents said they would use full-time on-campus child care. Further, 33 percent of respondents said they would want help accessing public benefits and community resources, and about 32 percent would participate in a parent support group. These preferences underscore

the importance of diverse and flexible support services that enhance parenting students' sense of belonging, crucial for their retention and success. Free family activities and flexible tutoring options foster community and inclusion, while on-campus child care and other services can alleviate stressors, allowing parents to focus on their studies. Implementing these supports promotes diversity, equity, and inclusion, benefiting both parenting students and the broader campus community.

Figure 20. Parenting students want family-friendly activities, tutoring, and child care

Parenting services desired by parenting students at their campuses



Source: 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey

Note: N=1,113

Discussion of Findings

Our survey of parenting students revealed several critical insights into their needs and challenges, highlighting opportunities for higher education institutions to better support this significant student population.

Student parents struggle to meet demands on their time as they care for multiple children and maintain intensive work schedules in addition to their academic responsibilities.

Parenting students often face significant hurdles in managing academic responsibilities alongside family and work commitments. As a result, three in four (73%) parenting students reported that finding enough time to get everything done is their biggest challenge in achieving their academic goals.

For instance, most parenting students work at least 30 hours a week (58%), compared to 40 percent of students without children. Additionally, 54 percent of student parents have more than one child under age 18. These factors contribute to higher part-time enrollment among parenting students, where the largest group takes 6–11 credit hours, compared to students without children, of which the largest group is enrolled full-time (12+ credits). Given that most parenting students (85 %) enroll at a college or university to obtain a certificate or degree, there is a mismatch between goals and the realities of realizing them.

To manage conflicting responsibilities, student parents show a strong preference for flexible courses with at least some online component (40% prefer online asynchronous, 25% prefer hybrid, and 8% prefer online synchronous). In contrast, only 27 percent of student parents prefer in-person classes, underscoring the need for flexible learning formats to accommodate their busy lives.



Student parents' child care needs are not currently met, complicating their ability to succeed in school.

Parenting students face significant challenges in securing adequate child care, which directly impacts their ability to succeed academically. Our survey revealed that 33 percent of parenting students currently have no formal child care arrangements, a major barrier for many parenting students.

Thirty percent of parenting students in our survey would prefer to send their child(ren) to child care centers or preschools, while 27 percent prefer to rely on unpaid family or friends. Additionally, 22 percent indicated they would prefer on-campus child care and 19 percent prefer drop-in child care options, highlighting the need for flexible child care solutions that do not require all-day care but can accommodate short-term needs.



The gap between current arrangements and preferred solutions underscores a critical area for improvement. Students' diverse preferences suggest the importance of providing a range of child care options that cater to student parents' variable needs. By providing on-campus child care and other flexible child care options, institutions can help alleviate one of the major barriers that parenting students face, allowing them to focus more on their studies and less on logistical challenges.

Many student parents would benefit from essential support services, including supports meeting basic needs and mental health resources.

While all college students face nonacademic barriers, parenting students face significant basic needs insecurities, which impacts their academic success and family well-being. Nearly half of parenting students (47%) reported difficulties paying for daily expenses in the last seven days, compared to 39 percent of students without children. Additionally, 60 percent of parenting students worry about having enough money to pay for school and 54 percent are concerned about running out of food—14 percentage points higher than the 40 percent of students without children who share this concern. Basic needs insecurities are even higher among young student parents. These insecurities highlight the critical need for support services to mitigate these challenges and allow parenting students to focus on their studies.



A significant proportion of parenting students are also first-generation college students, which adds another layer of complexity to their educational journey. Approximately 62 percent of parenting students are first-generation college students, compared to 47 percent of students without children. First-generation students often lack the cultural capital and family experience with higher education that can be crucial for navigating academic and administrative challenges. Comprehensive support services can help address both

their academic and nonacademic needs, helping them overcome barriers and succeed in their educational pursuits.

Many parenting students are struggling with their mental health: 45 percent of reported fair or poor mental or emotional health, a similar proportion (44%) reported high levels of anxiety symptoms, and about 28 percent reported high levels of symptoms of depression. These findings underscore the importance of accessible mental health services to help parenting students manage stress and maintain their academic performance.

Student parents want their colleges to see and support them as students and parents.

Among the most desired support services, 60 percent of parenting students expressed interest in free family and children's activities and events, which can foster a sense of community and belonging on campus. Additionally, 57 percent expressed interest in family-friendly study spaces, 46 percent in family-friendly tutoring, 44 percent in outdoor play spaces, 40 percent in drop-in on-campus child care, and 40 percent in online tutoring. These preferences highlight the need for academic supports that accommodate parenting students' busy schedules and parenting responsibilities. This aligns with the earlier finding that many parenting students prefer online courses and drop-in child care for the flexibility these services provide in managing their complex lives. By offering such flexible services, institutions can help parenting students balance their multiple roles more effectively and enhance their overall academic experience.



Despite everything on their plates, student parents remain motivated in college by economic and personal goals.

Parenting students' motivations to pursue higher education are both practical and aspirational. The top reasons cited for student parents to return to college were to increase their earnings potential and serve as an inspiration for their children—both endorsed by 54 percent of respondents. At the same time, 85 percent of parenting students aim to obtain a degree or certificate. These motivations underscore the dual potential of higher education for economic mobility and personal fulfillment for parenting students. Institutions that effectively support these students can expect not only to improve individual outcomes but also to contribute positively to the broader social and economic fabric of the community. Ultimately, supporting parenting students' educational pursuits not only benefits the students and their families but also strengthens the community and economy by creating a more educated and skilled workforce.



Policy and Practice Recommendations

Student parents have immense potential to fulfill their academic dreams. However, as they navigate a system largely designed to serve students without significant family or work responsibilities, they may need additional support to realize this potential. This study has specifically pointed to four overarching areas of opportunity for New Mexico’s higher education administrators and policymakers to consider in order to help their parenting students graduate and improve their state’s long-term fiscal picture. In addition, since nearly one in five undergraduates across the United States is a parent, these recommendations could benefit other states as well.

1. Create flexible learning environments.

As parenting students strive to complete degrees and certificates while balancing academics with work and family responsibilities, institutions can accommodate their complex lives by offering flexible learning environments. Flexible learning options include shortened academic terms, online learning, and flexible classroom policies.

Shortened academic terms. Gaining momentum in the first year of college is a crucial predictor of students’ success in college. For example, students who complete 30 credits in their first year are more likely to graduate.^{xlviii} Encouraging parenting students to take a more full course load (and providing appropriate support services for them to do so) in their first year can help set them on a path to timely completion of their degree or certificate. Accelerated course formats, such as eight-week terms instead of traditional 16-week terms, represent one way to allow students to focus on fewer courses at a time, thereby making it easier to manage their schedules and possibly move from part-time to full-time status. These courses have been linked to similar or improved learning outcomes for students.^{xlix,li}



Online learning options. Many parenting students prefer online courses for their flexibility. However, research has mixed findings on the effectiveness of online courses compared with face-to-face instruction,^{lii} so it is crucial to ensure that online courses are of high quality and that students have the resources they need to succeed in an online environment. Institutions can achieve this by training faculty to incorporate interactive and collaborative activities; regular feedback; and clear, well-structured content that promotes student engagement.^{liii}

Flexible classroom policies. Higher education institutions can also build flexibility into classroom policies, including attendance policies and deadlines. Students reported that flexible deadlines help them manage their workloads and reduce stress.^{liv} Flexible deadlines allow all students—but especially student parents—to handle unexpected life events without compromising their academic progress, thereby promoting equity and supporting those who might not otherwise ask for extensions due to a lack of confidence or understanding of institutional policies.

2. Offer comprehensive support services.

Colleges and universities can help student parents meet their basic needs—including financial security and mental health—so they can focus on their academic pursuits. This could be done by enhancing support services to effectively address the diverse needs of parenting students and ensuring students are aware of existing services. As flexible learning environments are needed, so too are flexible ways to access supportive services on and off campus.

Basic needs support. As many parenting students struggle with basic needs insecurity, colleges and universities can provide support accessing public benefits and other existing community resources, as well as emergency grants to allow students to focus on their education.

First-generation student support. Given that 62 percent of parenting students are first-generation college students, targeted support programs are essential. Mentoring, academic advising, and workshops on navigating college life can help first-generation parenting students overcome barriers posed by their lack of familial experience with complex systems of higher education.^{lv}

Counseling and mental health services. Many student parents—and many college students generally—struggle with their mental health, so institutions must continue to invest in affordable, accessible, supportive services for students. Mental health services for parents can include individual, group, and family counseling services that recognize the complexity of their lives.

Career and financial planning. With 64 percent of parenting students motivated to pursue higher education by the desire to increase their earnings potential, career development programs, job placement services, and financial planning workshops geared toward families can help them achieve their long-term goals. These types of services are not currently available to all students: As of 2020, 69 percent of colleges offered employment services and 81 percent offered job placement services.^{lvi}



3. Create family-friendly campuses with child care services.

Because student parents are parents first and students second, institutions can work toward creating family-friendly campus climates and invest in programs that celebrate student parents' identities as parents.

Family-friendly initiatives. Many student parents feel disconnected from their college campuses.^{lvii} To enhance their sense of community and belonging, colleges and universities can work to create family-friendly campus environments. This can include providing family-friendly study spaces, organizing family and children's activities, and offering family-friendly tutoring services—all of which are among the most popular services that students responding to this survey indicated they would use. These initiatives can foster a supportive campus culture that benefits both students and their families.

Child care services. Investing in on-campus child care facilities and/or developing partnerships with local child care centers to offer affordable child care options can alleviate major barriers to academic success. As of 2020, just 15 percent of college campuses offered on-campus child care for students' children.^{lviii} Meanwhile, 33 percent of parenting students responding to the 2024 New Mexico College Student

Experience reported lacking child care and 22 percent expressed a preference for on-campus child care—indicating that on-campus facilities could serve a large need. Additionally, offering on-campus, drop-in child care services—preferred by 19 percent of respondents—can provide the short-term care needed for students to attend classes or study on campus.

Student parent peer mentoring programs. Peer mentoring programs can foster a sense of belonging among college students and are linked to positive academic outcomes, including retention.^{lix, lx} Because many student parents feel disconnected from their college campuses,^{lxi} peer mentoring programs are particularly salient for this group of students.

4. Enhance data collection.

Colleges and universities are better positioned to support students when they are equipped with data that identify students as parents. As states pass legislation requiring data collection and colleges proactively begin collecting these data,^{lxii} best practices on collecting data are beginning to emerge. These data collection efforts can help colleges identify student parents, share services with them, and track the progress and impact of various initiatives aimed at supporting them. With the ability to track students' academic outcomes, financial stability, and overall well-being, institutions can make informed decisions to enhance support strategies and ensure the success of parenting students

Conclusion

It is important to recognize that the policy and practice recommendations outlined in this report—such as creating flexible learning environments, offering comprehensive and holistic support services, addressing the mental health needs of students, and so on—are not only relevant for parenting students, but also for other significant student populations, including first-generation students, working adults, and “traditional” students. Implementing these strategies provides multiple entry points for supporting student parents while also benefiting a diverse range of other students on campus. This holistic approach not only benefits the students and their families but also strengthens the broader social and economic fabric by fostering a more educated and skilled workforce. Ultimately, these efforts contribute to the creation of vibrant, thriving communities, driven by the success and mobility of their members.

Suggested Citation

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Methodology Appendix

Survey design

The 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey was designed for all students ages 18 and older at participating institutions. Including both pregnant and parenting students and students without children in the sample enabled us to compare the experiences of student parents and students without children.

To design the survey, Santa Fe Community College worked with Child Trends, a national nonprofit, nonpartisan research group. The design process started by building on the work already done on student parents to compile a list of existing relevant survey items, including items from the following surveys:

- Family Friendly Campus Toolkit's Student Survey
- The Hope Center's #RealCollege Survey (2020 and 2021)
- Santa Fe Community College's Student Parent Survey
- Trellis Company's Student Financial Wellness Survey (Fall 2022)
- The Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-2)
- The Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-2)
- National Survey of Children's Health
- Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey
- Considerations for Postsecondary Data on Student Parenting Status from the Urban Institute
- ECLS-B

Drawing on existing survey items and creating new questions as necessary, we compiled an initial draft of the survey. We then revised the survey based on input from key external stakeholders and current student parents. Input from student parents was gathered through both informal conversations with advisors to Santa Fe Community College's student parent programs and via formal cognitive interviews.

While revising the survey, we strived to balance several key aspects. We included positively worded items to counter more typical negatively worded questions, considered the length of the survey to minimize burden on student respondents, and balanced the use of existing items with new tailored items to focus on student parents' experiences.

The final survey covers the following topical areas: complexities of attending college, parenting, challenges faced while pursuing higher education, opportunities for support, and student and family demographics. The full survey instrument is currently being revised based on the results presented below and is available from the authors upon request.

Survey administration

This research was submitted to the Santa Fe Community College Institutional Review Board (IRB), which determined it to be exempt from IRB review.

The 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey was administered using Survey Monkey during the Spring 2024 semester, from approximately February 6 to April 4, 2024. Each participating institution

distributed the survey to their students, based on their existing communication channels (including email and/or text blasts to students). When students clicked on the link, they were provided information on the study and were asked to consent to participation. Students could choose to consent and complete the survey in either English or Spanish.

At the end of the survey, participants were invited to enter their contact information for a drawing for \$40 Tango digital gift cards. In total, 375 gift cards were administered, equitably distributed across participating colleges, based on the number of survey responses.

Across institutions, 10 percent of students responded to the survey. Response rates varied widely by college (see Table 1), which may reflect the level and type of promotion that each college was able to complete.

Table 1. Number of responses and response rates by institution

Institution	Number of responses	Response rate (out of total student body)
Central New Mexico Community College (CNM)	2,165	11%
Clovis Community College (CCC)	158	7%
Luna Community College (LCC)	141	18%
New Mexico Junior College (NMJC)	75	3%
Northern New Mexico College (NNMC)	73	6%
San Juan College (SJC)	210	4%
Santa Fe Community College (SFCC)	832	25%
Southeast New Mexico College (SEMC)	38	2%
Western New Mexico University (WNMU)	119	5%

Note: Response rates were calculated by dividing the number of responses by the total number of undergraduate students according to their 2022 fall enrollment in the National Center for Education Statistics' College Navigator. <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>

Data analysis

Data collected from the surveys were analyzed by a team of researchers at Child Trends. All results presented use data across the nine participating institutions. Findings are unweighted and descriptive in nature. We do not present any information based on less than 10 students to protect respondents' confidentiality.

In addition to this report, survey results were analyzed separately by institution and shared with each college in personalized reports. Data have also been de-identified and shared back with each institution so they can conduct additional analyses.

Study limitations

While all students at participating institutions were invited to participate in the New Mexico Student Experience Survey, the 10 percent of students who chose to respond are likely not representative of all students. Further, the survey's ability to reach students varied dramatically across institutions, likely based on the resources available to push the survey out to students. With that in mind, the survey responses largely reflect the largest colleges that participated in the survey: Central New Mexico College and Santa Fe Community College.

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