



# A Portrait of Student Parents in the California Community Colleges

## A New Analysis of Financial Aid Seekers with Dependent Children

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**THE PATH TO AND THROUGH COLLEGE** is challenging for many, but the challenges are especially acute for students who seek a credential or degree while also raising children. Existing research documents the challenge of juggling academic demands and parenting. Little is known, however, about the number, characteristics and experiences of college students with dependent children. This information gap is partly a function of the difficulty in identifying parents within the overall student population. Drawing on rich data from California, which boasts the most extensive higher education system in the nation, we begin filling that gap.

This work is especially timely given the challenges posed by the current pandemic. The disruption of higher learning due to COVID-19 has brought important new attention to the needs of student parents, whose challenges are compounded as school and childcare interruptions place significant new demands on their time and attention.

As student parents and the colleges that serve them approach the one-year mark in a crisis for which none could have prepared, this brief offers a portrait of an important student population whose goals matter not just for themselves, but for their children. By matching data from the California Community Colleges to information from applications for financial aid and other assistance, we build a unique data set that allows us to expand an emerging body of knowledge. [See Appendix for details on data, methods and limitations]. We find that more than 13% of students who seek financial aid in California are parents. While we identify student parents across all higher education segments, we focus here primarily on student parents enrolled in the California Community Colleges (CCCs). As the largest system of higher education in the country, the California Community Colleges likely serve the largest student parent population as well.

### TOPLINES

- > Among the nearly 1.5 million California college and university students who applied for financial aid in 2018–19, 13.4% were parents.
- > The great majority (72%) intended to enroll in a California community college, rather than a public four-year or private university.
- > Nearly 1 in 10 students in the CCCs is a parent who applied for financial aid.
- > While in community college, student parents' educational experiences differ from their on-parenting peers. On average, student parents:
  - > Have greater financial need than non-parenting students.
  - > Attempt and accumulate fewer credits per term.
  - > Have slightly higher GPAs than non-parents in their first year.
  - > Are less likely to enroll full-time, persist from year to year, and earn a degree or certificate.

“I want to finish a degree I started years ago to show myself and children it’s never too late and always follow through no matter what or how long.”

– STUDENT PARENT\*

## Existing Research on Student Parents: Needs and Numbers

The challenge of balancing the academic demands of college and parenting responsibilities is vividly documented.<sup>1</sup> A national survey of 23,000 student parents revealed that childcare demands impacted both time and financial well-being, with student parents reporting they spent an average of 40 hours a week caring for children in addition to almost 40 hours of college-related activities.<sup>2</sup> Subjects in a small qualitative study of community college student parents described the struggles of balancing work, school and parenting, with those obligations leaving little additional time for social activities, campus events or the opportunity to seek academic support.<sup>3</sup> In its recent Student Expenses and Resources Survey, the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) found that students with dependents faced expenses almost double those of their peers with no dependents. Beyond financial hardship, student parents reported high-levels of depression, anxiety and stress.<sup>4</sup>

Prior research also suggests that family responsibilities contribute to low college persistence and completion, especially for historically underrepresented minority students.<sup>5</sup> A recent report estimated that only 37% of all parenting students complete a degree or certificate within six years, compared to 60% of college students who are not parents.<sup>6</sup> A study of student parents attending The City University of New York found that the amount and quality of time available to study directly impacted credit accumulation and persistence in college; students with young children experienced the greatest shortage of time due to caring for children.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these challenges, the number of college students who are parents of dependent children is rapidly increasing. Nationally, 4.8 million individuals were raising children while enrolled in college in 2012, an increase of 30% from 3.7 million in 2004. Public two-year colleges across the nation served about 45% of all student parents, or 2.1 million students, in 2012. Researchers estimate that in western states (Alaska, California, Hawaii, Nevada, Oregon and Washington) 22% of the undergraduate population are student parents. In California, the full number of student parents is largely unknown.<sup>8</sup>

## Prior Research on Student Parents in California Community Colleges

Researchers from The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) recently explored the enrollment and course-taking patterns of 43,000 student parents participating in CalWORKS (a cash assistance program under the national Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program) between 2012–13 and 2016–17, the type and scope of services offered to these CalWORKS participants, and the transfer and degree attainment outcomes of these students.<sup>9</sup> They reported that although transfer, credential and degree attainment rates were lower for student parents than non-parents in similar programs, CalWORKS student parents fared better academically during the years they were receiving services compared to the years prior to and after their participation in CalWORKS. Beyond this report, experiences of college students with dependent children in California are not well documented. Our analysis extends the PPIC report by including CalWORKS parents as well as other parents.

## Findings

### Where California Student Parents Enroll

The first part of our analysis identifies student parents’ intentions about where to enroll in college, as indicated on their financial aid applications. Among the 1.5 million financial aid applications processed by CSAC in 2018,<sup>10</sup> we identified 202,327 student parents, representing 13.4% of aid applicants that year. Table 1 shows that, since 2010, that percentage has fluctuated across the years from about 13% to over 16%.<sup>11</sup>

Figure 1 shows the intended college destinations for student parents whose financial aid applications were processed by CSAC in 2018.<sup>12</sup> Student parents aspired to the full variety of public and private colleges and universities in California, though by far the largest share – 72% – intended to enroll in the California Community Colleges (CCCs).

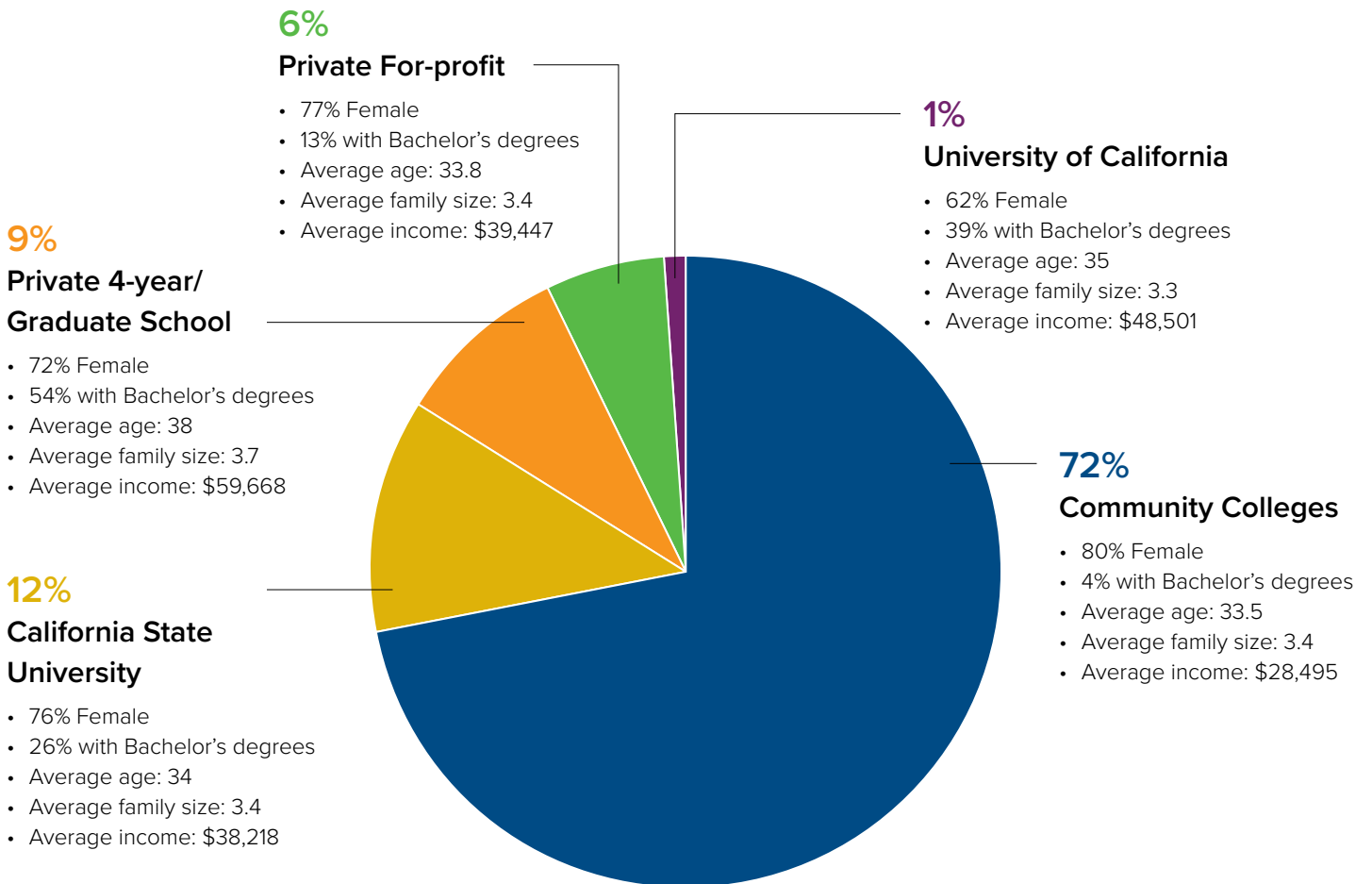
\* All quotes from student parents in this brief are drawn from the COVID-19 Student Survey, a joint project of the California Student Aid Commission and the California Education Lab at UC Davis (2020). [csac.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/2020\\_covid19\\_student\\_survey.pdf?1594172054](https://csac.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/2020_covid19_student_survey.pdf?1594172054)

Table 1. Student Parents Identified Through Financial Aid Applications Between 2010 and 2018

Intended College Segment/Type (As Listed on FAFSA/CADAA Applications)	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
Community College	107,693	152,065	140,673	129,454	145,061
California State University	15,884	22,760	22,568	21,546	24,023
Private 4-year/Graduate School	8,865	14,990	14,255	13,274	18,350
Private For-profit	26,431	32,791	8,765	11,606	11,774
University of California	2,662	3,511	3,281	2,996	2,975
Private 2-year Non-profit	135	222	139	90	40
Other	21	55	64	96	104
<b>Total Student Parents</b>	<b>161,691</b>	<b>226,394</b>	<b>189,745</b>	<b>179,062</b>	<b>202,327</b>
<b>Total Processed FAFSA/CADAA Filers</b>	<b>1,131,114</b>	<b>1,376,562</b>	<b>1,386,453</b>	<b>1,376,555</b>	<b>1,507,318</b>
<b>% of FAFSA/CADAA Filers Who Are Student Parents</b>	<b>14.30%</b>	<b>16.40%</b>	<b>13.70%</b>	<b>13.00%</b>	<b>13.40%</b>

Note: Years in the column headings indicate the spring in which a financial aid application was submitted for planned enrollment in the following school year. In other words, students who submitted applications in spring 2014 (column heading 2014) were applying for financial aid for the 2014–15 academic year.

Figure 1. Intended College of Enrollment for Student Parents Filing FAFSA/CADAA in 2018



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“I am a single mother of three children but I’m doing whatever I can to better myself and get a good education so I can have gainful employment upon graduating.”

– STUDENT PARENT

Our analysis yielded important details about student parents planning to attend California Community Colleges and how they differ from their counterparts in other segments of higher education. Figure 1 shows that, for the 2018–19 academic year, nearly 80% of CCC student parents were female. Their average age was 33.5 and they reported average family sizes of three to four members. Just 3.8% had previously earned a bachelor’s degree. By contrast, at private four-year/graduate institutions, more than half of student parents hold a bachelor’s degree, indicating pursuit of post-baccalaureate or professional degrees; at the University of California, 38% of parenting students already have bachelor’s degrees. Moreover, student parents planning to attend a CCC report the lowest family income among financial aid applicants.

### **A Portrait of CCC Student Parents Who Filed for Financial Aid**

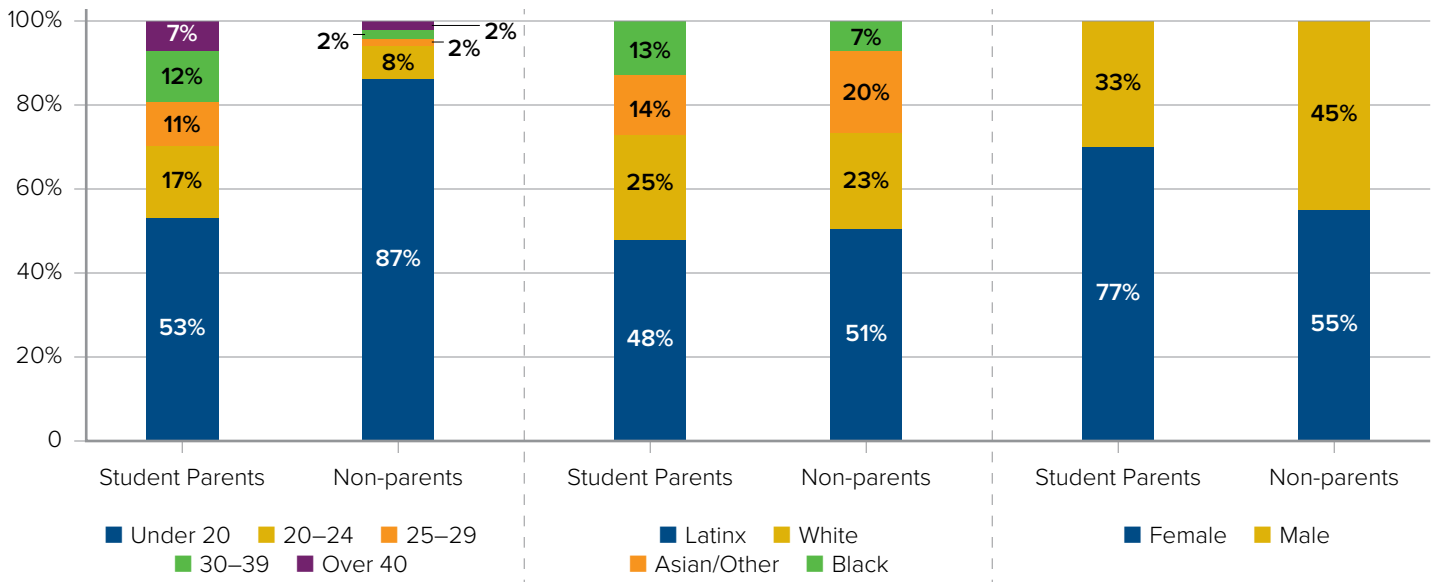
Through the matching of student-level data from CSAC to student-level administrative data from CCCCO, new details about student parents emerged. These details included information about the demographic characteristics of students who are parenting, their course-taking patterns and performance, and their take-up of financial aid. This unique dataset includes more student parents than any previous study has observed, and the richness of our data provides several new insights. We augmented the identification of student parents from the CSAC data by identifying additional student parents receiving cash assistance under Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF – known as CalWORKS in California) through the CCCCO data. In total, 221,429 student parents applied for financial assistance and took a community college course in 2016–17.<sup>13</sup> This represents 8.9% of the approximately 2.5 million total community college students, including all full-time and part-time students and those who applied and did not apply for financial aid.

Figure 2 illustrates important distinctions between student parents who completed a FAFSA/CADAA in the 2016–17 academic year and FAFSA/CADAA applicants without children. Parenting FAFSA filers were far more likely to be female. They are also older, on average, than their non-parenting counterparts. And while the racial and ethnic composition of the student parent population was fairly similar to the overall CCC student body population, a notable exception was Black students, who comprised 13% of the student parent FAFSA/CADAA filers, compared to 7% of filers who were not parents.

### **Course-taking Patterns of CCC Student Parents**

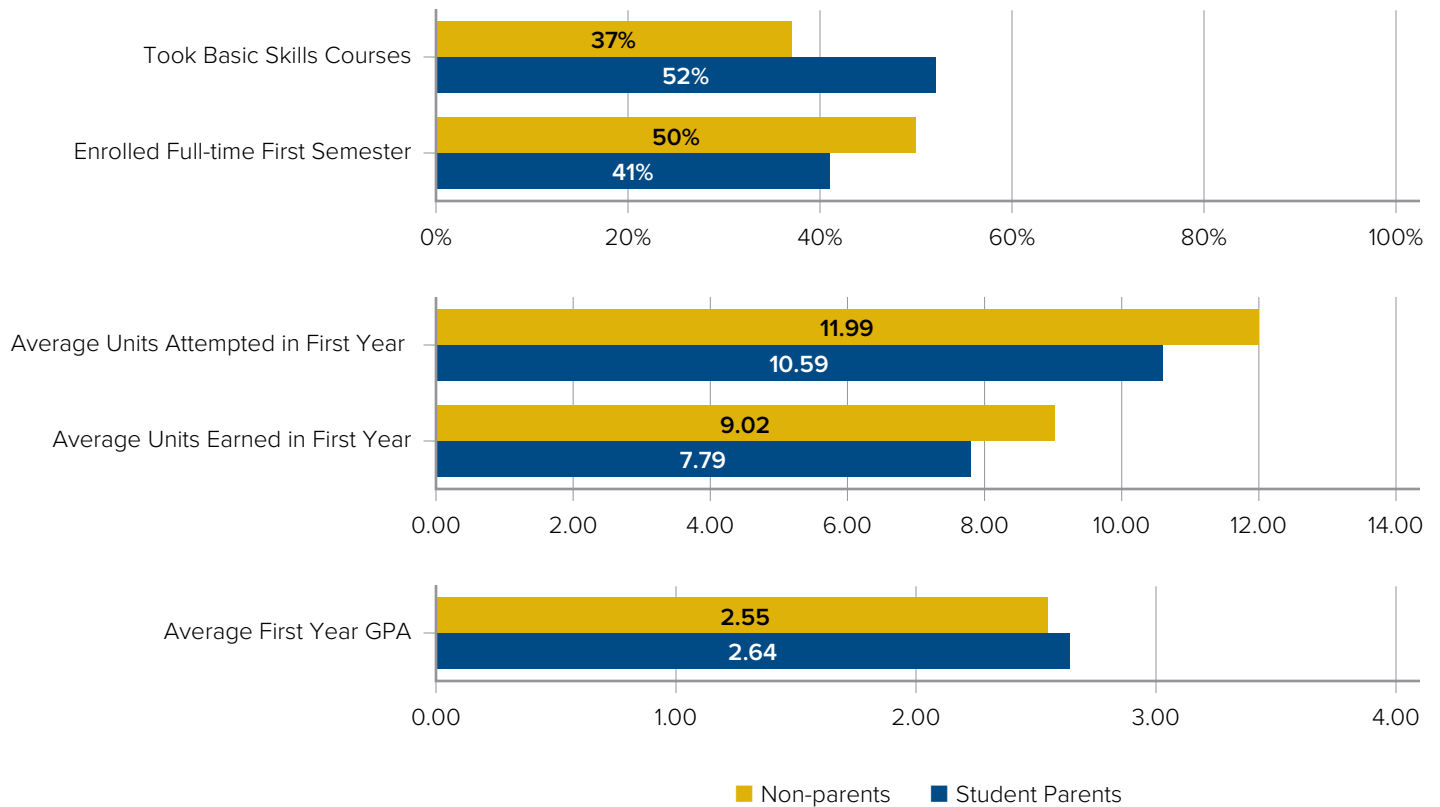
To understand the educational experiences and trajectories of student parents, we examined the cohort of student parents who took their first community college course in the fall of 2012 and applied for aid through either the FAFSA/CADAA or CalWORKS (n = 10,258). Figure 3 shows first-year course-taking patterns for this cohort of student parents and a comparison group of non-parenting financial aid applicants (n = 76,471). During their first year of community college (2012–13), student parents enrolled in an average of 11 units over the entire year, less than a full-time load of 12 units in each term. Yet, 41% of students enrolled in at least 12 units during their first semester. Non-parents had slightly higher rates of full-time enrollment and average units earned. Parents were also more likely to take basic skills, or remedial, courses. However, student parents were somewhat more successful than non-parents in terms of performance: The average GPA for student parents in credit-bearing classes the first year was slightly higher than the average GPA for the comparison group.

Figure 2. Demographic Characteristics of Community College Student Parents Compared to Non-parents, 2016–17



Notes: Sample includes community college student parents identified through FAFSA/CADAA or CalWORKS and taking at least one course during 2016–17. The difference in statistics presented in Figures 1 and 2 is due to different samples. Figure 1 includes student parents who submitted a FAFSA/CADAA in 2018 and selected a California Community College as a likely college of enrollment (actual enrollment is undetermined in this sample); Figure 2 includes student parents who submitted a FAFSA/CADAA at any point between 2010 and 2018, and enrolled in a California Community College in 2016–17. (N=221,429)

Figure 3. First Year Course-taking and Performance for Students Entering in Fall 2012

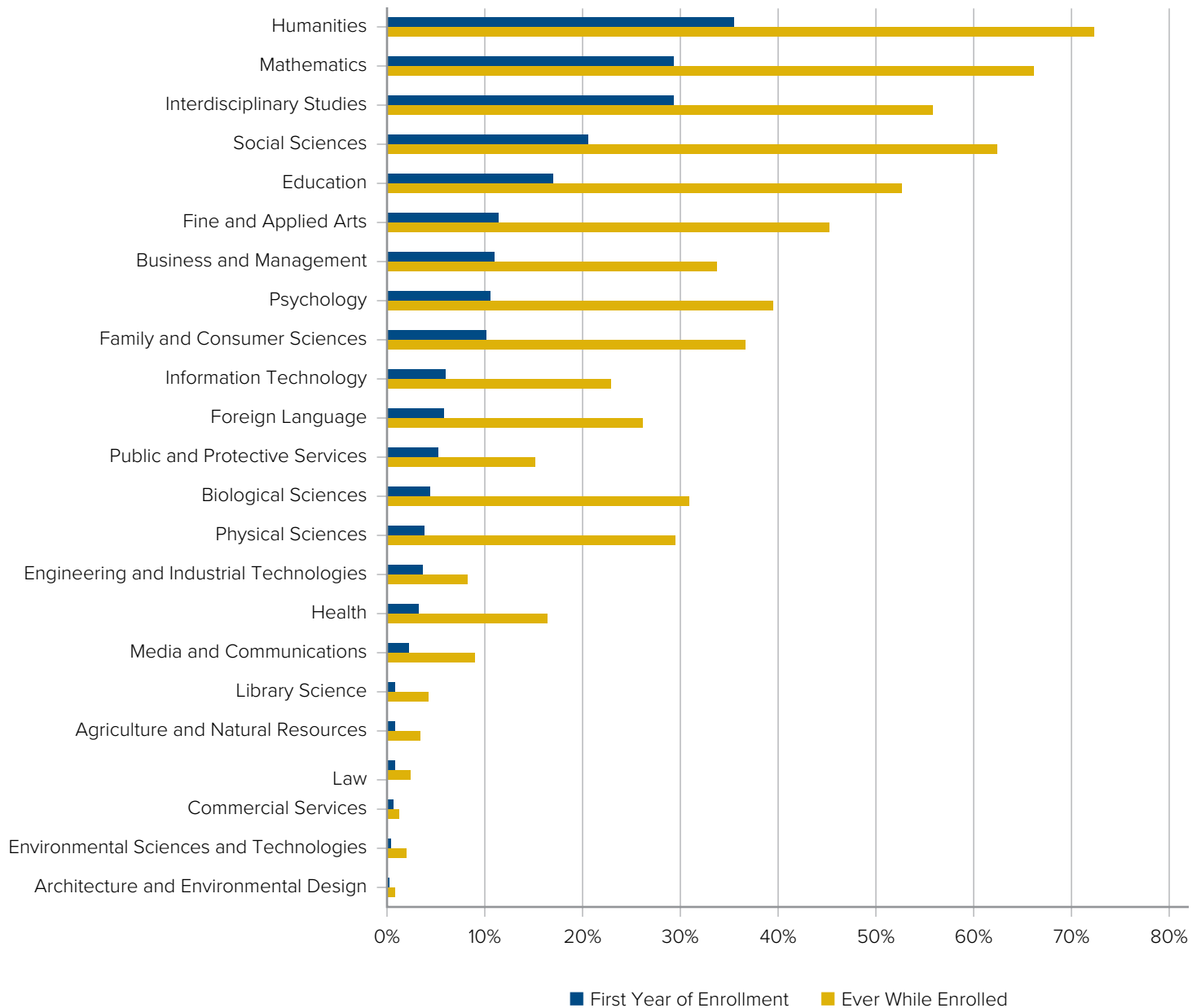


Notes: Sample of student parents includes community college students identified through FAFSA/CADAA or CalWORKS and taking their first course in fall 2012. Non-parents includes students who filed a FAFSA/CACAA but did not indicate that they had dependent children.

Figure 4 shows that the most popular classes for student parents in their first year of enrollment, and thereafter, were humanities, social sciences, and math. These disciplines contain courses required for many programs of study, and also include the basic skills courses that many students took early in their community college careers (in the years prior to implementation of AB 705 in 2018).<sup>14</sup> Additionally, more than 30% of students took courses in biological and physical sciences at some point during

their community college years; these courses appear much less popular during the first year of enrollment, likely driven by the necessity of completing prerequisites like basic math to enroll in more specialized classes in these fields. More than a third of student parents took a course in family and consumer sciences, which includes childcare, 16% took a class in health and 11% took a business class.

**Figure 4. Course-taking by Discipline for Student Parents Entering in Fall 2012**



Notes: Course categories correspond to the broad disciplines outlined in the CCCCO's Taxonomy of Programs. Sample includes community college student parents identified through FAFSA/CADAA or CalWORKS and taking their first course in fall 2012.

“Now that schooling will be completely online, I plan to take more classes to complete my degree quicker. My children are at home, so without the stress of traveling, finding parking, and the stress of being in lectures has been relieved by staying at home, completing my homework instead. I work very well independently so the change to online courses has benefited me greatly.”

– STUDENT PARENT

Table 2 shows information on student-parent course-scheduling, revealing that student parents are more likely than non-parents to take courses online, and less likely to take courses in the morning.

### Financial Aid for Student Parents

A critical factor in college enrollment and success, especially for students with children, is access to financial aid.<sup>15</sup> In their first year at community college, approximately two thirds (63%) of student parents received a tuition waiver through the Board of Governors (BOG) waiver program, now known as the California College Promise Grant. The waiver fully covers both tuition and fees. The proportion of student parents who received the tuition and fee waiver (63%) is slightly higher than the share of other FAFSA/CADAA filers who received the waiver (60%) and substantially higher than the share of other students who received it (11%). This makes sense; students who do not submit a FAFSA/CADAA are by definition much less likely to receive financial aid.

In addition, 52% of student parents from the 2012 cohort received a Pell Grant, and a smaller fraction of students received

other types of financial aid (Figure 5). These additional forms of aid are often critical to covering costs beyond tuition and fees for students (such as housing and food), thereby reducing the economic instability that often disrupts students’ college enrollment and success. Figure 5 also shows student parents’ noticeably higher take-up of financial aid when we extend our measures to capture aid receipt at any point while attending community college. The rate of FAFSA/CADAA submission increases by about 23 percentage points when we include additional years, as does the rate of tuition and fee waivers and Pell Grant receipt.

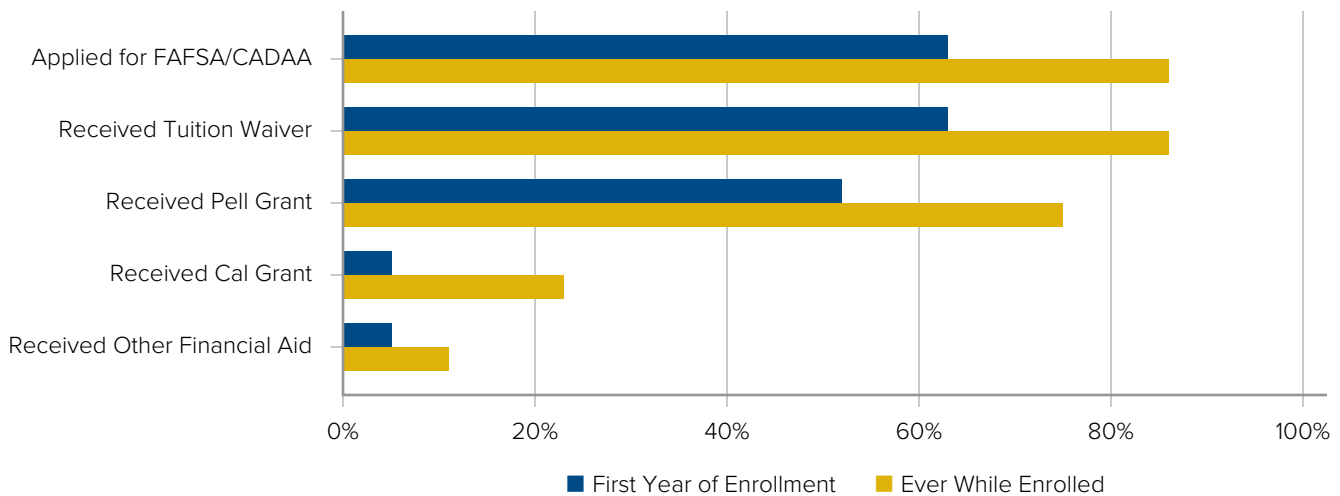
“I am determined to continue. As long as I get financial aid I will continue because it is impossible without it.”

– STUDENT PARENT

**Table 2. First Year Course Scheduling Characteristics for Student Parents Entering in Fall 2012**

Course Schedules	A. Student Parents FAFSA Filers and/or CalWORKS	B. Non-parent FAFSA Filers	C. Non-FAFSA Filers
<b>Total Number of Students</b>	<b>10,258</b>	<b>76,471</b>	<b>158,590</b>
<b>Took a Morning Class</b>	74%	83%	67%
<b>Took an Afternoon Class</b>	48%	46%	42%
<b>Took a Night Class</b>	54%	68%	48%
<b>Took a Weekend Class</b>	6%	5%	6%
<b>Took an Online Class</b>	26%	20%	15%

Notes: All students included in the samples in this table took their first community college course in fall 2012. Column A includes student parents identified through FAFSA/CADAA or CalWORKS. Column B includes students who filed a FAFSA/CADAA but did not indicate that they had dependent children. Column C includes community college students who did not apply for financial aid, and may include students who are not seeking a certificate or a degree. Percentages add up to more than 100% because students take more than one class.

**Figure 5. Financial Aid Application and Receipt for Student Parents Entering in Fall 2012**

Note: Sample includes community college student parents identified through FAFSA/CADAA or CalWORKS and taking their first course in fall 2012.

## Persistence and Degree Completion

Table 3 shows the persistence of student parents, with 71% enrolling continuously a second year and 86% taking at least one course at any time beyond their first year. Just over half enrolled full-time during their second year. These rates are slightly lower than students without dependent children of whom 80% enrolled in a second year and 66% enrolled full-time that second year. For students who persist in community college, student parents and non-parents enrolled in a similar number of terms on average. Community college students who did not apply for financial aid had much lower rates of persistence beyond their first year, because many of them were not seeking a degree but rather enrolled in community college courses for professional development or personal enrichment as indicated by their fewer attempted units and terms of enrollment.

College administrators, policymakers and researchers alike have been consistently challenged to measure completion rates at community colleges accurately. Not all students who enroll

in CCC courses intend to pursue a degree or certificate. Some take courses for personal growth or to satisfy job requirements, and these factors can depress completion rates while still fulfilling personal goals. With that context in mind, Table 4 shows degree and certificate completion through spring 2018 for student parents in the fall 2012 cohort. Student parents are less likely to complete any type of degree or certificate within six years than their non-parenting peers. In general, student parents take longer to complete their program of study.

Importantly, community college students often earn more than one credential. Many programs, especially in career technical fields, offer stackable credentials that are meant to lead students along a career pathway. Of the student parents who completed a degree or certificate program, 81% earned an AA/AS degree, 28% received a certificate of between 30–59 units (representing between one and two years of full-time coursework), and 29% received a certificate of fewer than 30 units. This indicates that some student parents are earning stackable credentials along their community college path.

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“My kids require a lot of time and attention to get them through their studies. This has limited my time I have for my own education. I’m really stressed I’m going to end up having missing assignments. I now work on my own work at night into the a.m. hours when my children are sleeping. I also worry about professors who are not understanding about those who have children. I have to put their education before mine. I know how important it is and I don’t want them to fall behind because I was too wrapped up in my own education.”



Table 3. Enrollment Beyond First Year for Student Parents Entering in Fall 2012

Persistence of Student Parents	A. Student Parents FAFSA Filers and/or CalWORKS	B. Non-parent FAFSA Filers	C. Non-FAFSA Filers
Total Number of Students	10,258	76,471	158,590
Any Enrollment after First Year	86%	90%	36%
Enrolled in Second Year	71%	80%	29%
Enrolled in Second Year Full-time	55%	66%	17%
Units Attempted in Second Year	8.92	9.37	5.43
Average Terms Enrolled 2012–13 to 2017–18	5.69	5.82	2.49
Average Terms Enrolled Full-time 2012–13 to 2017–18	2.55	2.88	0.98

Notes: All students included in the samples in this table took their first community college course in fall 2012. Column A includes student parents identified through FAFSA/CADAA or CalWORKS. Column B includes students who filed a FAFSA/CADAA but did not indicate that they had dependent children. Column C includes community college students who did not apply for financial aid, and may include students who are not seeking a certificate or a degree.

Table 4. Degree and Certificate Completion for Student Parents Entering in Fall 2012

Degree or Certificate	A. Student Parents FAFSA Filers and/or CalWORKS	B. Non-parent FAFSA Filers	C. Non-FAFSA Filers
Total Number of Students	10,258	76,471	158,590
Any Degree or Certificate	24%	28%	8%
AA/AS Degree	19%	25%	5%
30–59 Unit Certificate	7%	10%	2%
Up to 30 Unit Certificate	7%	4%	1%
Average Years to First Degree or Certificate	3.775	3.665	2.835
Average Years to First AA/AS Degree	4.127	3.755	3.279
Average Years to First 30–59 Unit Certificate	4.179	4.006	3.418
Average Years to First up to 30 Unit Certificate	3.492	3.613	2.64

Notes: All students included in the samples in this table took their first community college course in fall 2012. Column A includes student parents identified through FAFSA/CADAA or CalWORKS. Column B includes students who filed a FAFSA/CADAA but did not indicate that they had dependent children. Column C includes community college students who did not apply for financial aid, and may include students who are not seeking a certificate or a degree.

“I am drowning this semester in community college. I spend all my time dealing with bureaucratic matters/agencies/forms paperwork, going to food banks/pickups, etc. It is exhausting and time-consuming to keep abreast of and apply for the funding/resource opportunities that pop up. The lack of childcare is devastating for productivity and creates massive educational inequity that I can feel in my courses...the stress is contributing to cognitive/concentration difficulties and a full course load seems like it will be impossible.”

## Implications for Policy and Practice

Because higher education for student parents has potential for double benefits – for students and their children, too – this population deserves particular focus and support. Two-generation strategies to address economic security among families should include additional supports for student parents.<sup>16</sup>

We know that the financial and time demands that accompany child-rearing constitute barriers to college attainment. We also know how much more tenuous student parents' postsecondary plans have become with the economic and life challenges wrought by the pandemic. In response to a recent statewide survey<sup>17</sup> on the impacts of COVID-19 on college plans, many self-identified student parents reported increased financial pressure due to loss of employment and greater time pressure from intensified childcare responsibilities at home.

As CCCs navigate COVID-19 disruption and anticipate a return to face-to-face instruction, both the state and its community colleges have an opportunity to focus more intentionally on institutional conditions and supports to increase student parent success. These include, at minimum:

- **State Data:** Policymakers and colleges alike need better ways to identify student parents and understand their educational trajectories. The challenges we faced in assembling even partial data on this population illustrate the need for a functional statewide data system or better ability to link data across agencies and systems. Without such data or linkages, we will be hard pressed to know which institutions, programs or strategies help student parents succeed, and challenged to target assistance when they don't.
- **Local Data:** Colleges that don't yet seek to identify student parents at the time of first enrollment should do so on a voluntary basis, thus building local knowledge about population size, needs and use of existing internal and external supports.
- **Campus Supports and Culture:** Increasing access to local supports such as childcare, health and mental health services, advising and increased program flexibility could improve attainment for student parents. A companion brief, *Like a Juggler: The Experiences of Racially Minoritized Student Parents in a California Community College*,<sup>18</sup> highlights the importance of one-stop resource centers that bundle and streamline applications and build awareness of resources for parents, whose schedules are tight. It also recommends careful review and removal of messages, policies or practices that, however unintentional, may make student parents feel they or their children are

unwelcome on campus. Exemplary programs, such as the Family Resource Center at Los Angeles Valley College (profiled on p. 11), serve as an efficient resource and supportive, welcoming space for student parents.

- **Financial Aid:** At the state and campus levels, special focus should be placed on increasing financial aid awareness and take-up among eligible student parents in year one of enrollment. Only about two-thirds of student parents applied for aid in the first year of enrollment. If eligible, student parents should be connected from the start of college to state and federal aid that can cover not only fees and books, but transportation, food and childcare. Work-study should be included in this focus.
- **State Funding Allocations:** When state lawmakers established the Student Centered Funding Formula in 2018, they provided important supplemental funding to CCCs based on the demographic characteristics of the students they serve. The needs of student parents, who currently do not generate supplemental funds for the colleges they attend, should be considered as part of any future discussion about reducing barriers to success.

## Conclusion

As a clearer picture of student parents emerges, so do new policy and research questions, including:

- What are the best ways to ensure that student parents are more clearly identified in institutional and state-level data?
- What strategies can increase access to financial supports for student parents? Specifically, how can administrative and information barriers be eliminated so that student parents are aware of aid for which they are eligible, are able to apply for it and, if necessary, complete verification efficiently?
- How can educational supports be better integrated with other core components of economic security, such as housing, health and social services?

Today, a college degree remains the most important path to economic security for Californians and their families. This explains why so many student parents pursue degrees and credentials despite well-documented challenges. They are acting upon what research affirms: educational attainment is the strongest predictor of their own prosperity, and that of their children. Given these compound benefits, responding to the particular needs of student parents should be a state, system, district and campus priority.

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“A lot of us had our hands held to get through the system. To figure out college. To figure out work. To figure out how to parent. And a lot of our students don’t really have that.”

– MARNI ROOSEVELT, FRC FOUNDER/DIRECTOR

## CAMPUS SPOTLIGHT

# Los Angeles Valley College Family Resource Center

Los Angeles Valley College’s Family Resource Center (FRC) provides a one-stop suite of services to support student parents, and their families, as they juggle the demands of college, work and life, often within communities that have historically lacked access to public transportation or affordable housing. In its 17<sup>th</sup> year of operation, the center serves 1,000 families annually. In addition, FRC educates future early care personnel with a focus on meeting broader family needs.

FRC’s **whole-family approach** serves children and the adults with the following:

- **Basic Needs Support:** clothing exchanges and necessary provisions such as diapers, wipes and infant formula. During the pandemic, food pantries and emergency food boxes or grocery store gift cards have been provided.
- **Personal and Mental Health Support:** on-campus social workers to help navigate social services and housing; childcare services to free up study time; and marriage and family therapy.
- **Academic Support:** a study lounge where student parents can support each other academically and learn navigation strategies together; virtual academic counseling to help students stay on track toward completion; school supplies; a textbook library; and access to computers and printers.
- **Professional Support:** workforce training academies and interactive, online non-credit seminars designed to build transferrable skills modern workers need for success.
- **High School-to-College Support:** programs that bridge transitions between high schools and community and/or 4-year colleges for the teenage children of student parents, as well as vulnerable high school-age students through a partnership with LA County’s Juvenile Probation Department.

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“The Family Resource Center has saved me from dropping out of school. Through the Study Lounge, I’ve met other student parents who face my same struggles and I feel less alone and really feel like I belong in school now.”

– CHARMAINE CRAM, LAVC STUDENT PARENT

To support FRC’s work and students, LA Valley College engages organizations such as California’s Employment Development Department, the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, the Good+Foundation, Weingart Foundation, and ECMC Foundation. To share what the center has learned by experience, FRC has created a toolkit for other colleges seeking to replicate its model.<sup>19</sup>

## Appendix

### Data, Methods, Challenges and Limitations

In the absence of comprehensive, linked data systems or unique student identifiers that span education segments, identifying student parents in California is challenging.<sup>20</sup> One difficulty is that institution-level data generally does not include financial aid application data, in which student parents can be identified by their answers to questions on financial aid applications. As such, individual colleges and public higher education systems in California often have no way of tracking or contacting student parents.

To work around these challenges, we took a two-pronged approach. First, we identified student parents through detailed data from financial aid applications submitted to the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC). The CSAC data includes information on the universe of aspiring college students who (1) submitted a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or California Dream Act Application (CADAA) and (2) who are either California residents or who indicated intent to attend a California college or university. Through these data, we identified student parents as those who self-identified as independent (rather than as dependent children themselves) and who indicated they had dependents. This allowed us to describe the population of student parents who applied for financial aid, and whose applications were fully processed by CSAC, to support their studies between 2010 to 2018 (n = 202,327 in 2018, see Table 1).

Second, we merged the student-level data from CSAC to student-level administrative data from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) to assemble a unique data set of student parents in California that is broader than any previously studied. We augmented this data set by using CCCCCO data to identify additional student parents receiving cash assistance under Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF – known as CalWORKS in California). There is considerable overlap between these two data sources; many, *but not all*, CalWORKS recipients also apply for financial aid through CSAC. One quarter of student parents in 2016–17 receiving CalWORKS are not in the CSAC records, suggesting they never applied for financial aid (or were unable to be matched to the CSAC records). Importantly, CalWORKS recipients are a small minority of the student parents identified through the CSAC records, accounting for only 12% of the student parents who filed FAFSAs/CADAA. By using both sources, we were able to provide a sizeable sample – more than 200,000 student parents – that enabled a comprehensive analysis of characteristics, experiences and outcomes.

We recognize that our sample likely undercounts the student parent population in California. Specifically, we do not observe student parents who are either: a) unaware of the availability of financial aid; b) aware but fail to apply for the aid due to any number of informational or other barriers; or c) have less financial need. Our analysis, for example, observes an additional 300,000 to 450,000 student parents each year who indicate some intent to attend college through partial completion of the FAFSA/CADAA, but whose financial aid applications remain unprocessed by CSAC due to missing information.<sup>21</sup> If in fact these individuals enrolled in college without financial aid, the population of student parents is more than double the 200,000 described above, and, importantly, these student parents have not received state or federal financial support for their studies. It is possible that some number of these individuals begin a FAFSA/CADAA application but fail to complete the process due to a change in plans. In this case, there may be a substantial number of California parents who desire to go to college but face challenges in doing so (financial or otherwise).

From the dataset we assembled by merging data from CSAC and CCCCCO, we describe student parents in the community colleges using two different approaches. The first approach is a snapshot of statistics on every student parent who enrolled in at least one course in 2016–17, the most recent year of complete CCCCCO data available. This approach allows us to observe students who were enrolled relatively recently, and to include students who were at different points in their community college careers. Our sample of students in 2016–17, for example, includes students who were enrolled in their first year of college and students who had already taken classes for several years. A drawback of this approach is that it does not allow us to cleanly observe the trajectories of these students over time.

Thus, our second approach focuses closely on a specific cohort of students who were identified as student parents in the CSAC data or through their participation in CalWORKS, and who took their first community college course in the fall of 2012. This allowed us to follow students during the many years spent in the community college system and observe their completion of a certificate or degree. The drawback of this approach is that we had to examine a relatively older cohort to give us sufficient years of data to accurately track completion rates.

For both samples, we supplemented the group of student parents with two comparison groups. Because we identified many student parents through their presence in the CSAC records, we first compared student parents to other students in the CSAC records who did not indicate they had dependents. This allowed us to compare student parents to other FAFSA/CADAA filers.

Second, we compared these two groups – student parents and other students in the CSAC records – to community college students who did not apply for financial aid.

Our analysis is limited in several ways. We explored only the enrollment behavior and degree outcomes of student parents in community college. This leaves a large gap in information about the course-taking, persistence and degree attainment patterns for student parents in California’s other public and private colleges and universities, including for-profit institutions. Moreover, we

had limited information about student parents and their families, including the age of children; the support of a spouse, partner or co-parent; and other employment information. We also lacked information about the support programs, aside from financial aid and CalWORKS, that student parents may have accessed, such as on-campus or subsidized childcare, food banks, academic support and counseling. Nevertheless, this analysis represents the richest portrait to date of student parents in California’s public higher education systems.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>10</sup> The CSAC data contains information on both processed and unprocessed applications. Processed applications are complete financial aid applications that CSAC processed to determine Cal Grant eligibility. Unprocessed applications are not evaluated by CSAC because they are incomplete, or missing some critical piece of data such as GPA.
- <sup>11</sup> This range is lower than the national estimate that 22% of college students are parents (Noll, Reichlin, & Gault, 2017), most likely because our analysis does not include student parents who do not apply for financial aid.
- <sup>12</sup> The intended college of enrollment is determined through an individual-level variable, known as the segment code, included in the CSAC data. For students who receive a financial aid award from CSAC, the segment code represents the college where the award was paid and the student actually enrolled. For students who do not receive a financial aid award, the segment code is populated by the first intended college a student lists on the FAFSA/CADAA.
- <sup>13</sup> This 2016-17 sample of community college student parents is larger than the 129,454 reported in Table 1 because of differences in sample construction. In Table 1, we report the number of student parents whose FAFSAs/CADAAAs were processed in a given year and their intended college of enrollment at the time of submission. Here we use the universe of CSAC records to identify student parents who submitted FAFSAs/CADAAAs in any year and who actually enrolled in community college in 2016–17. Therefore, we identified some student parents through prior or later year FAFSA/CADAA filing who were attending community college in 2016–17 without a FAFSA/CADAA in the same year.
- <sup>14</sup> AB 705 is evidence-based legislation that took effect in January 2018. It requires all California Community Colleges to maximize the likelihood that students begin in and complete college-level English and math within one year. It also requires colleges to use high school achievement measures instead of assessment tests to place students in courses.
- <sup>15</sup> Not all of the student parents in our cohort sample submitted an application for financial aid during their first year of community college. This was a notable finding given that we identified student parents through FAFSA/CADAA data. It is possible that many of the student parents who began community college in fall 2012 submitted a FAFSA/CADAA at some point prior to 2012, and then failed to enroll in college or attended an institution other than a CCC.
- <sup>16</sup> See, for example Ascend at the Aspen Institute's "Two Generation Playbook," 2016; available at: [ascend.aspeninstitute.org/resources/two-generation-playbook](http://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/resources/two-generation-playbook). National Conference of State Legislatures' Two-Generation Strategies Toolkit, 2018; available at: [ncsl.org/research/human-services/two-generation-strategies-toolkit.aspx#:~:text=The%20Two%2DGeneration%20Continuum&text=They%20can%20be%20used%20to,examples%20of%20two%2Dgeneration%20strategies](http://ncsl.org/research/human-services/two-generation-strategies-toolkit.aspx#:~:text=The%20Two%2DGeneration%20Continuum&text=They%20can%20be%20used%20to,examples%20of%20two%2Dgeneration%20strategies).
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- <sup>18</sup> Huerta, A., Rios-Aguilar, C., Ramirez, D., and Muñoz, M., (2021), *Like a juggler: The experiences of racially minoritized student parents in a California community college*, (6)4. Wheelhouse: The Center for Community College Leadership and Research, University of California, Davis.
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- <sup>21</sup> Unprocessed FAFSA/CADAA records include indicators allowing us to identify student parents, but have incomplete information on other variables. Many of the students with incomplete and unprocessed FAFSAs/CADAAAs did not ultimately enroll in college; therefore, we excluded them from data presented in Table 1 and Figure 1. Some of these students did ultimately enroll in college, however. We therefore kept them in our overall dataset for the purposes of merging to the community college data and ensuring we captured and included as many student parents as possible.