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# “I Had to Figure It Out”: A Case Study of How Community College Student Parents of Color Navigate College and Careers

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Adrian H. Huerta<sup>1</sup> , Cecilia Rios-Aguilar<sup>2</sup>,  
and Daisy Ramirez<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

**Objective:** Community colleges, which can lead students to job opportunities and well-paying careers, are one of the main entry points to higher education for student parents. We use a conceptual framework that bridges career capital and community cultural wealth to understand student parents' college and career trajectories. This study asks (a) How do student parents of color navigate community college? (b) How do student parents of color make educational and career decisions?, and (c) What, if any, institutional resources do student parents of color utilize to learn about career planning and workforce transition resources at their campus? **Method:** This qualitative case study draws from individual and focus group interviews with 67 student parents of color to better understand how they tap into their cultural knowledge and lived experiences to navigate college and make career decisions. **Results:** Data speaks to (a) student parents' difficulty maneuvering life as a college student and parent; and (b) the importance of students' familial and institutional support networks as they seek college and career information. **Contributions:** We hope these findings will encourage community colleges to (re)consider their current practices relating to the student parent population which includes identifying and tracking student parents, implementing guided pathways with their unique needs in mind, communicating services offered to student parents, and creating a more welcoming environment for students and their families.

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<sup>1</sup>University of Southern California, Los Angeles, USA

<sup>2</sup>University of California, Los Angeles, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Adrian H. Huerta, Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California, 3470 Trousdale Pkwy, WPH 701, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0001, USA.

Email: [ahhuerta@usc.edu](mailto:ahhuerta@usc.edu)

## Keywords

student parents, students of color, careers, decision-making, community college, qualitative methods

As open access institutions that provide basic education, workforce training, and associates degrees (Dougherty et al., 2017), students have been turning to community college as a means of gaining access to skills and education to pursue mid-level jobs and lucrative careers (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Non-traditional students are enrolling in postsecondary education at higher rates than in previous decades. This group includes student parents who account for over one in five of *all* undergraduates in higher education (3.8 million), and 42% of *all* student parents are enrolled in 2-year colleges (Cruse et al., 2019). Cruse et al. (2019) with the Institute for Women's Policy Research estimate that only 37% of all student parents complete a degree or certificate within 6 years, compared with 59% of childless students. The disparity in degree attainment between student parents and others has profound equity implications, especially for racially and ethnically minoritized student parents of color (i.e., Black, Latina/o/x, Native American, Pacific Islanders, or multi-racial) who are more likely than students from other backgrounds to have dependent children while in college. Student parents face deeply rooted barriers that contribute to disproportionately worse retention and degree outcomes in postsecondary education than their non-parenting peers (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020).

Researchers have examined student parents' enrollment patterns and the institutional processes and practices that may contribute to their (in)ability to succeed in college. Past studies illuminate that student parents are quite vulnerable; they experience familial obligations, instability with childcare, or financial pressures that result in their early departures from college. We also know that in attempting to balance work, family, and college obligations, student parents may take fewer classes, drop courses, and might temporarily "take a break" from their college coursework due to unforeseen circumstances related to changes to their employment or family well-being. Experiencing such daily challenges impact student parents' persistence, retention, as well as the types of academic programs and occupational pathways they pursue (Anderson, 2019; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Peterson, 2016).

The individual stressors student parents' experience are not isolated to their homes. Goldrick-Rab et al. (2020) found that student parents face substantial financial and time constraints, and often greater expenses, thus putting them at higher risk for basic needs insecurity compared to other students. These stresses are then compounded in college, where student parents struggle to navigate college spaces (Huerta et al., 2021). As mentioned, many student parents are first generation and low-income, which means many require additional support and direction from counselors and instructors to understand the formulas and *processes* to be successful as college students (Estes, 2011; Lanford, 2019; Pizzolato & Olson, 2016; Sallee & Cox, 2019). Other times, college administrators may be unsure how to align institutional policies to meet student parents' needs due to limited resources in 2-year institutions (Cox & Sallee, 2018).

While existing scholarship has brought student parents' outcomes (i.e., enrollment, persistence, and success) and experiences to the center of many scholarly, policy, and institutional conversations, there is still a lack of attention on student parents as a subcategory in institutional, state, and national data sets, meaning most colleges have no data to capture on *how* student parents are faring on their campuses (Aspen Institute, 2019; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Pizzolato & Olson, 2016). Furthermore, in our search, we found no research that concentrates on student parents' occupational goals, trajectories, and outcomes. As a result, we know very little about their labor market outcomes. Student parents' academic and occupational success is a serious challenge in community colleges, and it requires a heightened understanding of how institutions need to be flexible, equitable, and caring while supporting students' various educational *and* career goals. We make these claims knowing that parenting services and childcare resources *do not reach all* students who would benefit the most due to multiple institutional factors (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Lynch, 2008; Yakaboski, 2010). The institutional trials for low-income students, including student parents, includes challenges when advocating for student loan allocations and financial aid resources, as financial aid counselors place administrative burdens through income verification and discouragement (Campbell et al., 2015; Radey & Cheatham, 2013), resulting in limited financial aid resources needed to survive and pay for their basic needs (Brown & Nichols, 2013).

In addition to providing more resources, community colleges across the nation have engaged in structural reforms, including guided pathways, to help students navigate the academic programs and institutional bureaucracy. Guided pathways have been introduced as a national model to simplify the academic major and career pathways for students (Bailey et al., 2015; Jenkins & Cho, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2017). Some colleges have created meta majors or academic communities such as health-related sciences, business, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), and others, so that students can easily choose and understand the career implications of their choices (Baker, 2018). This innovative reform in community colleges has allowed students to clearly visualize what it takes to complete their academic goals via program mappers (Baker, 2018). Although the guided pathways model could help community college students hone their program of study and increase their persistence and degree completion (Baker, 2018), some have questioned its ability to close equity gaps and to provide "non-traditional" students such as part-time or students with dependents with the flexibility and procedural knowledge needed to succeed in college (Rose, 2016). For example, meta majors are intended to simplify community college students' decision and choice process. However, not all community college students know, benefit, or understand how meta majors' function in future career placement (Baker, 2018; Baker & Orona, 2020). The implementation of guided pathways could result in additional burdens for these groups of students, particularly if the model does not recognize marginalized students' realities and lived experiences (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2018; Rose, 2016; Rose et al., 2019).

It is in this context that we situate our study. We use a case study research design to examine the college experiences of 67 Black, Latina/o/x, Asian American, and Pacific

Islander student parents enrolled in Coastal City College (CCC) (a pseudonym). This study explores how they navigate college and prepare for careers, and transition into the labor market. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do student parents of color navigate community college?
2. How do student parents of color make educational and career decisions?
3. What, if any, institutional resources do student parents of color utilize to learn about career planning and workforce transition resources at their campus?

## Literature on Student Parents in Higher Education

A majority of the scholarship on student parents in postsecondary education concentrates on students' individual and environmental challenges (Lovell & Scott, 2020; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Pizzolato & Olson, 2016); such as struggles locating social and academic support (Cerven, 2013; Sallee & Cox, 2019), financial pressures to support their children (Lynch, 2008; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Yakaboski, 2010), securing affordable childcare services (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Cerven, 2013; Estes, 2011; Sallee & Cox, 2019), or the stress and guilt of not providing "sufficient time" to their children (Lovell & Scott, 2020). While student parents are acutely aware of the sacrifices (e.g., time and wages) they need to make in order to persist in college, the goal of earning a college degree is fueled by high aspirations to provide a better and more stable future for their children upon college degree attainment. Student parents want to share new knowledge about the college process with their children to improve the next generations' likelihood of higher education success (Estes, 2011; Halem, 2004). However, earning a postsecondary credential or degree is not a simple process for many student parents due to rigid schedules, hostile classroom, campus policies, and balancing the demands of their families and work commitments (Huerta et al., 2021). For example, Wladis et al. (2018) found that "students with preschool-aged children dropped out of college at higher rates and accumulated credits at slower rates than students without children" (p. 16). Wladis and colleagues used the term "time poverty" to indicate and quantify that student parents have less *leisure time* than their childless peers to sleep, complete coursework, focus on childcare responsibilities, and other household duties. The time poverty student parents experience is coupled with a mismatch of inflexible course scheduling and non-family-friendly climates that they must navigate, including children's school schedules and demands (Brown & Nichols, 2013). The studies we have highlighted focus on the micro-level moments for student parents; however, structural forces and tensions in community colleges impact student parents' persistence.

At the organizational level, student parents are often invisible to college faculty and staff but become hyper-visible when campus agents punish them for violating institutional policies and social norms about bringing children to offices, appointments, classrooms, or other shared student spaces (Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Wilson & Cox, 2011). Student parents may also have to bring children to college classrooms when their pre-planned childcare efforts are thwarted. These pressures are highlighted in the education

and gender studies literature as student parents battle social and racial stigmas of being pregnant while at college, enrolled in single-parent programs, or in welfare-relief-style programs to feed their children (Haleman, 2004; Moreau, 2016; Wilson & Cox, 2011). In addition, student parents feel a need to fight for *respeto* (Kiyama et al., 2016) to be treated as a “legitimate college student” by faculty and campus staff. In other instances, campus administrators often face powerlessness in helping student parents due to budget constraints and limited full-time staffing (Cox & Sallee, 2018).

As we have described here, while existing research captures student parents’ turbulent experiences, very few studies focus on student parents’ career prospects in post-secondary education. Our study is a step in this new direction to provide insights into how student parents of color make decisions about college *and* careers. It is important to know how students gain the information they need to prepare for the labor markets they want to enter and how they use support networks to manage life circumstances. To do so, we bring literature on guided pathways and career decision-making relevant to our inquiry.

### *Guided Pathways and Careers*

Guided Pathways is a model intended to provide students with clear pathways to further their education, advance their careers, and complete degree programs with little credit loss (Bailey et al., 2015; Jenkins & Cho, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2017). The guided pathways model aims to provide students with information regarding career pathways upon entering the degree program and provide a structure of ongoing guided support for students to achieve their degree goals via scheduling, feedback, and monitoring by campus agents (e.g., faculty, staff, counselors) (Bailey et al., 2015). These synchronized efforts to support students might also include exposure to job search and training, mock interview skills, and localized career fairs to expedite employment for community college graduates (Jenkins & Cho, 2013; Van Noy et al., 2016). Guided pathways efforts have been adopted by many community colleges nationwide; in fact, over 200 colleges have adopted these reforms (Jenkins et al., 2017).

Despite the popularity and rapid adoption of guided pathways programs in community colleges, it is still too early to assess these programs’ outcomes, particularly for students of color and other marginalized student populations (Bragg et al., 2019). There are too few examples of ways that community colleges have centered equity in their guided pathways decision-making processes and practices. Bragg et al. (2019) state that racial equity is not a primary focus of guided pathways programs. Besides, some students do not arrive at community college knowing what career they want to pursue and require time to explore their interests and options, which may deviate from rigid set paths (Rose, 2016). As community colleges around the country implement guided pathways, they should examine students’ multidimensional identities (i.e., race, gender, sexual orientation, first-generation, student parent, socioeconomic status, and the like) and work toward equitable student outcomes (Rose et al., 2019).

Another challenge for community colleges attempting to infuse career information and exploration into their academic offerings is that they do not consider the local

labor markets that students face after college and while pursuing their degrees (Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010; Reyes et al., 2019). Deil-Amen and DeLuca (2010) emphasize that community college students often earn degrees and certificates for careers that do not align with regional labor market needs and these institutional decisions directly impact students' ability to secure employment quickly. All this to say, geography matters in academic opportunities and career decision-making for college students (Hora et al., 2021; Reyes et al., 2019). However, many community college students do not have regular access to a "point of contact" who can serve as a guide and inform their career decisions and exploration processes (Karp, 2013). Other times, career and technical education (CTE) programs are not designed to center or acknowledge the lived experiences of current students nor students' motivations for wanting to enter into specific career fields (Neri, 2020).

Knowing *what* and *when* to study to secure employment is a critical component to being a successful community college student. Bahr (2019) stressed that community college students could earn immediate economic returns due to credits earned in some academic programs. However, the most lucrative programs are engineering and information technology, but only marginal returns for health, human services, nursing, and child development (Bahr, 2019), which are traditional academic pathways for some returning student parents. However, building and sustaining networks into the labor market is not a universal practice for *all* career-focused community college programs. It depends on the faculty, program advisory boards, and local and national accreditation models that require and structured career preparation into academic programs. This is reaffirmed by scholars (Bragg & Krismer, 2016; Jenkins & Cho, 2013) who stress that career pathways for students can only thrive when "inside and outside" partnerships between community colleges and local employers collaborate (Hora et al., 2021). We know that many students return to community college to build the necessary skills and training to enter the labor market. Yet, questions remain about how student parents facilitate and conceptualize their networks and opportunities of support to gain access to new careers and pathways or their desired employment.

Lastly, Jenkins and Cho (2013) stress the value and impact of guided pathways programs for students and the multiple benefits and individual attention gained from faculty and counselor-program coordinators. While guided pathways inform career conversations for students in community college, a holistic understanding of student parents is needed to comprehend how they make strategic decisions about their post-secondary education and occupational choices and how these relate to the local labor markets that students are situated in.

## **Conceptual Framework: Career Capital and Community Cultural Wealth**

This study utilizes D'Amico et al.'s (2012) adapted career capital framework for community colleges and Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework to examine marginalized student parents' career choices and academic experiences in community colleges. Together, these frameworks help understand how marginalized student

parents in a community college setting make decisions regarding their education and careers while navigating oppressive structures and environments. The choices community college student parents make and the knowledge base from which those choices generate, align with what they hope to achieve is framed in a conceptualization of career capital (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Inkson & Arthur, 2001). More specifically, we rely on D'Amico et al.'s (2012) adapted version of the career framework for the community college sector, which explicitly recognizes the realities and challenges that students in this particular postsecondary system face in navigating their educational and occupational trajectories. This conceptual framework allows us to examine how college and career development is informed by knowledge and access points to *knowing why* (via aspirations), *knowing how* (via knowledge and skills), and *knowing whom* (via sources of information).

In D'Amico et al.'s (2012) career capital framework, *knowing why* refers to students' purpose in seeking a higher education degree or credential via their aspirations. Whether students aspire to attain an associate's degree, transfer, or earn a certificate largely depends on their career objectives. Though, student parents, particularly first-generation college students, may not arrive at community college with clear knowledge of how to achieve their educational and career goals. It is also possible that they have work experiences that colleges are unaware of and could draw from their current job experiences and skills to access other new jobs and careers. *Knowing how* refers to the ways students acquire skills to navigate their community college education. Indeed, as students decide to attend college, they also enroll in certain institutions and programs. In our study, we explore why student parents enrolled in a community college, given their education and career aspirations. We pay particular attention to the ways their aspirations have changed throughout their higher education journey and what, if any, experiences have influenced those decisions. In addition to navigating their curricular decisions, students must also navigate the financial aspect of attending a community college. Thus, students' "financial know-how" refers to the ways they gain the skills to navigate bureaucracies and processes to pay for their schooling and other expenses (D'Amico et al., 2012). Knowing the steps to gain financial aid, jobs, and financial resources on campus are crucial to student success. Finally, *knowing who* refers to the sources of knowledge that students tap into to navigate their community college and occupational trajectories, such as institutional agents. Fifty percent of community college students are people of color and 29% of all community college students are first in their family to pursue higher education, respectively (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020), they arrive at college not knowing *whom* to contact for information regarding career paths, internships, or other academic needs (Vega, 2018).

As our study is about marginalized student parents' experiences and choices, we also use Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) framework to highlight the assets students, families, and communities of color use to navigate educational systems. Based on critical race theory, CCW is the experiential knowledge of communities of color through an anti-deficit lens. Specifically, CCW argues that students of color bring various forms of cultural knowledge that are markedly different from those

of “traditional” (i.e., white, dominant socioeconomic class) students, yet are important to their success. These six forms of capital—linguistic, familial, social, navigational, aspirational, and resistant—make up the CCW framework, though we only focus on the latter five in this study. *Linguistic capital* is a form of storytelling and advice cultivated within communities of color that offer specific navigational goals to challenge [or resist] oppressive structures and conditions. *Familial capital* refers to the knowledge that comes from family units such as social support and labor histories that inform one’s sense of identity. *Social capital* is the source(s) of knowledge based on an individual or community’s social networks. These sources of knowledge may provide knowledge of job opportunities, advice, and mentorship. *Navigational capital* manifests in the way students seek information and resources. As previously mentioned, student parents require resources not only for them but for their children as well. Navigating community college as student parents may be challenging as colleges have historically been unwelcoming to children in general (Huerta et al., 2021; Sallee & Cox, 2019). As student parents maneuver these hostile institutions, they exhibit *resistant capital* by challenging the status quo and often racialized and gendered spaces. Finally, *aspirational capital* refers to students’ abilities to maintain hope in the face of multiple levels of adversity on and off college campuses.

Together, career capital and community cultural wealth help us examine marginalized student parents’ navigational experiences in community college. We argue that marginalized student parents must navigate highly dynamic and complex labor markets. The career capital they have acquired and developed through their individual, familial, and community labor histories is fundamental to achieving their academic and occupational goals. Specifically, our conceptual framework helps us understand the types of information and sources students seek to navigate college as well as the lived experiences that contribute to their career and degree aspirations.

## Methods

### Site Selection

Using a case study methodology (Yin, 2013), we draw from individual and focus-group semi-structured interviews of 67 enrolled student parents at Coastal City College (CCC). Coastal City College is a pseudonym for an institution located in an urban area in Southern California and has two local campuses. CCC was selected as the research site because of its student population characteristics and its administration’s commitment to serving student parents better. Currently, CCC enrolls almost 25,000 students, with 60% self-identifying as Latina/o/x or Hispanic, over 10% Black, African, or African American, over 10% Asian American Pacific Islanders, under 15% white, and 5% either not reporting or identifying with two or more races. Two-thirds of currently enrolled students attend part-time, and most students (70%) are under the age of 24. Most importantly, one-third of students at CCC are student parents. CCC provides a childcare center, counseling and career services, a transfer center, a welfare-to-work program for eligible students.

## *Study Sample and Recruitment Procedures*

Student parents from both CCC campuses were invited to participate in the study. We requested contact information and lists of students involved in various CCC programs and services such as the childcare center and first-generation low-income student programs. It is important to highlight that not all students participate in on-campus services, as some students were not eligible based on their past postsecondary education attendance, annual income, childcare center wait-list time, and other policy factors. Various campus agents (teaching faculty, counseling faculty, staff, administrators) also provided the names of student parents who were not formally involved in on-campus programs or services that may benefit from sharing their experiences as a CCC student. To be eligible for the study, participants had to be a student parent and identify with one or more of the following racial or ethnic groups: Black, Latina/o/x or Hispanic, Asian American, or Pacific Islander. Over 145 student parents were contacted via email and telephone calls, which resulted in 78 registrations to participate (see Table 1 for participant demographic information). Of those 78 students, 67 participated in either a focus group or individual interview. The student parents' needs, and schedules determined participation in either individual or focus group interviews. Often, the individual interview was an effort to increase participation due to the flexibility of a telephone interview.

## *Data Collection*

The qualitative data collection consisted of semi-structured individual and focus group interviews with student parents from both CCC campuses during the 2018 to 2019 academic year. Recruitment flyers were posted on advertisement boards around both CCC campuses with participant eligibility information and contact information for interview scheduling. Over a 3-month period beginning in April to July, a team of seven researchers conducted the interviews and focus groups that ranged in their duration of 45 to 120 minutes. Sample questions from the individual and focus group interviews included: "What's one thing that CCC can do differently to help you be successful?," "What motivated you to balance these various commitments (e.g., college classes, family commitment, and work-related experiences?," and "When you seek advice about career planning, whom do you talk to on-campus?" Based on students' availability, we presented the option to participate in on-campus or telephone interviews to provide flexibility with their work and family schedules. Lechuga (2012) found that telephone interviews also provided researchers access to "ample and detailed textual data. . . thorough examination of the values, perceptions, beliefs, and norms" from interviewees (p. 255). Participants who completed in-person focus group interviews were provided a \$20.00 gift card. Those who completed individual, in-person, or telephone, interviews were provided a \$30.00 gift card. Each interview and focus group were audio-recorded to ensure accurate representations of the students' experiences. A third-party transcription service transcribed interviews to ensure accurate analysis of the data.

## Data Analysis

After the first few 2 weeks of data collection, the research team met over the telephone to discuss and revise the wording of the interview protocols. Our team debriefed the emerging trends and challenges student parents experienced (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This moment allowed us to reflect on the current literature on student parents and our personal experiences as parents (as three research team members are parents to young children). The research team developed a codebook related to college and workforce information, parent responsibilities, and institutional resources in subsequent meetings. We also included codes related to the career capital and community cultural wealth frameworks. Initially, all team members participated in the deductive coding process by reading the data line by line and applying the a priori codes to the data (Saldaña, 2015). We also discussed emerging themes that we had not initially designated in our codebook with the academic leaders of CCC, including the Vice President of Student Services, Dean of Students, Director of Financial Aid, and the Director of the Childcare Center to triangulate our analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As such, subsequent rounds of coding utilized inductive analyses and ground-level feedback from community college professionals, which allowed us to understand nuances in student parents' experiences in this institutional setting (Miles et al., 2016).

## Author Positionalities

It is important to note that as authors, we feel connected and understand student parent participants' struggles in this research study. As the first and second authors are scholar-parents, we have a unique connection to this study population. We share a form of *cultural intuition* that allows us to see and understand the nuances of people's lives as we intersect through culture, traditions, and struggles (Bernal, 1998). As authors, we also negotiate with the complex demands of parenthood and family obligations that may interrupt work, research, and other personal obligations. Granted, we also benefit from middle-incomes that can help provide stability. As Peshkin (1988) helps us to understand our positionality, he comments that the "self and subject became joined" (p. 17). As we cannot easily divorce our lived realities away from the participants, but instead we "[see] people doing something that I realized that I do myself, and I value it" (p. 20). These moments shared by student parents "doing something" heightens our appreciation of their experiences and challenges. The third author of this study is not a student parent but comes to the work as a Latina community college alumni and scholar-practitioner with a deep sense of duty for improving students' lives in the community college system. As Milner (2007) comments, research positionality reminds us that we are not studying "othering," but we are also the *others* as we can center race, ethnicity, gender, marginalization, and lived experiences into our views and interpretations of this research data.

## Findings

### *Knowing Why: College Enrollment and Career Aspirations*

Interviews with student parents revealed several educational trajectories and career aspirations. Several of the student parents in this study enrolled in college directly after high school graduation but took breaks in between, like Jessica, a Latina mother of one, explained:

In 2001 and 2000 I was going to CCC, taking some summer school classes and fall classes, and then I became pregnant with my first son. And I wasn't really liking the way I felt and how the [faculty] were treating me on campus because I was a young pregnant lady. So, I just stopped going to school and then I recently started going back.

Like Jessica, women participants experienced negative faculty interactions and hostile environments when pregnant, which led to their subsequent departure. Most participants in this study took more than a 5-year break between high school and college. During their breaks from college, student parents shared that they worked several jobs and experienced other life changes. For example, Liz, a Latina mother of a 5-year-old daughter, started taking classes at CCC after graduating from high school in 2010 and attended three semesters before dropping out and returning many years later. During the 8-year break, Liz experienced hardship: her mother was deported to Mexico, she was in an abusive relationship, lost her stepfather, became addicted to drugs, and had a child. When Liz decided to get help with therapy and medication, she was introduced to CalWORKS, a statewide welfare-to-work program, and GAIN. This program helps CalWORKS students find employment opportunities, which helped her find a temporary job. Since re-enrolling at CCC in 2018, Liz has been enrolled full-time to obtain an A.A. in Human Services with a concentration on Addiction and Substance Studies so that she can work as soon as possible. Liz shared: *I fell in love with school when I came back. I don't want to stop. That's why I've been taking so many classes right now that I can.* Liz's immediate goal is to graduate with her A.A. in hopes that this degree will better financially provide for her daughter. In the future, she hopes to return and get a B.A. and a master's degree. Liz's connection with on and off-campus resources and agents provided her information on re-enrolling and planning for a career. Liz's story exemplifies how students' experiences, good or bad, contribute to their aspirations.

Like Liz, most student parents' lived experiences influenced their career and education aspirations. For example, Danielle, a Black mother of three (ages 10, 5, 1), shared:

I have three kids, two of the three had gestational diabetes. And I would always meet with a nutritionist who I felt helped me tremendously. . . . So it was just a field that I thought that I would like to go and share my experiences . . . my goal is to work with pregnant moms who are having issues.

Although Danielle had not previously attended college, her experience in and out of hospital settings and caring for her children inspired her to study nutrition. Both Liz and Danielle's *knowing why* (i.e., career aspiration) stemmed directly from their lived experiences and contributed to their career capital.

Since completing the prerequisite courses for the nutrition major, mostly science courses, Danielle has considered pursuing a nursing degree. Miranda, a mother of three, began community college immediately after graduating high school but left school to work at a children's nursery school before returning to CCC several years later. She explained:

I started with general ed and then some of the child development classes. . . later they [employer] offered me a full-time job at the nursery school and so I quit going to school and I was actually in a (daycare) classroom for seven years.

After those 7 years, she was laid off when she got pregnant with her first child. She returned to school in 2014 and has since been studying to obtain an A.A. in Early Childhood Education and transferring to a 4-year university. Like Miranda, participants noted that increased career opportunities, financial capital, and job stability motivated them to complete a college degree. Participants' education and career aspirations differed, yet most expressed gaining a sense of motivation to go back to school and complete a college degree *after* becoming parents. As noted by Ariana, a Latina mother of one:

My son is what motivates me to get him a better future. So that way he can see that, "okay, well, mommy went to college. So, I want to go to college too to get a better degree to get a better job."

Comments such as Ariana's exemplify how aspirational and resistant capital motivates student parents' persistence in college and challenge the belief that Latinas do not complete college. Even more, their motivation to succeed is driven by their identities as parents knowing that their education will inform their children's aspirations.

### ***Knowing How: Navigating Community College as Student Parents***

Student parents noted aspirations that motivated them to pursue higher education, yet they expressed difficulties navigating college. Overwhelmingly, students noted not having enough time in their days to complete their responsibilities as parents *and* college students, as they had to plan courses around the needs of their children. A lack of flexibility with their schedules resulted in student parents having less freedom in the total number of units they could take, and the time of day or types of classes they could enroll such as courses with(out) lab requirements. Also, student parents experienced financial hardships and difficulty accessing resources to help them reach their educational goals. Overwhelmingly their *knowing how* to navigate college depended on the

help of institutional agents, communities and family units, and resources such as internet and transportation.

*Balancing responsibilities and time challenges as a student parent.* Student parents reported balancing multiple on- and off-campus commitments related to their class-work, employment, personal and children's homework, and other household duties. For example, Evelyn, a mother of three studying early child development, noted: *"It's like, how do you say, like a juggler. You have to try to juggle school, work, the kids, a little alone time, a lot of study time, a lot of homework time."* Evelyn explained that she is responsible for chauffeuring her children in public transportation, completing college homework in a local public library due to her inability to afford highspeed Internet services at home, and squeezing studying between cooking dinner for her children. Parents, in general, shared sentiments of feeling overwhelmed by childcare duties and an inability to have moments to themselves, as captured in Debra's statement: *"I don't have time for me. . . So if I am not sleeping or eating, I am studying."* Several student parents commented that they only slept an average of 5 hours a night to study or complete homework after their children went to sleep in the late evening hours. These sentiments, and familial capital, are further reaffirmed by Brandi, a Black mother of two, who plans to transfer to get a B.A. in Human Services shared:

The biggest challenge is really just trying to make time because I don't want to have to put my kids, you know like, "Oh stop, Mommy's trying to do homework." So, it's just like if I just had more time to study or to finish an assignment that didn't cut into our family time, that would be a struggle. But I know too if my sister wasn't able to take my daughter [to school] then that would be definitely [be] even harder to get her to school on time, my son to school on time, and then me on time.

As Brandi commented, if she did not have daily support from her sister, she would have to navigate three different school schedules. Brandi highlights how familial capital is essential source of support to have free moments to study and prepare for her college classes. Therefore, when on-campus support services are difficult to access for student parents, it can create additional hardships. An online-only student and mother of one, Katia, shared the following comment about the services that she uses at CCC:

I obviously don't even use the services on-campus as much, I just use the counselors if I need something on employment and admissions records, [just the] basics. I feel like I'll go crazy if I even try to get to know other places here [on-campus] unless I need them. Cause I don't have the time. . .

Katia is enrolled full-time in online courses to avoid "wasting" time driving and parking at the CCC campus. Her toddler son has special needs, which creates additional hurdles to complete her coursework on time between multiple doctors' appointments as a single mother.

Students commented on the perceived challenges that various CCC offices do not communicate resources or strategies on supporting students and student parents in general with on-campus resources and services. Specifically, several student parents commented about the perceived disjointed information-sharing between offices that confused their navigating resources. As captured in this comment from Mary, a single mother of two, studying psychology,

That's the reason why I actually go and try to look for the direct sources [of information], because the financial [aid office] they send you one thing, admission [office] sends you another.

While students utilize their navigational skills to seek information, they are oftentimes left with inaccurate or conflicting messages from campus agents who are supposed to show them the steps (i.e., “knowhow”) to access the services they need. CCC employees' decisions to silo information cause further challenges to students with limited time to search for the correct and accurate information. Often, community college students will forgo searching for information or enrolling in courses altogether when they cannot retrieve the basic information needed to make informed decisions (Anderson, 2019). Additionally, parents struggled with the schedule of courses offered. As expressed by Nayeli, a mother of one, whose goal is to get accepted into the licensed vocational nursing (LVN) program at CCC:

I need to take a math class and then I want to get into anatomy [class] already so I could be able to join the LVN program, but they're always *so* booked already when it's my turn to choose classes.

In addition to not being able to enroll in courses before they reach enrollment capacity, some student parents noted not being able to enroll in courses because of the time of day they are offered. Depending on the student parents' childcare situation and the time courses are offered, the time to degree may be prolonged past their anticipated timeline. The combination of institutional hurdles for student parents means they must decide to either forgo locating help from CCC employees or sacrificing academic plans to appease their children's schedules. This situation can only exacerbate the challenges and time poverty student parents must experience to pursue a college degree or credential. Such bureaucratic hurdles hinder students' access to accurate information, course scheduling, and childcare. Yet, despite these challenges, their aspirational and resistant capital encourages them to persist.

**Financial challenges.** In addition to experiencing time challenges, student parents shared stories of struggles to pay for monthly rent, childcare, food and clothing, and other basic needs such as the Internet. Miranda, a mother of two whose goal is to be a social worker shared,

Because I am in a low-income family, I'm a single mother, I can't afford the Internet. So, that's another challenge for me. I try to work with what I have. Like when I pick up my

daughter from kindergarten, I have two hours free. I usually [work] those two hours; we usually go to the library because I only have one kid with me and she's older.

Similarly, Evelyn shared that she goes to the library to access the Internet and computer as she does not have those resources at home, she explained: "*it's a struggle trying to do our classwork or meet deadlines and stuff.*" Low-income student parents often depend on on-campus resources to complete their assignments and having children to care for poses an additional navigational challenge.

Jose, a father to a 3-year-old, shared that he only works part-time and is enrolled in three courses as he and his wife are both enrolled in CCC at the same time. Collectively, they must navigate work, class, and childcare schedules each week. The familial capital used to juggle competing schedules and childcare demands is important for Jose, Jesus, and other student parents at home and while enrolled in CCC. Jesus comments, "*And I had to work because I had nobody that can pay my bills so, I just had to – Just so that I can get by.*" He is actively searching for full-time employment and states,

I just need full-time work somewhere else, but something that can also allow me to come to school . . . I would go from part-time to full-time [work] and I would have a set schedule, set pay, and that means if I can't [physically] come to school to take classes within the school, I can at least take [my] online classes. So, it would make it a bit easier for me, too.

Many low-income student parents depend on the support of after-school programs in their local K-12 schools to provide childcare services until the early evening hours. For the student parents without close friends or family members in their local community, this school-based option allows student parents to have a dependable and low-cost support system as additional financial concerns impact their ability to complete their credentials and associate degrees in a timely manner. The ability to locate and use various low-cost services is a testament to how students utilize their social and navigational capital to support themselves and their children.

Some student parents expressed challenges accessing the on-campus childcare center that services only toddlers between the ages of two and five, operates between "working hours" on weekdays, and is closed during weekends and semester breaks. For student parents employed in federal work-study positions on the CCC campus, this means a potential loss of income during semester breaks due to limited childcare support from the childcare center or K-12 based options. The CCC childcare center's schedule poses challenges to students enrolled in evening or weekend courses and need childcare services for children outside the structured age range as not all schools provide after-school programs. Many low-income families are unable to access or afford high-quality childcare centers in the community and the childcare center on the CCC campus is similarly difficult to access. We found that high-quality and licensed childcare near the CCC campus costs over \$1,200 a month per child. As commented by Ariana, a Latina mother of one:

Trust me I get the fact that there's a lot of people in need, but, . . .single parents. . .that go to CCC. . .We all need a place for *them* (our children). I mean, it's really hard outside of

school, so why should it be *harder* inside school? Why should we be on a two-year waiting list [for the childcare center]?

The challenges of being low-income are not only felt at home with pressures to pay bills and other basic needs, but also by depending on free or subsidized services through local K-12 afterschool or wraparound programs to care for their children or accessing Internet services at public libraries. When students cannot access the Internet at home it impacts their ability to enroll in evening or weekend classes to advance their course-taking. Navigating community college as student parents poses a particularly difficult challenge yet students in this study shared a deep sense of aspirational capital and navigational skills to do what they must to remain in school.

### *Knowing Whom: Sources of Information*

*Accessing campus resources.* As previously noted, student parents are often first-generation college-goers, which means they cannot easily inquire with their parents or guardians for advice on how to navigate higher education. As Mary, a single mother, shared, “*My parents didn't go to college, so I knew that me being a single mom, I had to figure it out.*” The concentration of resources in one office space or building can help alleviate unnecessary confusion for student parents. For example, student parents often complained of the need to search throughout the campus to locate accurate resources. Below, Mary shared her frustration over her inability to request “emergency funds” from CCC.

I know that the [CCC] provides emergency funds for students and I still haven't gotten the answer [on how to request and use it]. I go to different people. . . to the Deans. I've walked all the way to the end of the campus. They don't have the answer. But I think that's the only thing that sucks. Sometimes the resources are out there, but we don't know *who* exactly. . . [is] providing the resources.

When resources are difficult to locate, they cannot be utilized by those who need them. Those who are tasked with supporting all students including student parents should clearly and effectively bridge resources. The challenge of finding resources on campus was repeated by various participants, such as Katia, who shared her frustration with having to “bounce around” to find answers, especially as she has limited time. As previously mentioned, student parents experience time poverty which restricts their available time and abilities to search for help and support on-campus. Granted, some student parents are involved with EOPS, CARE, and CalWORKS which can help them access some resources as structured components that require advising sessions with counselors. Brandi, a Black mother of two shared her experience with CalWORKS:

[CalWORKS] helped me pay for the parking passes or if I need extra supplies for the science class lab that I'm in, so then that's money. . . I'm glad they were able to give me that because I needed three different books and I was able to afford them without taking away from anything that I needed to get for my kids.

Other students may not be eligible for on-campus services due to different eligibility factors, as shared by Liz:

I am receiving the California Waiver to pay for the credits for the units [but] I don't receive financial aid just because back when I dropped out [of college], I didn't take school seriously. . . so financial aid doesn't trust me right now. So, I have to prove to them. . . I'm working towards that.

As Liz works on her A.A., she works part-time delivering food with app-based company because she is unable to find stable employment. As such, over the upcoming summer, Liz plans to attend CCC online because she needs to find a stable job to support her child. Although she would like to work on campus, because she had previously exhausted her financial aid she is unable to enroll in a work-study program. Students like Liz could benefit from knowledge and access to other on-campus resources that could help her find a job. *Knowing who* to contact and what questions to ask is a key component in developing a career capital yet, without the structures in place to provide accessible information, student parents are disadvantaged.

As exemplified in the findings shown, student parents are resilient in their attempts to navigate college, yet they face struggles in accessing resources. Besides, when student parents can see and connect with counseling-faculty at CCC they at times met with unwelcoming messages via institutional policies. As shared by Evelyn: “[there are] signs around admissions [offices] saying that no children are allowed on campus.” This can be deflating for student parents who are trying to gain necessary college advising information, as shared by Jose:

And we know that we can't bring our son to the campus because counselors can't see you when you have a kid with you – they won't see you. They'll just immediately tell you; they can't see you, so you'll have to reschedule, you have to get somebody to watch [your children] or whatever.

Such policies send a message to student parents that their children do not belong and serve as a distraction to campus agents. Student parents utilize their navigational capital to seek resources and information to make important career and educational decisions, yet they are met with institutional policies that hinder their abilities to make accurate and informed decisions. Even further, these policies do not honor student parents and their children's identities and sense of belonging on campus.

*Career counseling and faculty interactions.* As noted in the previous section, student parents seek resources on campus though they are sometimes difficult to find. Regarding their career choices, student parents often enter college with an idea of what they want to pursue, whether it is nutrition, child development, or nursing. Still, as many are first-generation college students, sometimes their education aspirations do not match their career goals. To gain information about career pathways, student parents look to institutional agents, including workers in offices such as CalWORKS, counseling, as well as teaching faculty, but many campus agents are unaware of all available campus

**Table 1.** Demographics of the Student Sample.

	Demographic characteristic
	No. of students out of 67
Race/ethnicity	Black/African American: 10 Hispanic/Latinx: 24 Asian American/Pacific Islanders: 4 Mixed race or ethnicities: 8 Egyptian: 2 Did not disclose: 19
Gender	Men: 3 Women: 59
Number of children	Did not disclose: 5 Five children: 1 Four children: 4 Three children: 18 Two children: 15 One child: 24
Ages of children	Did not disclose: 5 1 to 23 months: 11 2 to 4: 35 5 to 8: 30 9 to 11: 20 12 to 18: 23 19+: 3 Pregnant: 1
Relationship status	Did not disclose: 7 Married: 8 Single: 23 Partnered/engaged: 18 Divorced/separated: 5 Did not disclose: 13

resources for student parents. Although some students experienced stigmas and inflexibility by staff, some also experienced positive faculty interactions. Some even gained career advice from teaching faculty members. For example, Liz shared:

One of my professors is the one that guides me when I need help on my career choice or classes to take. Sometimes the counselors *don't* have the right answers to some of our questions because they're not in the career of my choice. So, going to a professor that's been there and done that has been helpful.

Other students cited the counselors at CalWORKs as informing their major/career choices. For example, counselors often suggested majors that would be “quicker” to graduate from based on their prior coursework or suggested careers based on results

from a career test. The information gained and relationships made with faculty and counselors in CalWORKs highlights the importance of utilizing social and navigational capital for future professional advancement. Although CCC has a Career Center, most students revealed not understanding the purpose of the center, never visiting the center, and therefore never utilized it to talk with counselors about possible career or internship trajectories related to their majors. Kathy, a mother to one child (14), who is studying vocational nursing, commented that she “went to the Counseling Center and they told me to go the [Career Center], but I was trying to get directions from a career counselor, and they wouldn’t give it to me either.” In this same focus group, Thomas who is studying Culinary Arts and father to two children (4, 9): “I just. . . I don’t know. . . I haven’t spoken to a counselor about it (career advice)” and Catherine mother to three children (2, 4, 9), who is studying psychology stated, “No. I’ve never used [any campus services].” Similarly, when Jude, a Filipino military veteran and father to two children (3, 1), was asked who he seeks out for career advice he responded, “Not really. That’s what my wife’s for (to provide advice) . . . She’s the one that researched more on the educational portion . . . from the military side.” Jude’s wife helped him to navigate his GI Bill benefits. But when Jude does seek support from a Veterans counselor at CCC to update his educational plan. Due to a previous accident, he has access to disability services and being a first-generation college-goer, has access to EOPS.

Traditionally, career centers provide students the “hidden curriculum” of how to prepare for interviews and communicate their skills to future employers (Hora et al., 2019). Diana, a mother to two children (9, 11) shared that she did not return to college until her children were settled into school and after her husband was in a serious car accident that prevented him from working. When she was asked if she had visited the Career Center, she comments:

I never visited the Career Center. I didn’t know about it until after, I think I met with the counselor from CalWORKs and he spoke about it to me. But I’m like well I’m in there already, I have too many units, how should I balance it out? I’ll just go with the flow and then just drop it [from RN program] to the LVN program and see how I handle that situation.

Diana receives career and academic advice from the CalWORKs counselor. As shared by the participants in this section, most have not used or are aware of the benefits of the CCC Career Center to receive additional advice about career pathways. When students do seek advice, it is from non-career counselors and faculty members in their fields who have more hands-on perspective of courses and career fields. The limited use of the Career Center may limit students’ exposure to knowledge of labor markets, and education needed to participate in the workforce.

## Discussion

Through this case study, we provide ample evidence that student parents of color in this community college face significant challenges while pursuing their academic and

career goals. Our study corroborates existing scholarship on this group of students: chilling climates, incoherent institutional practices, lack of affordable campus-based child-care, struggles navigating or being aware of all offices, programs, and services, and meager and counterproductive financial aid policies combined with other social factors which make earning a credential or degree difficult if not impossible for student parents (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2011; Stuart, et al., 2014). Furthermore, our case study illustrates those institutional strategies and supports for student parents to obtain career information to help ease their decision-making are severely lacking. That is, student parents rely, sporadically, on a handful of faculty members and counselors to gain access to critical career information and job-related opportunities, and information for campus-based resources that promote persistence. Although we recognize the need to have singular and dedicated offices for financial aid, advising, career centers, what we find is the need for centralized services and resources for student parents to be better served by the college.

As California aims to center equity efforts throughout the community college system, it is important to recognize the unique needs and challenges for student parents. In many ways, the findings of this study demonstrate the need for a guided pathways approach that, first and foremost, recognizes the knowledge and skills that student parents bring to campuses (Bragg et al., 2019). For example, if community college counselors were able to provide appropriate support for students of color, students could benefit from meta majors and understand the implications of their major decision choices (Baker, 2018; Baker & Orona, 2020). Second, colleges could utilize students' experiences, particularly their labor histories to help student parents explore several career options and pathways in order not to create additional hurdles to reach success (Rose et al., 2019).

As discussed earlier in this paper, there is a need to move beyond a single and straightforward "career capital" model that does not account for the nuances of student parents' lives, including their navigational and aspirational capitals that are embedded in their past and current labor histories. We present multiple instances where students utilize their social, navigational, and resistant capital and still they were hindered by bureaucratic policies (e.g., no children allowed in counseling appointments). Our conceptual approach and findings remind scholars, campus leaders, and practitioners that structural solutions (e.g., services such as having a child development center on campus, access to a career center, and extended/weekend hours) need to be grounded in a contextual understanding of students' lived realities and cultural wealth.

Our work builds on the scholarship of others who argue higher education must empower campus advisors to share knowledge and resources with student parents to be successful (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Cerven, 2013; Huerta & Fishman, 2014; Sallee & Cox, 2019). We advance the understanding of student parents in community colleges by highlighting their personal motivations to return and be successful in college, but also how they garner, or not, support to consider future careers and how facilitates that information to them. Overall, many student parents return to higher education to prepare for new and stable careers, albeit, without the direct support or intentional investment from the *career center*, and this disconnection warrants further investigation to understand

*why* student parents are aware or choosing not to use those services. The limited connection to the career center is a missing opportunity to foster social and navigational capitals with students. Community colleges should tap into the resources and labor market conditions that exist within the local context and that student parents themselves bring to their courses and campus, and the aspirations they hold for the future. Specifically, we encourage colleges to explore providing work-based learning opportunities and partnerships with local businesses and services to ensure student parents have opportunities to succeed both academically and occupationally.

## **Recommendations for Practice and Policy**

If marginalized student parents complete their certificates and degrees, both they and their children and families could expect improved social, economic, and health outcomes (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). As such, institutional practices and policy reforms could significantly enhance the extent to which the benefits of postsecondary education accrue to marginalized student parents and ensure that those benefits are distributed equitably. Here, we discuss possible institutional reforms that could improve student parents' college experiences and decision-making processes as they pursue their academic and occupational goals.

Identification process to support student parents need to develop a series of strategies to identify student parents in internal databases and to understand their specific academic needs and their career aspirations and goals (Aspen Institute, 2019). Institutions must bring together various data sources, in admissions, through the financial aid process, and through specific academic programs and services offered on-campus. Failing to identify student parents and their experiences and needs will result in more unnecessary obstacles in gaining access to institutional supports and local, state, or federal services and programs that they are benefit eligible (Emrey-Arras, 2019).

Bundling services in a single-stop location can provide the following services: financial aid advisor, counseling-faculty, career, and job-related information, wellness, basic-needs, and other services should be in a designated office focused on student parents and their children (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016). This relocation of services can reduce the amount of time and offices that student parents must visit to complete college-related tasks and promote a heightened sense of connection and belonging (Wladis et al., 2018).

Revise institutional policies to create a family-friendly campus. Engage in an institutional process to revise all academic and student affairs and building policies that intersect with student parents' college experiences and career goals. For example, making sure that children are allowed on-campus (in classes and appointments with counseling-faculty). Another concrete recommendation is to provide dedicated spaces across campus where student parents can "hang out" with their kids and other family members (e.g., library, cafeteria, etc.) and offer free age and developmentally appropriate activities and resources.

Secure funds to assess institutional efforts. State policies, including guided pathways, the California college promise, and the student-centered funding formula are vital

resources for helping student parents. These resources should be utilized more strategically to provide more support to student parents financially and academically. Additionally, institutions can make sure they apply to grant funding that the U.S. Department of Education has available to increase and improve the services offered to student parents (Emrey-Arras, 2019). Finally, we encourage colleges to partner with local foundations, businesses, and research teams to monitor and assess the effectiveness of the implemented strategies to support student parents across campus and in the local community.

Each of the recommendations described here has the potential to enhance persistence and degree completion rates among marginalized student parents. For all the reasons we have described in this paper, making postsecondary education a more successful experience for more student parents and may be an essential part of any family-friendly agenda in local community colleges.

## Conclusion

Our study finds that community colleges must do more for student parents, specifically student parents of color. Attention to these parents' needs and their lived experiences in the institutional habits, practices, and processes is also lacking. Student parents are resilient and are showing up on our campuses and in classrooms despite the difficulty of accessing resources and opportunities and navigating institutions. We know that the benefit of obtaining a postsecondary degree and/or credential has a tremendous impact on the lives of student parents themselves and that of their children. Lastly, it is estimated that a single mother who earns an associate degree will earn about \$256,000 more over a lifetime than a single mother who only finished high school (Cruse et al., 2019). The time to provide student parents of color with the many resources they need to succeed in college and beyond is now.

## Author Note

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## ORCID iD

Adrian H. Huerta  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6920-9350>

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## Author Biographies

**Adrian H. Huerta** is an Assistant Professor of Education in the Pullias Center for Higher Education located in the Rossier School of Education at USC. Dr. Huerta’s research centers boys and men of color, college access and (in)equity, and gang-involved populations.

**Cecilia Rios-Aguilar** is Professor of Education and Associate Dean of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion at UCLA’s School of Education and Information Studies (Ed&IS). Currently, Dr. Rios-Aguilar is examining how community college students make decisions about majors, careers, and jobs and how can institutions better support their academic and occupational trajectories.

**Daisy Ramirez** is a PhD Candidate in Higher Education at UCLA’s School of Education and Information Studies (Ed&IS). Her research examines how neoliberal institutional logics shape faculty and staff of color labor in the community college sector.