

# IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 CARE CRISIS FOR STUDENT PARENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>1</sup> emergency funds were disbursed to student populations in higher educational institutions who met specific criteria.<sup>2</sup> How student parents, also commonly referred to as “parenting students” and “students with dependents,”<sup>3</sup> are recognized and included in federal, state, and local institutions’ provisions have grave implications for their ability to successfully complete their post-secondary education toward second-generation outcomes.<sup>4</sup> This moment in recent

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1. See generally Yu Shi et al., *An Overview of COVID-19*, 21 J. ZHEJIANG U. BIOMED. & BIOTECH. 343 (2020).

2. Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, 15 748 U.S.C.S. §§ 9001-914118004 (2020); *CARES Act: Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund*, U.S. DEP’T OF EDUC., <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/caresact.html> (Aug. 30, 2023); *CRRSAA: Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF II)*, U.S. DEP’T OF EDUC., <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/crrsaa.html> [<https://perma.cc/E5CR-3E9V>] (Oct. 18, 2021).

3. THERESA ANDERSON & AUTUMN GREEN, URBAN INST., ROADMAP FOR CHANGE TO SUPPORT PREGNANT AND PARENTING STUDENTS 5 (2022), <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/roadmap-change-support-pregnant-and-parenting-students> [<https://perma.cc/34ZQ-ZEQ4>].

4. See *The 2Gen Approach*, ASCEND ASPEN INST., <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/2gen-approach/> [<https://perma.cc/SA9V-8W3N>] (last visited Oct. 15, 2023) (“2Gen approaches recognize whole family units – as families define themselves – to consider the variety of pathways for promoting positive, pragmatic, and effective outcomes for everyone.”); see generally ANNE

history allows us to explore what this future of learning means for student parents, as well as how we can reorganize and reprioritize our educational institutions, so that such students can fully thrive in their duality of roles as students and as parents, and create successful paths toward economic security for their families.<sup>5</sup>

In order to take stock of the COVID-19 responses to the care crisis<sup>6</sup> and to re-envision higher education for student parents, institutions of higher education can embrace the responsibility of acknowledging and rectifying the historical injustices that have hindered parenting students' educational pursuits. Colleges can create empowering environments that uplift and honor the unique experiences and challenges faced by parenting students through more inclusive policies, flexible academic structures, and comprehensive, student-centered support systems.<sup>7</sup> By looking at the barriers pregnant and parenting students have encountered and proactively addressing them, higher education can pave the way for a future where all individuals, regardless of their parental status, have equitable opportunities

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MOSLE & MARJORIE SIMS, ASCEND AT THE ASPEN INST., STATE OF THE FIELD: TWO-GENERATION APPROACHES TO FAMILY WELL-BEING (2021), <https://ascend-resources.aspeninstitute.org/resources/state-of-the-field-two-generation-approaches-to-family-well-being/>

5. See THERESA ANDERSON ET AL., URBAN INST., SUPPORTING YOUNG PARENTS: IMPACTS OF THE NEW YORK CITY PERFORMANCE PARTNERSHIP PILOT (P3) ON YOUNG PARENTS OUTCOMES 1, 14 (2022), [https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/supporting-young-parents-impacts-of-the-new-york-city-performance-partnership-pilot-p3-on-you\\_1.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/supporting-young-parents-impacts-of-the-new-york-city-performance-partnership-pilot-p3-on-you_1.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/7YJF-8ZCF>]; see also ANNE MOSLE & NISHA PATEL, ASCEND AT THE ASPEN INST., TWO GENERATIONS, ONE FUTURE: MOVING PARENTS AND CHILDREN BEYOND POVERTY TOGETHER 3, 11, 16 (2017), [https://ascend-resources.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Aspen\\_Ascend20Report\\_Two\\_Gen\\_One\\_Future.pdf](https://ascend-resources.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Aspen_Ascend20Report_Two_Gen_One_Future.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/9RHJ-KM6B>]; see also ZAKIA REDD ET AL., CHILD TRENDS, TWO GENERATIONS IN POVERTY: STATUS AND TRENDS AMONG PARENTS AND CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES, 2000-2010 at 1-2, 6 (2011), <https://cms.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/2011-25DUPGenerationsInPoverty.pdf>.

6. This essay emerged from the two-part COVID Care Crisis Symposium organized in January 2021 and June 2022 by the Hamilton Lugar School of Global and International Studies at Indiana University. See *Symposium on the COVID Care Crisis and its Implications for Legal Academia*, IND. UNIV. BLOOMINGTON (2021), <https://hls.indiana.edu/covid-symposium/2021-symposium.html> [<https://perma.cc/3P5Y-DCR5>]; see also *The COVID Care Crisis Symposium, Part II: Imagining Solutions and Taking Action*, IND. UNIV. BLOOMINGTON (2021), <https://hls.indiana.edu/covid-symposium/index.html#schedule> [<https://perma.cc/2FZ9-ZRDN>].

7. See, e.g., Nina Agrawal, *For Students with Kids, College Can be a Lonely Struggle. One Program Aims to Help*, L.A. TIMES (Dec. 27, 2019, 6 AM), <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-12-27/community-college-program-helps-student-parents> [<https://perma.cc/MUB7-EZB8>]; see, e.g., *Student Parent Center*, U.C. BERKELEY, <https://studentparents.berkeley.edu/home> [<https://perma.cc/V5XN-72V2>] (last visited Oct. 15, 2023) (“The Student Parent Center is committed to the holistic support and success of a highly motivated population of undergraduate and graduate students who are engaged scholars, as well as devoted parents at UC Berkeley.”).

to pursue their educational aspirations and create better futures for themselves and their families.

Most importantly, we want to argue that it is no longer acceptable to continue the patriarchal status quo of a “care-evasive”<sup>8</sup> ideology of offering “solutions”<sup>9</sup> that do not address the underlying mechanisms of the status quo advantages of students without caretaking responsibilities. Pregnant and parenting students have always existed in our higher educational learning spaces, but the emergence of COVID-19 forced higher education institutions to confront the ways their campuses have been exclusionary to particular groups’ access to education.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, equity-driven allies found each other online during the pandemic and co-conspired with one another during this period of survival and solidarity.<sup>11</sup> Philanthropic and intermediary organizations<sup>12</sup> simultaneously gained momentum in their

8. We use the term “care-evasive” to shift away from a “care-blind” ideology, which views who does the care work as immaterial to student experiences in higher education. Instead, we focus on care evasiveness in the ways institutions refuse to recognize how care work limits the possibilities of thriving for the students these institutions serve. *See generally* Margaret W. Sallee & Rebecca D. Cox, *Thinking Beyond Childcare: Supporting Community College Student-Parents*, 125 AM. J. EDUC. 621 (2019) (explaining “care-blind” ideology); *see also* Subini Ancy Annamma et al., *Conceptualizing Color-Evasiveness: Using Dis/ability Critical Race Theory to Expand a Color-Blind Racial Ideology in Education and Society*, 20 RACE ETHNICITY AND EDUC. 147 (2017) (discussing the shift in education and society from a historically color-blind racial ideology to a racial ideology of color-evasiveness).

9. *See, e.g.*, RACHEL SCHUMACHER, INST. FOR WOMEN’S POL’Y RSCH., PREPPING COLLEGES FOR PARENTS: STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING STUDENT PARENT SUCCESS IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION, (2015), [https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Support-for-Student-Parents-Paper\\_MAIN\\_6-17-15-clean.pdf](https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Support-for-Student-Parents-Paper_MAIN_6-17-15-clean.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/T8UK-XTEP>].

10. *See generally* Hung-Chu Lin et al., *Responding to the Pressing yet Unrecognized Needs of Student-Parents amid the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 70 J. AM. COLL. HEALTH 2276 (2022).

11. *See* Sade Bonilla et al., *The Politics of COVID-19 and Educational Inequities*, 97 PEABODY J. EDUC. 251, 252 (2022) (arguing that the pandemic increased the possibility of increased social solidarity in the U.S., as evidenced by federal policies such as the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), signed into law on March 27, 2020); *see also* Connie L. McNeely & Laurie A. Schintler, *The Pandemic Challenge: Reflections on the Social Justice Dynamic*, 12 WORLD MED. & HEALTH POL’Y 344, 344-46 (2020).

12. *See* ASCEND ASPEN INST., <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org> [<https://perma.cc/MUM8-MZ5M>] (last visited Oct. 15, 2023); IMAGINABLE FUTURES, <https://www.imaginablefutures.com> [<https://perma.cc/37Q3-5SEG>] (last visited Oct. 15, 2023); INST. FOR WOMEN’S POL’Y RSCH., <https://iwpr.org> [<https://perma.cc/4WZM-RE42>] (last visited Oct. 15, 2023); GENERATION HOPE, <https://www.generationhope.org> [<https://perma.cc/Q7WY-KR69>] (last visited Oct. 15, 2023); URBAN INST., <https://www.urban.org> [<https://perma.cc/A86H-SFJT>] (last visited Oct. 15, 2023); THE EDUC. TR.-W., <https://west.edtrust.org> [<https://perma.cc/AT24-GQAM>] (last visited Oct. 15, 2023); MICHELSON 20MM, <https://20mm.org> [<https://perma.cc/FY3U-2YJV>] (last visited Oct. 15, 2023); ECMC FOUND., <https://www.ecmcfoundation.org> [<https://perma.cc/BH8T-32JZ>] (last visited Oct. 15, 2023); THE PREGNANT SCHOLAR, <https://thepregnantscholar.org> [<https://perma.cc/3SNN-R9WS>] (last visited Oct. 15, 2023); LUMINA FOUND., <https://www.luminafoundation.org> [<https://perma.cc/HNK5-83BB>] (last visited Oct. 15, 2023), for more on philanthropic and intermediary organizations.

coalition-building work within this ecosystem and leveraged online spaces to catalyze collaborations toward shared outcomes.<sup>13</sup> Collectively, these organizations have created mechanisms that have (1) increased student parent visibility on campuses, (2) identified the barriers that hindered student parents' educational and life outcomes, and (3) proposed solutions and pathways<sup>14</sup> that center student parent joy, learning, and thriving.<sup>15</sup>

This article is framed in four parts. Part 1 describes the diversity of student parents in colleges and universities through the lens of invisibility and hypervisibility. Part 2 looks at some of the opportunities that opened up during COVID-19 and the transition “back to normal.” Part 3 offers a framework that centers pregnant and parenting students' belonging and thriving in the academy. Part 4 examines both the unintended and intended consequences of recent political and legal decisions that will impact how campuses respond. We conclude with remarks on what a path forward might mean for pregnant and parenting students in higher education institutions in the U.S.

## II. PART 1: INVISIBLE YET HYPERVISIBLE: STUDENT PARENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Recent data shows that “[m]ore than one in five college students—or 22[%] of all undergraduates—are parents.”<sup>16</sup> Within a growing body of research on this subpopulation, student parents are primarily single, women of color, and low-income.<sup>17</sup> Twenty-seven percent of Indigenous undergraduate students are student parents.<sup>18</sup> For example, “[a]mong African American female undergraduates, a staggering 47[%] are raising dependent children while in school, and [65%] of them work while caring

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13. See, e.g., *Policy & Advocacy*, GENERATION HOPE, <https://www.generationhope.org/policy-advocacy> [<https://perma.cc/M8AC-FYVV>] (last visited Oct. 15, 2023).

14. See generally ANDERSON & GREEN, *supra* note 3.

15. See *Who We Are*, ECMC FOUND., <https://www.ecmcfoundation.org/who-we-are/about> [<https://perma.cc/3AMD-3CEY>] (last visited Oct. 15, 2023); see also *Today's Students*, LUMINA FOUND., <https://www.luminafoundation.org/topics/todays-students/> [<https://perma.cc/K4BS-XVDD>] (last visited Oct. 15, 2023).

16. LINDSEY REICHLIN CRUSE ET AL., INST. FOR WOMEN'S POL'Y RSCH. & ASCEND AT THE ASPEN INST., *PARENTS IN COLLEGE BY THE NUMBERS 1* (2020), [https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/C481\\_Parents-in-College-By-the-Numbers-Aspen-Ascend-and-IWPR.pdf](https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/C481_Parents-in-College-By-the-Numbers-Aspen-Ascend-and-IWPR.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/H2ZE-MLLR>].

17. *Id.* at 1-3.

18. Renee Ryberg et al., *Meeting Indigenous Parenting Students' Needs Promotes Equity in Higher Ed*, CHILD TRENDS (May 2, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.56417/8535e2648u> [<https://perma.cc/D42N-PPYR>].

for their families and attending college.”<sup>19</sup> This student population has a lower retention rate and longer timeline toward degree completion because issues such as employment, childcare, housing, and finances impact how these students experience learning.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, student parents may also be the first generation in their family to attend college or be undocumented—compounding their challenges of successfully navigating through colleges and universities.<sup>21</sup>

Institutions often render student parents both invisible<sup>22</sup> and hypervisible.<sup>23</sup> This happens most when leadership “performs diversity” without actually addressing marginalizing policies, practices, and cultures that make it more difficult for student parents to graduate and enter the workforce.<sup>24</sup> Despite the strong evidence that supporting student parents mitigates equity challenges,<sup>25</sup> colleges are less than eager to collect data on this population,<sup>26</sup> make it visible and public within institutional language,

19. Tina Cheuk, *The Invisible Woman: Student Parents and the COVID-19 Pandemic*, THE FORUM OF AM. J. OF EDUC. (Aug. 13, 2021), <https://www.ajeforum.com/the-invisible-woman-student-parents-and-the-covid-19-pandemic-by-tina-cheuk/> [<https://perma.cc/L29D-9UAJ>].

20. See Barbara Gault & Lindsey Reichlin Cruse, *Access to Child Care Can Improve Student Parent Graduation Rates*, INST. FOR WOMEN’S POL’Y RSCH. (May 12, 2017), <https://iwpr.org/access-to-child-care-can-improve-student-parent-graduation-rates/> [<https://perma.cc/8RE8-S9XF>]; see also THE EDUC. TRUST-WEST, HEAR MY VOICE II: SUPPORTING SUCCESS FOR PARENTING AND UNHOUSED WOMEN OF COLOR (2017), <https://west.edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/etw-hear-my-voice-report-final-version-2.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/C8VG-NCJV>]; see also CAL. COMPETES, CLARIFYING THE TRUE COST OF COLLEGE FOR STUDENT PARENTS 1 (2020), [https://californiacompetes.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/CACompetes\\_Clarifying-the-True-Cost-of-College-for-Student-Parents\\_Final.pdf](https://californiacompetes.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/CACompetes_Clarifying-the-True-Cost-of-College-for-Student-Parents_Final.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/LX2L-VSS8>].

21. See generally ANTHONY ABRAHAM JACK, THE PRIVILEGED POOR (2019); see also Ernest T. Pascarella et al., *First-Generation College Students: Additional Evidence on College Experiences and Outcomes*, 75 J. HIGHER EDUC. 249, 249-51 (2004); see generally Michael Trivette & David J. English, *Finding Freedom: Facilitating Postsecondary Pathways for Undocumented Students*, 31 EDUC. POL’Y 858 (2017).

22. Cheuk, *supra* note 19.

23. See generally Andrea Brighenti, *Visibility: A Category for the Social Sciences*, 55 CURRENT SOCIO. 323 (2007).

24. See generally CHAUNTÉ WHITE & LINDSEY REICHLIN CRUSE, INST. FOR WOMEN’S POL’Y RSCH., SUPPORTING STUDENT PARENT RECOVERY THROUGH STATE POLICY (2021), [https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Supporting-Student-Parent-Recovery-through-State-Policy\\_FINAL.pdf](https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Supporting-Student-Parent-Recovery-through-State-Policy_FINAL.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/9EXA-ZVJV>].

25. See VICTORIA FRANK, UNIV. OF WIS.-MILWAUKEE, SUPPORTING PARENTS STRIVING FOR SUCCESS: AN EVALUATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MILWAUKEE LIFE IMPACT PROGRAM 3 (2020), [https://uwm.edu/global-inclusion/wp-content/uploads/sites/283/2020/07/Life\\_Impact\\_Report\\_102517.FINAL\\_.pdf](https://uwm.edu/global-inclusion/wp-content/uploads/sites/283/2020/07/Life_Impact_Report_102517.FINAL_.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/C9CY-PBMY>].

26. See Da’Shon Carr et al., *Utilizing Data to Make Student Parents a Visible Population*, NEW AM. (July 12, 2023), <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/utilizing-data-to-make-student-parents-a-visible-population/> [<https://perma.cc/MMG4-WCYJ>] (noting the

and provide resources to support parenting students' familial and academic success. This deliberate form of inaction is an example of care-evasiveness that permeates much of our higher education institutions and reflects the priorities of our society. Not collecting data on student parents allows institutional leaders—and the wider public—to be willfully ignorant and unable to concretely identify inequities and inequalities for this student group. We posit that being a student parent is considered less desirable for institutions of higher education due to micro and macro interactions that include normative beliefs, cultural hierarchies, and economic costs related to enrolling and supporting student parents—effects that are biased more toward mothers who bear the brunt of caretaking responsibilities.<sup>27</sup>

### III. PART 2: OPPORTUNITIES UNVEILED FOR STUDENT PARENTS DURING COVID-19

Profound societal shifts can occur during times of crisis, and the COVID pandemic served as a transformative moment for those of us in higher education systems to reevaluate priorities, structures, and relationships with the institution and with one another. We want to recognize that the characteristics of student parents are not monolithic, as they are not universally the same.<sup>28</sup> However, as seen and experienced during COVID-19, we saw that student parents have targeted needs, most of which were guided by students' gender and income status, intersecting closely with their racial identity and (for many) immigration status.<sup>29</sup> In this section, we offer three observations stemming from the recent pandemic to prompt institutions of higher education, student parents, and their allies to reassess their values, systems, and priorities during this moment of reckoning. These opportunities include (1) capitalizing on this historical moment to redesign what learning and thriving can look like for student parents, (2) leveraging the increased solidarity and community

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importance of gathering students' parental status on a regular basis, not just at a point in time, as students can become pregnant at any point of their educational career).

27. See Stephen Benard & Shelley Correll, *Normative Discrimination and the Motherhood Penalty*, 24 GENDER & SOC'Y 616, 617 (2010); see also Paula England et al., *Progress Toward Gender Equality in the United States has Slowed or Stalled*, 117 PNAS 6990, 6694-95 (2020); see generally Cecilia L. Ridgeway & Shelley J. Correll, *Motherhood as a Status Characteristic*, 60 J. SOC. ISSUES 683 (2004); see generally CAITLYN COLLINS, MAKING MOTHERHOOD WORK: HOW WOMEN MANAGE CAREERS AND CAREGIVING (2019).

28. See Cruse et al., *supra* note 16, at 3-5.

29. See generally Trivette & English, *supra* note 21; see also *Education and Socioeconomic Status*, AM. PSYCH. ASS'N (2017), <https://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/education> [<https://perma.cc/RLX5-4WGV>].

building through movement and coalition building, and (3) building and augmenting the efforts in the area of basic needs toward equitable and successful degree completion.<sup>30</sup>

A. *The Pandemic is a Portal*

Arundhati Roy's essay, *The Pandemic is a Portal*, eloquently offered this lesson: "Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next."<sup>31</sup> Roy's words were quite prescient, as the United States underwent a racial reckoning, forcing people in positions of power to reconcile systemic inequalities surfaced by the pandemic and the political climate amidst George Floyd's murder.<sup>32</sup> Previously, marginalized groups led the charge for change independently, and often without allies or collaborators.<sup>33</sup> However, during the pandemic, there was a shift in responsibility, both personal and organizational, forcing those with power and privilege to challenge the status quo and share the responsibility in creating systemic change, alleviating the burden of advocacy historically carried by marginalized groups.<sup>34</sup>

Many higher education institutions grappled with their role in perpetuating systemic racism and the systematic exclusion of people of color, particularly Black people.<sup>35</sup> Although Black students were often centered in diversity, equity, and inclusion conversations, higher education commitments expanded to benefit other groups as well, including parenting students (who are more likely to be of color).<sup>36</sup> With this, we witnessed

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30. See generally ANDERSON & GREEN, *supra* note 3.

31. Arundhati Roy, *The Pandemic is a Portal*, FIN. TIMES (Apr. 3, 2020), <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca> [<https://perma.cc/ZG77-YKF3>].

32. See *How George Floyd Died, and What Happened Next*, N.Y. TIMES (July 29, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd.html#:~:text=weeks%20of%20protests,-,Mr.,fentanyl%20and%20methamphetamine%20in%20Mr> [<https://perma.cc/6HQG-W43T>].

33. See Pooja Bachani Di Giovanna, *Engaging Marginalized Communities: Challenges and Best Practices*, ICMA (Sept. 1, 2021), <https://icma.org/articles/pm-magazine/engaging-marginalized-communities-challenges-and-best-practices> [<https://perma.cc/5S9N-9U6W>].

34. *Id.*

35. See Elizabeth Baylor, *Closed Doors: Black and Latino Students are Excluded from Top Public Universities*, CTR. FOR AM. PROGRESS (Oct. 13, 2016), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/closed-doors-black-and-latino-students-are-excluded-from-top-public-universities/> [<https://perma.cc/CWW8-UDMG>].

36. CRUSE ET AL., *supra* note 16, at 3-4.

how Black Lives Matter<sup>37</sup> solidarity and protests transformed higher education institutions for all marginalized students, increasing solidarity and community for the most marginalized and underserved.<sup>38</sup>

The pandemic also served as a portal for student parents. On the one hand, the pandemic exposed and exacerbated existing social inequalities faced by pregnant and parenting students in universities, especially those from marginalized backgrounds. During this time, student parents, especially first-generation college students and those experiencing poverty, faced increased vulnerability due to limited economic resources, lack of access to childcare, and the increased mental stressors of taking care of themselves and their children.<sup>39</sup> In balancing their responsibilities as students and parents, they had to manage greater time poverty than their non-parent peers, with student mothers disproportionately facing the time crunch.<sup>40</sup>

Despite these obstacles, student parents demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptation during the COVID-19 pandemic. A silver lining for student parents during the pandemic was that they no longer had to commute to campus when learning moved online, and the time gained allowed student parents to spend more time with their children and focus more on academics.<sup>41</sup> Admittedly, student parents had to seek out creative solutions to accommodate both their children's schooling needs and their own needs as learners, so that they could engage in online classes, complete

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37. Larry Buchanan et al., *Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History*, N.Y. TIMES (July 3, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html> [<https://perma.cc/ZQ7D-HTKF>].

38. See *What Does the Higher Education Community Mean for the Black Lives Matter Movement?*, AM. COUNCIL ON EDUC.: HIGHER EDUC. TODAY (Mar. 16, 2016), <https://www.higheredtoday.org/2016/03/16/ace2016-what-does-the-higher-education-community-mean-for-the-black-lives-matter-movement/> [<https://perma.cc/2RNS-RM5F>].

39. See generally BRITTANI WILLIAMS ET AL., THE EDUC. TRUST, FOR STUDENT PARENTS, THE BIGGEST HURDLES TO HIGHER EDUCATION ARE COST AND FINDING CHILD CARE (2022), <https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/For-Student-Parents-The-Biggest-Hurdles-to-a-Higher-Education-Are-Cost-and-Finding-Child-Care-August-2022.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/Y8NZ-DFC9>]; see also ASCEND AT THE ASPEN INST., IMPROVING MENTAL HEALTH OF STUDENT PARENTS: A FRAMEWORK FOR HIGHER EDUCATION 2 (2021), [https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/MentalHealthFramework\\_Final.pdf](https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/MentalHealthFramework_Final.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/M93M-PWX5>].

40. See generally Katherine M. Conway et al., *Time Poverty and Parenthood: Who Has Time for College?*, 7 AERA OPEN 1 (2021).

41. See Christin Perry, *Silver Linings: Positive Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children*, PARENTS (May 31, 2022), <https://www.parents.com/kids/health/childrens-mental-health/silver-linings-positive-effects-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-children/> [<https://perma.cc/3X3J-EHGU>].

assignments, and make progress toward their degrees.<sup>42</sup> In our conversations with student parents as part of our #StudentParentJoy campaign,<sup>43</sup> we encountered stories of late night and early morning study sessions, and reliance on spouses, partners, family members, and extended family and friends for alternative caregiving arrangements so that student parents could successfully complete their coursework and not be inadvertently pushed out of higher education. For student parents who were able to stay on course during this time, their ability to navigate multiple responsibilities, adjust to remote learning for themselves and for their children, seek support from their networks, find solutions to the myriad of economic challenges, and maintain their commitment to education is a testament to their strength and determination.<sup>44</sup>

### B. *Increased Solidarity and Community*

The COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly became a catalyst for increasing social solidarity within communities worldwide. During stay-at-home orders, college student activists recognized the shared vulnerability and interdependence that came with the crisis.<sup>45</sup> The sense of a common threat brought students together, leading to remarkable organizing efforts toward issues related to economic and social justice.<sup>46</sup> In the face of unprecedented challenges, student activists mobilized to help those most affected by the pandemic, whether through volunteering, donating resources, or simply offering emotional support.<sup>47</sup> From mutual aid

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42. *Id.*

43. STUDENT PARENT JOY, <https://www.studentparentjoy.org/> [https://perma.cc/A3QC-H3Y9] (Oct. 6, 2023) (“The #StudentParentJoy media and policy research program is redefining what it means to be a pregnant and/or parenting student within the California State University system. This work is part of a state-wide movement centering the expressions of joy, resilience, and persistence of pregnant and parenting students.”).

44. See *Joy Narratives*, STUDENT PARENT JOY, (Oct. 6, 2023), <https://www.studentparentjoy.org/joy-narratives> [https://perma.cc/XJF7-8RYW].

45. See Satra Taylor, *In the Age of Coronavirus, Student Activism is More Relevant Than Ever*, THE EDUC. TR. (Apr. 28, 2020), <https://edtrust.org/resource/in-the-age-of-coronavirus-student-activism-is-more-relevant-than-ever/> [https://perma.cc/X4LP-KE5K].

46. See Megan Zahneis & Vimal Patel, *Covid-19 Changes the Calculus of Grad-Student Activism*, THE CHRON. OF HIGHER EDUC. (Apr. 30, 2020), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/covid-19-changes-the-calculus-of-grad-student-activism/> [https://perma.cc/EWR9-CUWK]; see generally Tina Cheuk et al., *Political Activism in Postsecondary Settings: Possibilities for Institutional Change toward Social Justice*, 97 PEABODY J. EDUC. 521 (2022).

47. See Cheuk et al., *supra* note 46, at 523.

networks to grassroots initiatives, communities formed strong bonds and fostered a spirit of togetherness.<sup>48</sup>

In like manner, while the pandemic brought immense hardship for many student parents, it also underscored the resilience of individuals, proving that in times of crisis, social solidarity<sup>49</sup> can unite students within and beyond higher education institutions.<sup>50</sup> Through solidarity, student parent activists built a groundswell, attracting the attention, interest, and support of philanthropic groups, nonprofit organizations, and system leaders.<sup>51</sup> In California, these organizations and leaders partnered to uplift the voices and illuminate the experiences of student parents,<sup>52</sup> many of whom navigated multiple systems during the pandemic, including systems spanning across the K-16 realm, as well as local, state, and even federal systems and programs (although the latter were inaccessible to undocumented parenting students and students from mixed-status families).<sup>53</sup> Increased solidarity expanded and strengthened the student parent ecosystem and pushed student parent issues into the purview of those holding influence, power, and privilege.<sup>54</sup>

### C. *Convergence with the Basic Needs Community*

Before the pandemic, higher education institutions began to address basic needs insecurity on campuses, understanding its relation to student

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48. See Ezra Marcus, *How College Students are Helping Each Other Survive*, N.Y. TIMES (Nov. 23, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/23/style/college-mutual-aid-networks.html> [<https://perma.cc/R69X-8HYN>]; see also Lilah Burke, *Students Organize their own Aid Networks*, INSIDE HIGHER ED (Mar. 16, 2020), <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/03/17/students-organize-their-own-aid-networks-campus-close-virus> [<https://perma.cc/75CQ-A2LE>].

49. See generally Chinmayee Mishra & Navaneeta Rath, *Social Solidarity during a Pandemic: Through and Beyond Durkheimian Lens*, 2 SOC. SCIS. & HUMANS. OPEN 1 (2020).

50. See Marcus, *supra* note 48.

51. See *id.*

52. *A Hand Up Not A Hand Out: Student Parents Advocate for Equity on College Campuses*, MICHELSON 20MM (June 30, 2022), <https://20mm.org/2022/06/30/student-parents-advocate-equity/> [<https://perma.cc/YL6P-F2F9>].

53. See Kat Trejo & Amy Patricia Morales, *Expanding TRIO to be Inclusive of all Students Regardless of Immigrant Statuses and Providing Federal Financial Aid Funding for Undocumented, TPS, and DACA Students*, UNIDOSUS 2, [https://unidosus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/kattrejo\\_amypatriciamorales\\_expandtrio\\_lafpb.pdf](https://unidosus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/kattrejo_amypatriciamorales_expandtrio_lafpb.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/2QFS-BXMK>] (last visited Oct. 21, 2023).

54. See *A Hand Up Not A Hand Out: Student Parents Advocate for Equity on College Campuses*, *supra* note 52.

well-being and its adverse effects on academic performance.<sup>55</sup> Student parents often are also one paycheck away from being unhoused, carry the burdens and fears of deportation for themselves and their families as undocumented students, are forced to navigate the maze of local and state-level health supports, and face food insecurity for their families.<sup>56</sup> Within the context of COVID-19, demand and need skyrocketed, forcing institutions to strategize and adapt basic need support.<sup>57</sup> With campus closures, University of California (UC) basic needs centers altered their service delivery to remain accessible to students, some of whom were still living on or near campus.<sup>58</sup> However, during this time, the basic needs services were not always delivered through an equity lens that included the differential care work that parenting students hold, ensuring that student populations with varying circumstances and needs received equitable support for the most part.<sup>59</sup> In particular, racial disparities in basic needs insecurity for student parents persisted, “disproportionately affect single parents of young children, Asian, Black and Latinx parenting students, and Black fathers working toward their degrees.”<sup>60</sup> The pandemic illuminated the need for equitable support and services, as anything else would be a disservice to marginalized students—including student parents.

Indeed, COVID led to an explicit naming of parenting students’ basic needs, including childcare, housing, and food, all of which were disrupted by the pandemic.<sup>61</sup> For example, the UC made explicit recommendations to prioritize basic needs resources for parenting students through targeted spending for the group during the 2020-21 fiscal year.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, The

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55. See generally Rashida M. Crutchfield et. al., *The Starving Student Narrative: How Normalizing Deprivation Reinforces Basic Need Insecurity in Higher Education*, 101 FAMS. SOC’Y 409 (2020).

56. Carola Suárez-Orozco & Guadalupe López Hernández, “Waking Up Every Day with the Worry”: A Mixed-Methods Study of Anxiety in Undocumented Latinx College Students, 11 FRONTIERS PSYCHIATRY 1, 8 (2020); see also Margaret W. Sallee et al., *Falling Through the Cracks: Examining One Institution’s Response to Food Insecure Student-Parents*, 94 J. HIGHER EDUC. 415, 416 (2023).

57. See generally REGENTS OF THE UNIV. OF CAL. SPECIAL COMM. ON BASIC NEEDS, THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA’S NEXT PHASE OF IMPROVING STUDENT BASIC NEEDS (2020) [hereinafter STUDENT BASIC NEEDS], <https://basicneeds.ucop.edu/files/uc-next-phase-of-improving-student-basic-needs.pdf> [https://perma.cc/8RWX-MJBT].

58. *Id.* at 45.

59. See *id.* at 47.

60. GREGORY KIENZL ET AL., THE HOPE CTR., PARENTING WHILE IN COLLEGE: RACIAL DISPARITIES IN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY DURING THE PANDEMIC 1 (2022), [https://hope.temple.edu/sites/hope/files/media/document/PWIC\\_Final\\_2.9.pdf](https://hope.temple.edu/sites/hope/files/media/document/PWIC_Final_2.9.pdf) [https://perma.cc/5DA4-6C9L].

61. See *id.* at 2.

62. See STUDENT BASIC NEEDS, *supra* note 57, at 50.

Education Trust–West released a report on parenting students during the pandemic, outlining the pandemic’s role in worsening basic needs and disrupting services that, though imperfect, supported parenting student persistence, academic achievement, and stability.<sup>63</sup> The Education Trust–West report called for increased access to existing resources targeting parenting students, including enhanced childcare services, on-campus housing, and equitable financial aid packages that reflect the cost of parenting and caregiving.<sup>64</sup> At the California State University (CSU), the nation’s most diverse and largest public four-year university system, the convergence between basic needs and parenting students set a precedent for other institutions looking to strengthen basic needs support and services for parenting students.<sup>65</sup> Within the CSU, this convergence led to family-inclusive accommodations, including allowing students with children and dependents in the Short-Term Emergency Housing Assistance Program,<sup>66</sup> as well as expanding partnerships that serve the entire family, such as “We Got Your Back,” a program that provides up to six meals per week, depending on the size of the student parent’s family.<sup>67</sup>

The pandemic moved the needle toward the need for a more equitable higher education system for parenting students.<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, the pandemic underscored the importance of student parent self-determination, understood as the ability to make independent choices and maintain control over their lives by accounting for factors such as childcare, housing, and financial stability.<sup>69</sup> In the context of the pandemic, there was an increase in support aimed at promoting self-determination and better supporting parenting students, including family fee waivers, which completely waived fees for families receiving subsidized childcare.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, other

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63. See generally THE EDUC. TRUST-WEST, *supra* note 20.

64. *Id.* at 17.

65. *Id.*

66. See *id.* at 13; see, e.g., *Student Emergency Housing & Well-Being Assistance*, CAL. STATE UNIV., DOMINGUEZ HILLS, <https://www.csudh.edu/student-support/food-shelter/shelter-resources/student-emergency-housing> (last visited Oct. 29, 2023) [<https://perma.cc/7G2U-EBJJ>].

67. RASHIDA M. CRUTCHFIELD & JENNIFER MAGUIRE, THE CAL. STATE UNIV., *STUDY OF STUDENT SERVICE ACCESS AND BASIC NEEDS 27* (2019), [https://www.calstate.edu/impact-of-the-csu/student-success/basic-needs-initiative/Documents/BasicNeedsStudy\\_Phase\\_3.pdf](https://www.calstate.edu/impact-of-the-csu/student-success/basic-needs-initiative/Documents/BasicNeedsStudy_Phase_3.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/FJ4M-VWPP>].

68. *Id.* at 29.

69. See *Student Parents in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Heightened Need & the Imperative for Strengthened Support*, INST. FOR WOMEN’S POL’Y RSCH. 3-4 (Apr. 14, 2020), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED612659.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/M5J4-7GCB>].

70. See Elizabeth Aguilera, *‘I’m Already Stressing Out’: Families to Face Bigger Bills for Subsidized Child Care as California Ends Waivers*, CAL. MATTERS (May 24, 2023),

support services and programs emerged during the pandemic, such as the Golden State Education and Training Grant Program<sup>71</sup> in California, which allocated half of its \$500 million to support current student parents who experienced COVID-related job loss, helping them re-skill, upskill, and access educational and training programs that help them re-enter the workforce.<sup>72</sup> There have also been investments in family-inclusive student housing projects across the nation, from Compton College in California to the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.<sup>73</sup> These are all examples of what higher education institutions can do to promote self-determination for pregnant and parenting students.

#### IV. PART 3: PREGNANT AND PARENTING STUDENTS BELONGING AND THRIVING FRAMEWORK

Our Pregnant and Parenting Students Belonging and Thriving Framework<sup>74</sup> is based on the premise that much of the higher education policy-making space, if it attends to pregnant and parenting needs at all, tends to focus on changing student parents to better fit into existing higher education infrastructure, rather than change the systems and structures to center on the strengths, as well as the needs, of this student population.<sup>75</sup> From the insights our team has learned prior to, during, and after COVID-19, we put forth a vision of what it might look like to include pregnant and parenting students front and center in how higher educational institutions are designed by dismantling inequitable structures and advancing collective

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<https://calmatters.org/california-divide/2022/10/subsidized-child-care/> [https://perma.cc/4APY-MB7U].

71. *Golden State Education and Training Grant Program Frequently Asked Questions*, CAL. STUDENT AID COMM'NS 1 (Jan. 2023), [https://www.csac.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/golden\\_state\\_education\\_and\\_training\\_grant\\_program\\_faqs.pdf](https://www.csac.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/golden_state_education_and_training_grant_program_faqs.pdf) [https://perma.cc/28LM-HFW3].

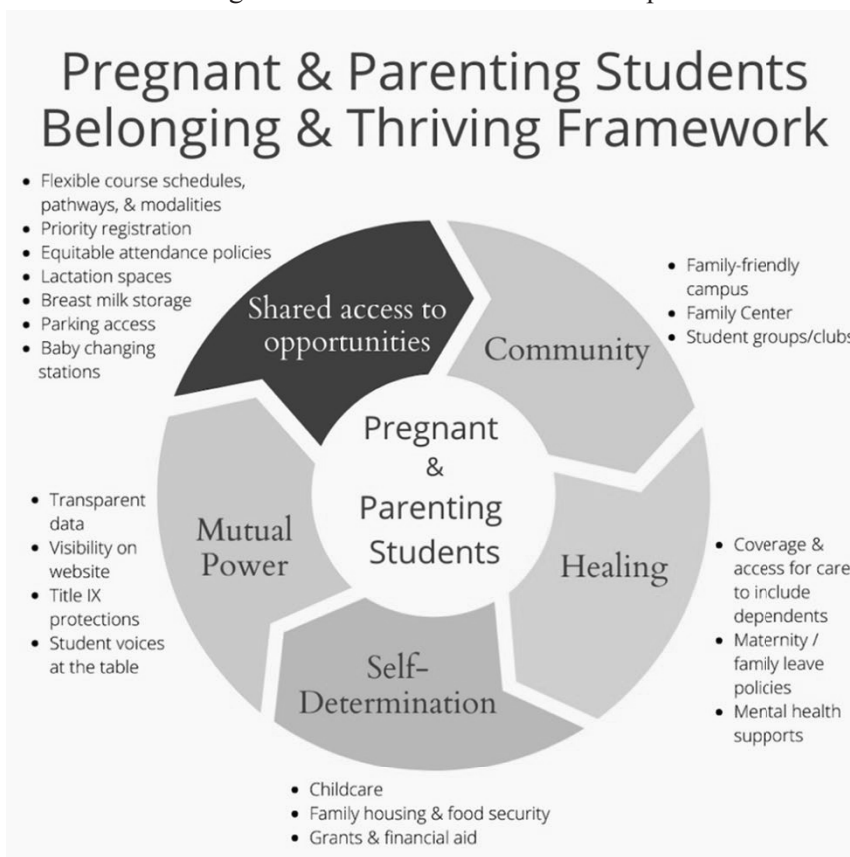
72. *See id.*

73. COMPTON COLL., *STUDENT HOUSING STUDY: COMPTON COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT* (2022), [https://www.compton.edu/about/presidentceo/docs/CCCD\\_Student-Housing\\_Presentation\\_102522.pdf](https://www.compton.edu/about/presidentceo/docs/CCCD_Student-Housing_Presentation_102522.pdf) [https://perma.cc/YY67-AVYF]; *UMass Amherst Takes Next Steps to Build Undergraduate and Graduate Housing, and Student Family Housing*, UNIV. OF MASS. AMHERST (Mar. 18, 2021), <https://www.umass.edu/news/article/umass-amherst-takes-next-steps-build> [https://perma.cc/NDC5-2RAS].

74. *See generally* Paul J. Kuttner, *The Right to Belong in School: A Critical, Transdisciplinary Conceptualization of School Belonging*, 9 AERA OPEN 1 (2023) (arguing that the concept of “belonging” goes beyond a psychological measure, and is one that is socially, culturally, and politically situated).

75. *Pregnant & Parenting Students Belonging & Thriving Framework*, TINA CHEUK (July 2023), <https://sites.google.com/view/tinacheuk/home> [https://perma.cc/7UQF-V8VB].

liberation toward multigenerational outcomes for student parents and their



children.<sup>76</sup>

The Pregnant and Parenting Students Belonging and Thriving Framework (Figure 1) centers around five interrelated dimensions: community, healing, self-determination, mutual power, and shared access to resources.<sup>77</sup>

**Figure 1. Pregnant and Parenting Students Belonging and Thriving Framework<sup>78</sup>**

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76. *Id.*

77. *Id.*

78. *Id.*

The first dimension of community emphasizes establishing supportive peer networks and mentorship programs.<sup>79</sup> Pregnant and parenting students often feel isolated as four-year higher educational institutions were not intentionally designed with them in mind.<sup>80</sup> Consequently, community connections through student family centers,<sup>81</sup> student parent groups and clubs,<sup>82</sup> and family-friendly campuses<sup>83</sup> are crucial to their success. By facilitating opportunities for connection and collaboration, institutions can help students recognize the community cultural wealth that students bring into learning spaces and leverage them toward productive academic outcomes.<sup>84</sup>

The second dimension of healing underscores the importance of attending to pregnant and parenting students' mental and physical health.<sup>85</sup> Institutions can promote well-being by offering access to health coverage that includes students and their dependents, making maternity, paternity, and/or family leave policies transparent, helping pregnant students navigate complex state and federal pregnancy and disability supports, and having robust mental health supports.<sup>86</sup> A comprehensive approach to well-being

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79. See *Supporting the Academic Success of Pregnant and Parenting Students*, U.S. DEP'T. OF EDUC., [https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/pregnancy.html#\\_Toc16](https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/pregnancy.html#_Toc16) [<https://perma.cc/TVQ9-GSGP>] (Jan. 1, 2020); see also *Pregnant & Parenting Students Belonging & Thriving Framework*, *supra* note 75.

80. See *Supporting the Academic Success of Pregnant and Parenting Students*, *supra* note 79; see also *Pregnant & Parenting Students Belonging & Thriving Framework*, *supra* note 75.

81. E.g., *Student Parent Center*, UC BERKELEY, <https://studentparents.berkeley.edu/home> [<https://perma.cc/G69M-6PY6>] (last visited Oct. 16, 2023).

82. E.g., *Parenting Broncos Club*, CAL. STATE POLYTECHNIC UNIV. - POMONA, <https://mybar.cpp.edu/organization/parentingbroncos> [<https://perma.cc/5DBP-MFFG>] (last visited Oct. 16, 2023).

83. E.g., *The Family U Seal: Honoring Institutions and Organizations that Champion Student Parents*, GENERATION HOPE, <https://www.generationhope.org/family-u-seal> [<https://perma.cc/YJT8-MNRU>] (last visited Oct. 16, 2023) (“Generation Hope has created the Family U Seal, a national certification for higher education institutions making significant strides in intentionally serving parenting students.”).

84. See Tara J. Yosso, *Whose Culture has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth*, 8 RACE ETHNICITY & EDUC. 69, 76-78 (2015).

85. See *Supporting the Academic Success of Pregnant and Parenting Students*, *supra* note 79; see also *Pregnant & Parenting Students Belonging & Thriving Framework*, *supra* note 75.

86. See generally Jessica Lee, *Back to Campus 2021: Supporting Pregnant and Parenting Students During COVID-19*, THE PREGNANT SCHOLAR (2021), <https://thepregnantscholar.org/wp-content/uploads/Back-to-Campus-Toolkit.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/U2GZ-WL73>]; e.g., *Your UC Student Health Insurance Plan: UC Ship*, UCI STUDENT HEALTH CTR., <https://shc.uci.edu/insurance> [<https://perma.cc/Z3YC-3BFX>] (last visited Oct. 16, 2023) (“UC SHIP provides high-quality, affordable and convenient health care coverage to UC students. The plan is designed especially for students, and it covers medical, pharmacy, dental, vision, and mental health and substance use disorder services for UC undergraduate and graduate students and their eligible dependents.”).

acknowledges that academic achievement is deeply intertwined with physical, mental, and emotional aspects of student parents' lives.<sup>87</sup>

The third dimension of self-determination encompasses student parents' ability to make independent choices and maintain control over their lives, taking into account various factors such as childcare, housing, and financial stability.<sup>88</sup> For student parents, childcare plays a pivotal role in enabling them to attend classes and complete their degrees.<sup>89</sup> For example, the majority of the CSU system offers subsidized on-campus childcare prioritized for student parents.<sup>90</sup> Scholarships, grants, and other forms of financial assistance help alleviate the financial burden, making education more accessible and empowering student parents to meet their goals.<sup>91</sup> Lastly, by providing student parents with on-campus family housing and advocating for off-campus family housing, campus leaders can support parenting students' self-determination by fostering a more inclusive environment that recognizes and respects their students' dual roles.<sup>92</sup>

The fourth dimension of mutual power refers to a state where power dynamics are balanced and shared among individuals or groups, fostering inclusivity and equal participation.<sup>93</sup> First and foremost, data transparency allows institutions to develop targeted support systems and resources for student parents and allows them to advocate for their needs as a collective.<sup>94</sup> Title IX<sup>95</sup> protections ensure that pregnant students and student parents are not discriminated against or disadvantaged due to their parental status, creating a fair and inclusive environment.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, involving student parent voices in institutional decision-making empowers

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87. See generally Manuela Pulimeno et al., *School as Ideal Setting to Promote Health and Wellbeing Among Young People*, 10 HEALTH PROMOT. PERSPECT. 316 (2020).

88. *Pregnant & Parenting Students Belonging & Thriving Framework*, *supra* note 75.

89. Sallee et al., *supra* note 56, at 418; see also Virginia Brown & Tracy R. Nichols, *Pregnant and Parenting Students on Campus: Policy and Program Implications for a Growing Population*, 27 EDUC. POL'Y 499 (2013).

90. E.g., *CSUSB Receives \$1.2 Million Grant for On-Campus Child Care Programs*, CSUSB (Aug. 7, 2018), <https://www.csusb.edu/inside/article/448256/csusb-receives-12-million-grant-campus-child-care-programs> [<https://perma.cc/3HMT-JREM>].

91. *A Policy Agenda for California Student Parents*, CAL. COMPETES (Jan. 26, 2023), <https://californiacompetes.org/resourches/a-policy-agenda-for-california-student-parents> [<https://perma.cc/CZG7-HKNC>].

92. Autumn Green, *Student Housing is Scarce for College Students Who Have Kids*, THE CONVERSATION (Oct. 6, 2020, 8:17 AM EDT), <https://theconversation.com/student-housing-is-scarce-for-college-students-who-have-kids-145162> [<https://perma.cc/Q5CM-2CVT>].

93. *Pregnant & Parenting Students Belonging & Thriving Framework*, *supra* note 75.

94. See *A Policy Agenda for California Student Parents*, *supra* note 91.

95. 20 U.S.C. §§ 1681-1689.

96. *Conley v. Nw. Fla. State Coll.*, 145 F. Supp. 3d 1073, 1084 (N.D. Fla. 2015).

them to advocate for their needs, preferences, and concerns, thereby shaping policies responsive to their strengths and needs.<sup>97</sup> When power is shared mutually, student parents have a stronger sense of belonging, which empowers them to drive cultural and policy changes that better support their thriving.<sup>98</sup>

Finally, ensuring shared access to opportunities for student parents is our framework's fifth dimension.<sup>99</sup> Flexible course schedules, pathways, and modalities attend to the time poverty constraints faced by student parents.<sup>100</sup> This flexibility might include online, hybrid, and asynchronous courses that work for the student's schedule.<sup>101</sup> Priority registration allows student parents to secure class schedules that align with their caregiving responsibilities, especially when childcare hours typically follow a workday, not providing coverage for evening courses for student parents.<sup>102</sup> Equitable attendance policies provide flexibility in attendance requirements and accommodating their caregiving responsibilities (e.g., child illness).<sup>103</sup>

97. See K.E. Matthews & M. Dollinger, *Student Voice in Higher Education: The Importance of Distinguishing Student Representation and Student Partnership*, 85 HIGHER EDUC. 555, 556, 561 (2023).

98. See *id.*

99. *Pregnant & Parenting Students Belonging & Thriving Framework*, *supra* note 75.

100. See Meredith G. Manze et al., *Experiences of College Students with Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 9 EMERGING ADULTHOOD 631, 636 (2021) ("Faculty in our sample noted accommodations they made for students during the pandemic, upon being asked, including lenient grading, flexible deadlines, and asynchronous options, although these were far from universal across the full faculty. These accommodations were all cited by student parent participants as critically helpful and should be common practice, given that they had to negotiate with each professor, and for multiple assignments, along with everything else they had to manage. Student parents, however, were reticent to request support, both for fear of being perceived as exploiting the pandemic as well as a lack of bandwidth to seek out and then make individual requests to meet each need."); see also Sherrie Reed et al., *A Portrait of Student Parents in the California Community Colleges*, 6 UC DAVIS WHEELHOUSE 1, 7 (Mar. 2021) [https://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/wheelhouse\\_research\\_brief\\_vol\\_6\\_no\\_2\\_v2.pdf](https://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/wheelhouse_research_brief_vol_6_no_2_v2.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/UUK6-KMRD>] ("[S]tudent parents [in the community college system] are more likely than non-parents to take courses online, and less likely to take courses in the morning."); see also Brian Gabriel, *Student Moms Demand Flexible Scheduling for College Classes*, BUS. ADMIN. INFO. (July 16, 2023), <https://www.businessadministrationinformation.com/news/student-moms-demand-flexible-scheduling-for-college-classes> [<https://perma.cc/LM9C-QXKA>].

101. Reed et al., *supra* note 100, at 7; Manze et al., *supra* note 100, at 636.

102. Erin Frawley, *California AB 2881: New Rights for Parenting Students in CA*, THE PREGNANT SCHOLAR (Nov. 22, 2022, 19:22), <https://thepregnantscholar.org/california-ab-2881-new-rights-for-parenting-students-in-ca/> (explaining that the enactment of California AB 2881 will require priority registration for students with dependents in the California public higher educational system).

103. *E.g., Resolution to Update the Class Attendance Policy to Include Students with Dependents*, CAL. POLYTECHNIC STATE UNIV., SAN LUIS OBISPO (2020), [https://www.asi.calpoly.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/20-04-Resolution-to-Update-the-Class-Attendane-Policy-to-Include-Students-with-Dependents\\_BODappr.pdf](https://www.asi.calpoly.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/20-04-Resolution-to-Update-the-Class-Attendane-Policy-to-Include-Students-with-Dependents_BODappr.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/S5HF->

Lactation spaces ensure that nursing mothers have a private and comfortable area to express milk, enabling them to continue breastfeeding while pursuing their education.<sup>104</sup> Adequate parking access eliminates transportation obstacles, ensuring student parents can easily commute to campus, drop off their children, and attend classes without added stress. Additionally, baby-changing stations in campus facilities promote inclusivity by providing essential amenities for student parents, allowing them to care for their infants while accessing educational resources and facilities.<sup>105</sup> Together, these provisions foster an environment where student parents can fully participate in educational opportunities, empowering them to achieve their academic goals while successfully managing their parenting responsibilities.

The proposed framework serves as a call to action for higher education institutions to confront—rather than evade—the caretaking responsibilities held by pregnant and parenting students. By implementing this empowering, care-centered approach, colleges and universities can foster an inclusive and supportive environment where pregnant and parenting students can thrive academically, personally, and professionally for themselves and the next generation of learners.

#### A. *Who's Doing the Counting?*

This proposed framework is a weak lever for change if it is not coupled with data collection that makes visible who our pregnant and parenting students are. In the past few years, at the urging of advocacy and coalition groups, a handful of states have successfully passed state laws that make student parent data collection more systematic.<sup>106</sup> Recently signed

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8P84] (revising the student attendance policy) (“It is strongly urged that all instructors accept the following ‘excusable’ reasons for allowing students to make up missed work while considering implementation shall be equitable for all qualifying students: . . . Serious illness, death, or any extenuating circumstances of close relatives (including but not limited to parents, legal guardian, sibling, grandparent, grandchild, spouse or partner, as well as natural, adopted, and/or in-law children).”).

104. Rachel Ann Ryan et al., *Barriers and Facilitators to Expressing Milk on Campus as a Breastfeeding Student*, 71 J. AM. COLL. HEALTH 2031-37 (2021) (finding that barriers for lactating student parents include limited lactation spaces and lack of storage for equipment and expressed milk, as well as difficulty in finding time to express milk during their time on campus).

105. Kristan Hawkins, *Baby Changing Stations Play an Important Role on College Campus*, STANDING WITH YOU (July 19, 2012), <https://www.standingwithyou.org/baby-changing-stations-play-an-important-role-on-college-campus/> [<https://perma.cc/R9YE-NZVM>].

106. See *Data-to-Action Campaign for Parenting Students*, URBAN INST., <https://www.urban.org/projects/data-action-campaign-parenting-students> [<https://perma.cc/58B6-GGPB>] (last visited Oct. 16, 2023).

legislation from Minnesota,<sup>107</sup> Oregon,<sup>108</sup> Illinois,<sup>109</sup> and California<sup>110</sup> can serve as models for other coalitions to mobilize and advance similar bills in their own states. Although these “small wins”<sup>111</sup> may appear isolated, they collectively contribute to broader systemic change as they generate momentum and build confidence, gradually normalizing data collection for student parents in similar ways we collect other student demographics (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, age, etc.) in our institutions of higher education.

Policies that emerged during and after COVID-19 allowed student parents to shift from the extreme scales of invisibility and hypervisibility to a place of visibility. In this shift, institutions can no longer continue to deploy a care-evasive ideology in serving their student parents. However, the process of data collection and the labels we use to put students into categorical bins are not neutral. Rather, data collection is a process replete with politics, power, and identity, as making student parents visible results in changes to resource allocation and funding—indicating that politics and legal decisions will play an outsized role moving forward for this group.<sup>112</sup>

#### V. PART 4: PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING A CARE-CENTERED FRAMEWORK

Moving forward, we need to reflect on how our policies, practices, and institutional cultures have been shaped historically and contemporarily in our current political and legal context in support of care-evasive ideologies.

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107. MINN. STAT. § 136A.1251 (2023) (“Each postsecondary institution shall allow students to identify whether the student is a parent, a legal guardian, acting as a parent, or an expectant parent on an annual basis on a form used to collect demographic data from students. The postsecondary institution shall provide the information to the commissioner annually on a date and in a manner prescribed by the commissioner.”).

108. OR. ADMIN. R. 715-015-0011 (2023) (requiring community colleges and public universities in Oregon to collect and report data on student parents to the Higher Education Coordinating Commission).

109. 110 ILL. COMP. STAT. 149/10 (2021) (requiring Illinois public institutions of higher education to determine the parental status of enrolled students).

110. Frawley, *supra* note 102 (explaining that the enactment of California AB 2881 will require priority registration for student parents and allowing data collection on the number of parenting students at a given college or university).

111. Karl E. Weick, *Small Wins: Redefining the Scale of Social Problems*, 39 AM. PSYCH. 40, 43 (1984); *see also* Debra E. Meyerson & Maureen A. Scully, *Tempered Radicalism and the Politics of Ambivalence and Change*, 6 ORG. SCI. 585, 595-96 (1995); *see also* Tina Cheuk & Robin Hoecker, *Tempered Radicals: The Power of Small (and Big) Wins*, INSIDE HIGHER ED (Nov. 5, 2018), <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2018/11/06/importance-advocacy-efforts-behalf-grad-student-parents-opinion> [<https://perma.cc/U79L-REDA>].

112. *See* Robert Ubell, *The Political Right is Slamming the Door on College Access*, EDSURGE (Aug. 24, 2022), <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2022-08-24-the-political-right-is-slamming-the-door-on-college-access> [<https://perma.cc/XVY9-59NA>].

For example, in light of the 2022 *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*<sup>113</sup> decision from the U.S. Supreme Court, pregnant students face greater difficulties in accessing abortion services, especially if they live in states with more restrictive laws.<sup>114</sup> As seen in Texas with SB8, which went into effect in September of 2021, a higher number of live births were recorded.<sup>115</sup> Yet, in the post-Dobbs era, Texas has redirected some of their focus to supporting pregnant and parenting students, causing unlikely “bedfellows” among legislators who support reproductive justice and those who are pro-life.<sup>116</sup> The Texas legislature, along with Governor Abbott, recently passed and signed three bills (SB-412, HB-1361, and SB-459),<sup>117</sup> each working in tandem in response to the anticipated effects of SB8 on the increased number of pregnant and parenting students in Texas colleges and universities.<sup>118</sup> SB-412 provides flexible attendance policies to pregnant and parenting students and requires colleges to adopt a non-discriminatory policy for parenting students.<sup>119</sup> HB-1361 requires colleges to have a parenting student liaison, and SB-459 provides priority registration for parenting students, similar to CA-AB2881,<sup>120</sup> signed by California Governor Newsom in the fall of 2022.<sup>121</sup> Demographic data will emerge out of these services, providing a pathway to more appropriate and directed

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113. See generally *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Org.*, 142 S. Ct 2228 (2022)..

114. See *Abortion in the United States Dashboard*, KAISER FAM. FOUND., <https://www.kff.org/womens-health-policy/dashboard/abortion-in-the-u-s-dashboard/> [https://perma.cc/C3NQ-DP5F] (last visited Oct. 16, 2023) (explaining that the difficulties in abortion restrictions include increased travel and financial barriers for pregnant students who may have to travel long distances or out of state to terminate a pregnancy, increased stress, anxiety about their reproductive choices as they navigate the restrictive laws in their state, increased stigma, judgment, and possible discrimination from peers, faculty or staff at their institution that affect students' mental health).

115. Suzanne Bell, *A Spike in Births and Other Potential Impacts of Texas' Abortion Restrictions*, JOHNS HOPKINS BLOOMBERG SCH. OF PUB. HEALTH (Aug. 31, 2023), <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2023/measuring-impacts-of-sb8-in-texas> [https://perma.cc/8R77-8HYG].

116. See Kate McGee, *In First Session After Dobbs Ruling, Texas Lawmakers Provide More Support for Pregnant and Parenting College Students*, THE TEX. TRIB. (May 30, 2023), <https://www.texastribune.org/2023/05/30/texas-legislature-student-parents/> [https://perma.cc/D5YG-R8LE].

117. Jessica Lee, *New Protections for Pregnant and Parenting Students in Texas*, THE PREGNANT SCHOLAR (July 25, 2023, 10:18), <https://thepregnantscholar.org/new-protections-for-pregnant-and-parenting-students-in-texas/>.

118. McGee, *supra* note 116.

119. Lee, *supra* note 117.

120. Frawley, *supra* note 102.

121. *California to Remove Barriers for College Students with Children*, MICHELSON CTR. FOR PUB. POL'Y (Oct. 3, 2022), <https://www.michelsonpolicy.org/news/california-to-remove-barriers-for-college-students-with-children#:~:text=AB> [https://perma.cc/HBN5-6TT8].

supports for this population. Texas has responded swiftly, but only time will tell if other states will follow in supporting more family and care-centered policies for their higher education institutions.

One of the major challenges student parents face at four-year higher educational institutions in their fight for inclusion and recognition is the inconsistent enforcement, ambiguities, and awareness of legal guidance under Title IX.<sup>122</sup> As a federal law in the United States that prohibits sex discrimination in educational institutions that receive federal funding, the interpretation and enforcement of Title IX offers several instances where inequality can be reproduced for pregnant and parenting students:<sup>123</sup>

**1. Lack of accommodation:** Title IX requires schools to provide reasonable accommodations for pregnant students (and, to a lesser extent, newly parenting students) to ensure that they can continue their education without discrimination.<sup>124</sup> However, some campuses may fail to communicate and provide necessary accommodations such as flexible scheduling, access to lactation rooms, or excused absences for pregnancy-related and post-partum medical appointments and care. Students often must advocate for themselves through disability resources centers and may not know the extent to which Title IX and disability offices<sup>125</sup> can serve as points of support.<sup>126</sup>

**2. Stigmatization and bias:** Pregnant and parenting students may face social stigma or bias from peers, teachers, and school administrators. This stigma can result in discriminatory treatment, such as being treated differently or being subjected to stereotypes and assumptions about their

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122. See Tina Cheuk, *Small Wins: A Mother's Group in the Academy*, INSIDE HIGHER ED. (July 5, 2017), <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2017/07/06/doctoral-student-organizes-network-mothers-academe-essay> [<https://perma.cc/NB67-GBP>]; see also Michelle Gough, *Parenting and Pregnant Students: An Evaluation of the Implementation of the Other Title IX*, 17 MICH. J. GENDER & L. 211, 256-58 (2011); see also Deborah L. Brake & Joanna L. Grossman, *Reproducing Inequality Under Title IX*, 43 HARV. J.L. & GENDER 171, 187 (2020).

123. 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (“No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance . . .”).

124. See *Accommodating Pregnancy-Related Conditions*, THE PREGNANT SCHOLAR, <https://thepregnantscholar.org/accommodating-pregnancy-related-conditions/> [<https://perma.cc/C2F7-6FZJ>] (last visited Oct. 16, 2023), for guidance on accommodations for pregnant students.

125. See *id.*

126. See 34 C.F.R. § 106.40 (2023) (“A recipient shall treat pregnancy, childbirth, false pregnancy, termination of pregnancy and recovery therefrom in the same manner and under the same policies as any other temporary disability with respect to any medical or hospital benefit, service, plan or policy which such recipient administers, operates, offers, or participates in with respect to students admitted to the recipient’s educational program or activity.”).

abilities or commitment to education.<sup>127</sup> This stigma is particularly pronounced when it intersects with race, as young women of color face heightened levels of scrutiny and discrimination.<sup>128</sup> Collectively, these biases lead to what we deem “othering,” making it difficult for these students to thrive academically and inadvertently push them out of the pathway toward degree completion.<sup>129</sup>

**3. Limited support services:** As abortion access becomes more limited across states, students may require additional services that support their well-being and reproductive choices.<sup>130</sup> Additional supports include access to affordable childcare, parenting resources, counseling, and academic support.<sup>131</sup> Without these targeted resources, pregnant and parenting students are at a greater risk of dropping out, further perpetuating inequities in our educational system and limiting family prosperity.<sup>132</sup>

**4. Inconsistent enforcement and awareness:** Despite the legal requirements of Title IX, there may be inconsistent enforcement and a lack of awareness among school administrators, teachers, and students regarding protections and rights for pregnant and parenting students. This can lead to a failure to recognize and address instances of discrimination against

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127. See WANDA S. PILLOW, UNFIT SUBJECTS: EDUCATION POLICY AND THE TEEN MOTHER, 1972-2022 at 186 (2004); see also Rainesford Stauffer, *Cradle to College: Stigma and Stereotypes About Teen Parents Fail to Capture Reality*, TEEN VOGUE (Mar. 22, 2022), <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/cradle-to-college-part-2> [<https://perma.cc/YPU6-CR5H>].

128. See generally NICOLE LYNN LEWIS, PREGNANT GIRL: A STORY OF MOTHERHOOD, COLLEGE AND CREATING A BETTER FUTURE FOR YOUNG FAMILIES (2022); see also Da’Shon Carr & Ewaoluwa Obatuase, *Addressing Racial Inequities Faced by Black Parenting Students in Higher Education*, NEW AM. (Sept. 12, 2023), <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/addressing-racial-inequities-faced-by-black-parenting-students-in-higher-education/> [<https://perma.cc/H5P5-QFBQ>].

129. See SANDRA FREDMAN ET. AL., OXFORD HUMAN RTS. HUB, LEARNER PREGNANCY IN SCHOOLS: SOME COMPARATIVE EXAMPLES 23, 30-31(2018), <https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Learner-Pregnancy-in-School.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/R8F3-HVBX>].

130. See *After Roe Fell: Abortion Laws by State*, CTR. FOR REPROD. RTS., <http://reproductiverights.org/maps/abortion-laws-by-state> [<https://perma.cc/A4UQ-V8LZ>] (last visited Oct. 16, 2023).

131. See, e.g., *Parenting and Pregnant Student Resources*, COASTLINE COLL., <https://www.coastline.edu/student-services/student-equity/pregnant-and-parenting-student-resources.php> [<https://perma.cc/S36K-BDF9>] (last visited Oct. 16, 2023).

132. See Gault & Cruse, *supra* note 20 (“Students who used the on-campus child care center at Monroe Community College in New York were nearly three times as likely to graduate or transfer to a four-year college than student parents who did not use the center.”); see also *Family Prosperity Innovation Community*, ASCEND ASPEN INST., <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/family-prosperity/> [<https://perma.cc/N3ZU-682E>] (last visited Oct. 16, 2023) (“Family Prosperity is designed to address inefficiencies and barriers created by current policies and practices by power-sharing with parents and caregivers to bring fresh thinking that can dismantle deep-rooted, discriminatory systems.”).

pregnant and parenting students, falling into what we call a “gray zone,” as limited cases have been brought to bear, leaving ambiguity in the role Title IX offices play in the lives of pregnant and parenting students.<sup>133</sup> Students are then shuffled toward the disabilities offices to seek out accommodations provided by the American Disability Act<sup>134</sup> and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.<sup>135</sup>

## VI. CONCLUSION: A PATH FORWARD

In light of the current political and legal context, we must ensure that advocacy for student parents is rooted in justice and evidence, moving away from care-evasive ideologies that have driven much of policies, practices, and institutional culture in higher education.<sup>136</sup> Our collective efforts need to shift toward a more visible acknowledgment and recognition of the role care work plays in our learning spaces and what it means for us as a society. Failing to consider and include pregnant and parenting students hurts schools and our society, as enrollment may decrease for this subpopulation, and women in particular will be disproportionately pushed out of the public sphere of education, and subsequently the workforce. At the same time, as a society we are underutilizing this student group in meeting our workforce development goals as a nation. This is a critical junction for us to ask ourselves what policies, practices, and conditions are necessary to promote success for all. We believe that there is potential for transformational multigenerational outcomes in our return on investment on student parents.<sup>137</sup>

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133. See Mary Ann Mason & Jaclyn Younger, *Title IX and Pregnancy Discrimination in Higher Education: The New Frontier*, 38 N.Y.U. REV. L. & SOC. CHANGE 269, 271 (2014); see also Gough, *supra* note 122, at 248, 258; see generally Emily McNee, *Pregnancy Discrimination in Higher Education: Accommodating Student Pregnancy*, 20 CARDOZO J.L. & GENDER 63 (2013).

134. Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, 42 U.S.C. §§ 12101-12213.

135. See, e.g., letter from the U.S. Dep’t of Educ., Off. of C.R., to Dr. Deneece G. Huftalin, President of Salt Lake Cmty. Coll. (June 14, 2022) (on file with author), <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/investigations/more/08222021-a.pdf?> [<https://perma.cc/Z2GH-52YX>] (“OCR further found that the College failed to engage in an interactive process with the Complainant and failed to consider whether the Complainant’s pregnancy caused a temporary disability requiring academic adjustments, in violation of Section 504. Finally, OCR found that the College failed to excuse the Complainant’s absences related to pregnancy, provide her the opportunity to make up work missed due to absences related to pregnancy, or provide alternatives to making up missed work at a later date, in violation of Title IX.”).

136. See Cheuk, *supra* note 122.

137. LINDSEY REICHLIN CRUSE ET AL., INST. FOR WOMEN’S POL’Y RSCH., INVESTING IN SINGLE MOTHERS’ HIGHER EDUCATION IN CALIFORNIA: COST AND BENEFITS TO INDIVIDUALS, FAMILIES, AND SOCIETY 6 (2020), <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/California.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/8UMM-VJFU>].

As we consider how to better center student parent experiences after COVID, we want to reiterate how student parents have demonstrated unwavering endurance, persevering through sleepless nights and juggling both academic and familial responsibilities, all while navigating negative stereotypes of their dual identities as student parents. Motivated by their love for their children and the desire to build a better future, student parents refuse to let circumstances define their potential. They serve as beacons of inspiration and powerful contributors to their communities, demonstrating the transformative role they can play if provided with adequate support and the recognition that they belong at our institutions.