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Parenting While In College:
Basic Needs Insecurity Among Students
With Children

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Executive Summary

At least one in five of today's college students is parenting a child while enrolled in classes.[1] If these parenting students complete their degrees, both they and their children could expect improved social, economic, and health outcomes. Nevertheless, degree attainment rates among parenting students are low, and evidence about their experiences—which is critical to improving policy and practice regarding parenting students—is sparse.

In 2019, the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice began using our tools to fill that gap. Specifically, we added new questions to our fifth annual #RealCollege survey, asking parenting students at 171 two-year institutions and 56 four-year institutions about their experiences with basic needs insecurity, childcare, depression and anxiety, and campus and social supports.

More than 23,000 parenting students responded to the survey. The results indicate:

- 53% of parenting students were food insecure in the prior 30 days

- 68% of parenting students were housing insecure in the previous year

- 17% of parenting students were homeless in the previous year

While rates of basic needs insecurity are substantial among nearly all college students, they are especially high among parenting students. Moreover, parenting students are more likely to face increased time and financial demands, including childcare costs. About half of the parenting students surveyed who use childcare pay more than $100 per week, about 3 in 4 find that unaffordable, and those individuals are more likely to experience basic needs insecurity. The vast majority said that they would benefit from on-campus full-day childcare. Our report includes these and related recommendations to support their education and their children's futures.
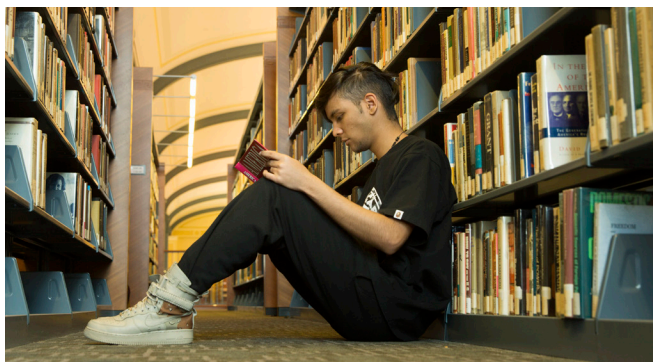
Introduction

There is broad consensus that education beyond high school brings strong returns to individuals, families, and communities. On almost every measure of economic well-being and career attainment, college graduates fare better than their peers with less education. These benefits are extensive, with each level of postsecondary education correlated to improved social, economic, and health outcomes, though significant racial disparities persist.[2]

More than one in five college students has children, and for those students, the benefits of a college education extend across generations.[3] Two-generation approaches to family well-being explicitly include postsecondary education, along with employment pathways, early childhood education, economic assets, health and well-being, and social capital development.[4] According to an Aspen Ascend report:

> Successful two-generation programs could enable parents to increase their educational attainment, credentialing, earnings, and eventual wage growth. In turn, positive education and career outcomes can result in increased family income, greater financial stability, higher self-efficacy, improved executive functioning, better mental health, lower levels of stress, and more effective parenting practices over time.[5]

Critically, these programs help parenting students by reducing external pressures created by conditions of scarcity, thereby allowing their genuine underlying talents and strengths to emerge.[6] Indeed, a recent evaluation of a two-generation model in Tulsa, called Career Advance, identified improvements in the rates at which parents in a health care workforce training program completed certifications and gained employment, and in turn experienced psychosocial benefits without experiencing increased stress or material hardship.[7]

Yet such programs remain relatively uncommon, and most parenting students face significant barriers accessing and completing college. The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) estimates that only 37% of all parenting students complete a degree or certificate within six years, compared with 59% of students without children.[8] This has serious equity implications as Black and American Indian or Alaska Native women, who are more likely than women from other backgrounds to be raising children while in college, face entrenched racial barriers that contribute to disproportionately worse outcomes in higher education, though these begin to affect their lives long before they reach college.[9]

Single parents constitute the majority of parenting students, and they are often at a distinct disadvantage.[10] They are alone, yet endure both financial and time poverty and are challenged to make ends meet while also going to school.[11] Among all undergraduate parenting students, IWPR estimates that 10% are single mothers and only 8% earn a degree within six years of enrolling, compared with roughly half of women in college who are not mothers.[12] This is economically inefficient, as IWPR further estimates that the benefits of a college degree for these women are substantial:

- For every dollar that a single mother spends on a bachelor's degree, she receives a return of $7.77, and for an associate degree, she receives $12.32.

- Single mothers with college degrees contribute between $71,400 (for an associate degree) and $220,000 (for a bachelor's degree) to the federal and state tax base over their lifetimes.

- Lifetime public assistance use is reduced $25,600–$40,000 when single mothers are able to complete their college degrees.[13]

Facing substantial financial and time constraints, and often greater expenses as well, parenting students are at higher risk than other students for basic needs insecurity. Across the country, single mothers are more likely to live in poverty than other women, and among those in college, 88% have incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level.[14] Further complicating matters, while access to public support programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF), and childcare, are critical to reducing basic needs insecurity, administrative requirements and burdens hinder access for college students who are parenting.[15] For example, "work first" rules, which promote low-wage and low-growth employment over education, discourage college as a pathway to economic mobility and security.[16] These policy barriers undermine state and federal investments in higher education and workforce development programs, and make it harder for parenting students to meet their households' basic needs.

While the attention being paid to parenting students is increasing, there is little information on the extent to which they deal with food and housing insecurity and how those challenges relate to time constraints, childcare demands, and personal health. The federal Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System does not collect any data on parental status.[17] Most colleges and universities do not identify which students are parenting on their campuses, nor assess their

needs.[18] The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is the data source to which colleges most typically turn for information on which students are parents, but the form only asks students if they "have or will have children who will receive more than half of their support [from the respondent]."[19] This excludes all other children and discounts non-custodial parents, plus the information is unavailable for those students who do not (and often cannot) complete the FAFSA. A survey from Achieving the Dream revealed that community colleges also point to a lack of staff capacity, tracking difficulties, and privacy concerns as key reasons why they do not collect data on which of their current students are parenting. In addition, nearly three in 10 community colleges surveyed said that they had simply never considered asking students whether they had children.[20]

Building on the Hope Center's nearly two decades of experience documenting the challenges facing people with children who pursue higher education, this report draws on new survey data from fall 2019 to explicate basic needs insecurity among parenting students.[21] It also extends the national conversation on basic needs insecurity by highlighting the role of childcare expenses. This is essential, as our ongoing evaluations of housing and food assistance programs for college students suggest that the need to manage childcare sometimes compromises students' ability to accept critical supports.

THE SURVEY

Now in its fifth year, the #RealCollege survey is the nation's largest, longest-running annual assessment of basic needs insecurity among college students. In the absence of any federal data on the subject, the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice created the survey to evaluate access to affordable food and housing among college students. Over the last five years, more than 330,000 students at 411 colleges and universities have taken the survey.[22]

The most recent survey was fielded in fall 2019, with students completing it in August, September, and October. Nearly 167,000 students from 171 two-year institutions and 56 four-year institutions responded.[23] It was sent electronically to all enrolled students ages 18 and older, more than 1.9 million students. The estimated response rate is 8.4%, or approximately 167,000 total student respondents. While this response rate is on the low side, it is typical for electronic surveys in higher education and the methodology employed tends to underestimate rather than overestimate the prevalence of basic needs insecurity on campus. For more information on how the survey was fielded and a discussion of how representative the results are, please refer to the web appendices.

SECTION 1:
Who is a "Parenting Student"?

The #RealCollege survey asks students: *"Are you the parent or guardian to any biological, adopted, step, or foster children who live in your household?"*

If they said yes, they are deemed a parenting student in this report.

This is a more inclusive definition than used on the FAFSA or in many federal studies, but does not include parent-like relationships students may have with younger siblings, cousins, or friends' children who reside in their homes. It also omits non-custodial parents.

Single parents are defined as students who indicated that they were single, divorced, or widowed, as opposed to married, in a domestic partnership, or in a relationship.

There are many phrases used to describe college students raising children, including student-parents, students with children, and parent-students. The Hope Center uses the phrase "parenting student" to acknowledge lessons from these individuals, who stress that parenting is an ongoing, energy- and time-consuming activity that often must take precedence over education considerations. We thank parenting student Esperanza Aceves for inspiring our choice of words.

More than 23,000 parenting students responded to the #RealCollege survey, including nearly 7,000 single parents. That is about 16% of survey respondents for 2019, indicating that parenting students are somewhat underrepresented in this sample, as national estimates indicate that about one in five students have children.[24]

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There is substantial variation in the representation of parenting students among two-year and four-year institutions in this sample, as depicted in Figure 1. For example, while on average parenting students are 22% of the sample at two-year institutions, the median is 21% and the range extends from 2% to 56%.[25] Across four-year institutions, the mean percentage of parenting students is 9%, while the median is 6% and the range extends from 1% to 52%. This means that we identified very few parenting students at some two-year and four-year colleges and universities, but at others they represent more than half of the respondents.

FIGURE 1. Distribution of Parenting Students, By Institution Type

Percentage of Parenting Students at Institution (%)

Two–Year   Four–Year
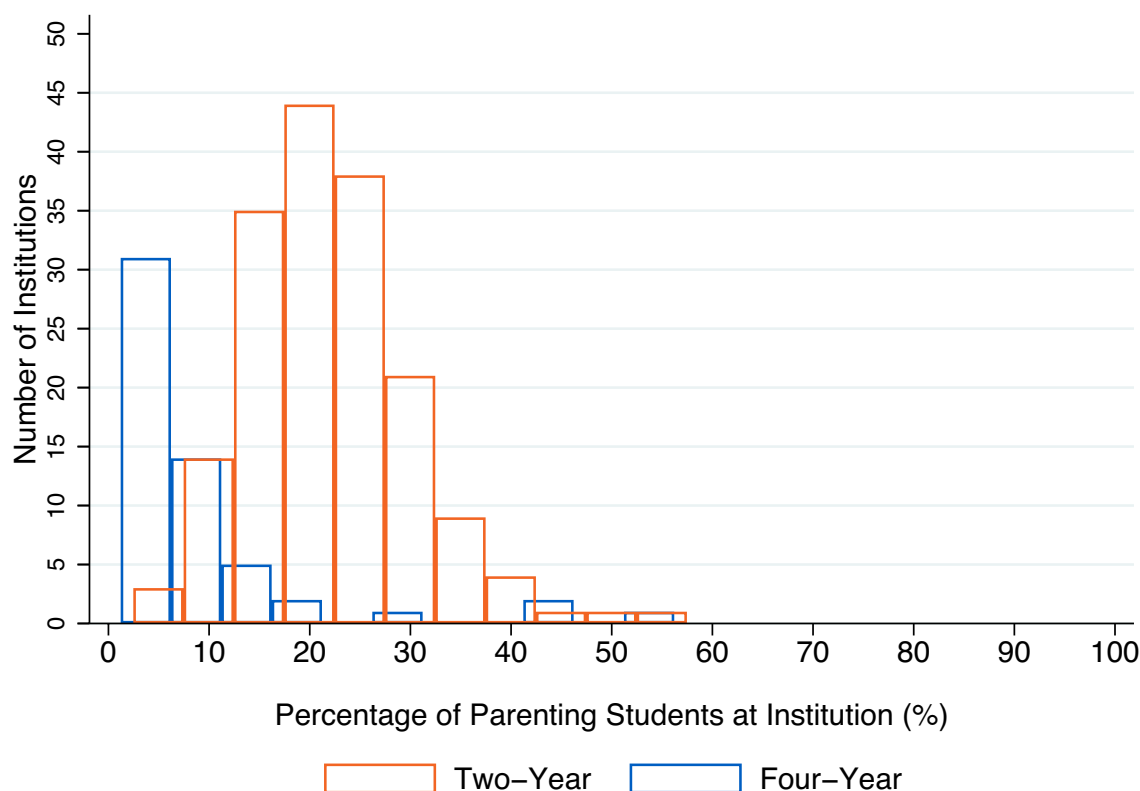
Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: For more details on institutional rates shown in the figure above, refer to the web appendices.

As noted in the Introduction, many colleges and universities struggle to identify which of their students have children, and as a result do not know much about their characteristics. In order to shed light on which undergraduates are more likely to be parenting, Table 1 describes the representation of parenting students among specific subgroups of the full survey sample.

We find that female-identified students are nearly twice as likely as male-identified students to be parenting while in college (19% vs. 10%), but that gender gap is much smaller at four-year colleges (7% vs. 5%) than at two-year colleges (24% vs. 12%). Seven percent of students identifying as non-binary or third gender are also parenting students.

Students from minoritized backgrounds are more likely to be parenting while in college; for example, 25% of both Indigenous students and American Indian or Alaska Native students in this sample are parenting students, as are 22% of Black students and 17% of Hispanic or Latinx students, compared to 15% of White students. However, at two-year colleges, 20% of White students are parenting, compared to 19% of Hispanic or Latinx students. This general trend is consistent with national figures.[26]

When considering the intersection of race and gender, we find that Black female-identified students are particularly likely to be parenting in college; this includes 25% of the overall sample, 29% of Black females at two-year colleges, and 11% of those at four-year colleges. Latinx females and White females have more similar rates of parenting during college (20% and 18%). Among male-identified students, 14% of Black males are parenting, compared to 10% of Latinx males and 9% of White males.

Students over age 25 are far more likely to be parenting: 51% of students older than age 30 said that they had children, as did 29% of those ages 26–30. In comparison, just 3% of students ages 18–20 and 8% of students ages 21–25 are parenting.

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TABLE 1. Percentage of Parenting Students, By Demographic Background

	All (%)	Two-Year (%)	Four-Year (%)
All survey respondents	16	21	7
Gender Identity			
Female	19	24	7
Male	10	12	5
Non-binary/Third gender	7	8	4
Prefer to self-describe	13	15	6
Racial or Ethnic Background			
American Indian or Alaska Native	25	28	15
Black	22	25	10
Hispanic or Latinx	17	19	7
Indigenous	25	27	18
Middle Eastern or North African or Arab or Arab American	15	17	7
Other Asian or Asian American	11	13	4
Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian	19	21	7
Southeast Asian	10	13	4
White	15	20	6
Other	19	22	9
Race/Ethnicity and Gender Identity			
Black female	25	29	11
Black male	14	15	8
Latinx female	20	22	8
Latinx male	10	11	6
White female	18	24	6
White male	9	12	5
Age			
18 to 20	3	4	1
21 to 25	8	12	2
26 to 30	29	33	14
Over 30	51	51	47
Prefers not to answer	15	15	16

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Classifications of gender identity and racial or ethnic background are not mutually exclusive. Students could self-identify with multiple classifications.

Given the dearth of data on parenting students at the institutional, state, and national levels, we next turn to a close examination of the characteristics of those individuals in this sample. This information should inform the reader's interpretation of the subsequent analyses of their basic needs challenges, their beneficial support mechanisms, and so on. It is difficult to know how the characteristics of this sample compare to the national population of parenting students, though we do draw those comparisons where data exist.

Table 2 examines the characteristics of parenting students and single parents for the full sample, broken down by type of college they attend (two-year vs. four-year). Among the approximately 23,000 parenting students in this sample, the vast majority, about 8 in 10, attend two-year colleges (not shown). This is a key difference between this sample of parenting students and national samples, as the #RealCollege survey is disproportionately fielded by community colleges and public four-year universities. Nationally, 42% of parenting students attend community colleges.[27]

Our definition of single parents includes those who said that they were single (27% of parenting students), divorced (6%), or widowed (1%). That status does not fully reflect their available support, however. While 56% of the full sample of parenting students said that they had a spouse or partner living with them, 6% of single parents also affirmed they had that support.

Most parenting students in this sample have one child (43% of all parenting students and 50% of single parents) or two children (33% of all parenting students and 29% of single parents), which is consistent with national figures.[28] However, nearly one in 10 parenting students said that they have four or more children.

Knowing the age of the children is critical for understanding parenting students' lives and especially their childcare needs. But most surveys do not ask about children's ages, or ask only about the age of the youngest child, as with the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS).[29] An IWPR analysis finds that, among student parents in the NPSAS sample, 53% have a youngest child ages 0–5, and 18% have a youngest child ages 13–17.[30] Older children often play a critical role in the work of a household by providing sibling care.[31] Therefore, the #RealCollege survey asks students the ages of all their children. We find that 50% of parenting students have a youngest child ages 0–5, and 22% have a youngest child who is a teen. But when including all of the children in the home, we find that more than four in 10 (42%) parenting students have a teenager.

TABLE 2. Family Formation of Parenting Students' Households, By Institution Type

	All Parenting Students			Single Parents		
	All	Two-Year	Four-Year	All	Two-Year	Four-Year
Relationship Status						
Single (%)	27	27	22	80	80	78
In a relationship (%)	20	21	18	0	0	0
Married or domestic partnership (%)	44	43	52	0	0	0
Divorced (%)	6	6	5	18	18	20
Widowed (%)	1	1	<1	3	3	2
Do you have a spouse or partner who lives with you?						
Yes (%)	56	56	62	6	6	4
No (%)	41	42	36	92	92	95
Number of Children in Household						
1 (%)	43	43	44	50	50	51
2 (%)	33	33	33	29	29	27
3 (%)	15	15	14	12	12	13
4 or more (%)	9	9	9	9	8	9
Ages of Children in the Household						
0 to 18 months (%)	16	16	15	12	12	10
19 months to 2.5 years (%)	13	14	12	11	12	7
2.5+ to 5 years (%)	31	32	28	28	29	23
6 to 9 years (%)	33	33	31	30	30	27
10 to 12 years (%)	24	24	23	24	24	25
13 years or over (%)	42	41	46	45	43	56
Age of the Youngest Child in the Household						
0 to 18 months (%)	16	16	15	12	12	10
19 months to 2.5 years (%)	11	11	10	10	10	6
2.5+ years to 5 years (%)	23	23	19	23	23	19
6 to 9 years (%)	18	18	18	19	19	17
10 to 12 years (%)	10	10	11	12	12	12
13 years or over (%)	22	22	27	26	25	36

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Relationship Status and "Do you have a spouse or partner who lives with you?" percentages may not add up to 100 because respondents who chose "Prefer not to answer" option are not shown above (see web appendices for details). Ages of Children in the Household (HH) percentages may not add up to 100, as respondents may have several children of various ages. Students who did not identify the college they attended are included in the All column, but not in the Two- or Four-Year columns. Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding error.

Approximately half of the parenting students in this sample attend college full-time, rather than part-time, though those attending four-year colleges are more likely to attend full-time. The sample of parenting students in community colleges is fairly equally divided between students in their first year of college, those who have attended one or two years, and those who have been enrolled longer, while the majority of the sample of parenting students in four-year institutions have been enrolled for at least three years (Table 3).

TABLE 3. Enrollment Status of Parenting Students, By Institution Type

	All Parenting Students			Single Parents		
	All	Two-Year	Four-Year	All	Two-Year	Four-Year
Enrollment Intensity						
Full-time (%)	51	49	63	55	53	72
Part-time (%)	49	51	37	45	47	28
Years of Enrollment						
Less than 1 (%)	29	31	17	31	33	21
1 to 2 (%)	36	38	22	37	39	23
3 or more (%)	35	31	61	32	29	55

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Students who did not identify the college they attended are included in the All column, but not in the Two- or Four-Year columns. Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding error.

As shown in Table 4, the vast majority (82%) of parenting students in this sample are female-identified, and female-identified students are an even greater percentage of single parents (86%). However, more male-identified students are represented among the parenting students at four-year institutions, where they are 23% of parenting students and 17% of single parents. There are very few parenting students in this sample who identify as non-binary or third gender (1%).

With regard to race and ethnicity, the majority of parenting students identify as White (60%), while 24% identify as Hispanic or Latinx, 17% as Black, 6% as American Indian or Alaska Native, and 3% as Indigenous, which reflects the inclusion of seven tribal colleges and universities in this study. The sample of parenting students at four-year institutions is disproportionately White (69%), while the sample of single parents is the opposite—less than half of this group identify as White. One in four single parents in this sample is Black and 28% are Hispanic or Latinx. These students are predominately female. There are very few men of color represented among the parenting students—for example, only about 3% of parenting students are Black men, and about 4% are Hispanic or Latinx men. In comparison, among parenting students at four-year institutions, 16% are White men.

TABLE 4. Demographic Characteristics of Parenting Students, By Institution Type

	All Parenting Students			Single Parents		
	All	**Two-Year**	**Four-Year**	**All**	**Two-Year**	**Four-Year**
Gender Identity						
Female (%)	82	83	76	86	87	82
Male (%)	17	16	23	13	12	17
Non-binary/Third Gender (%)	1	1	1	1	1	1
Prefer to self-describe (%)	1	1	1	1	1	1
Racial or Ethnic Background						
American Indian or Alaska Native (%)	6	6	9	8	7	13
Black (%)	17	16	14	25	25	21
Hispanic or Latinx (%)	24	26	12	28	30	14
Indigenous (%)	3	3	5	4	3	7
Middle Eastern or North African or Arab or Arab American (%)	2	2	2	2	2	3
Other Asian or Asian American (%)	4	4	4	4	4	6
Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian (%)	2	2	1	2	2	1
Southeast Asian (%)	3	3	3	3	2	4
White (%)	60	59	69	49	49	55
Other (%)	3	3	3	3	3	3
Race/Ethnicity and Gender Identity						
Black female (%)	14	14	11	22	22	18
Black male (%)	3	2	3	3	3	3
Latinx female (%)	20	22	9	24	26	12
Latinx male (%)	4	4	3	4	4	3
White female (%)	50	50	51	43	44	45
White male (%)	10	9	16	6	5	9

TABLE 4. Demographic Characteristics of Parenting Students, By Institution Type (Cont.)

	All Parenting Students			Single Parents		
	All	Two-Year	Four-Year	All	Two-Year	Four-Year
Age						
18 to 20 (%)	8	8	11	15	13	23
21 to 25 (%)	14	14	13	16	16	19
26 to 30 (%)	19	19	16	19	19	13
Over 30 (%)	58	58	61	50	51	44
Prefers not to answer (%)	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Classifications of gender identity and racial or ethnic background are not mutually exclusive. Students could self-identify with multiple classifications. Students who did not identify the college they attended are included in the All column, but not in the Two- or Four-Year columns. Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding error.

The vast majority of parenting students at both two- and four-year institutions are over age 30, but the age distribution differs for single parents versus other parenting students. The most notable difference is that students ages 18–20 represent 8% of parenting students, but they are 15% of single parents, and they constitute 23% of parenting students at four-year institutions. Again, these trends are consistent with national figures; IWPR reports that "student parents' median age is 32, compared with 27 for independent students without children and 20 for dependent students," and "married student parents tend to be older than their single counterparts, with a median age of 34 and 30, respectively."[32]

The Experience of a Parenting Student: Esperanza Aceves

It was 2012 and I was in the midst of transferring from Long Beach City College to California State University at Long Beach. I had a four-year-old son and we were living on just $690 a month. Nonetheless, I was determined to go to school full-time so I could earn a degree in child development and make a career change that would eventually benefit us both. I applied for several scholarships, filed my FAFSA in the very first week of each new year, worked as a federal work-study student, and applied for CalWORKS assistance for both financial and food support. When my son was born, I had lost my job and my car, but thanks to financial aid I was able to get a used van and enroll my son in the on-campus childcare center. I was on my way to a bachelor's degree.

Three years later, that degree was nearly in hand. I was now Mom to three children: a seven-year-old son, a two-year-old son, and a four-month-old daughter. But while we had secured a home for a while, the owner suddenly evicted us after deciding he wanted to live in the property. My entire family again became homeless. And I was not getting enough to eat.

In some ways I was lucky. Thanks to CalFresh I had my EBT card for food. To earn that support, I worked long hours and studied to keep my grades up. I was taking six classes, and working part-time as a federal work-study student. But I could not use my EBT card to get a meal on campus. That meant that in between classes I had to take a shuttle to my car (20–30 minutes), leave campus, and buy a meal at the nearest store that accepted my card, then drive back to campus to find parking and take the shuttle back to class. That time simply did not exist in my life, so I simply did not eat.

It took me some time to realize it, but now I know: I am worthy of much more support than this. My name is Esperanza. My name means HOPE. I majored in child development and family studies in addition to family life education, and eventually I earned a master's degree. I choose to help families and others for the rest of my life. We are fighting for every parenting student to have support for their basic needs so they can get an education. I thank my children for that.

SECTION 2:
Basic Needs Insecurity Among Parenting Students

We next describe the rates of food and housing insecurity and homelessness among parenting students. Our recent national #RealCollege report finds that parenting students experience basic needs insecurity at higher rates compared to other students—overall, 53% of parenting students experienced food insecurity, 68% experienced housing insecurity, and 17% experienced homelessness.[33]

This report further investigates those findings. Figure 2 shows basic needs insecurity rates among parenting students at community colleges and four-year colleges and universities. As with the general population, parenting students at community colleges are at higher risk of basic needs insecurity but sizable proportions of students at four-year institutions are also affected. For example, 54% of parenting students at two-year colleges were food insecure in the prior 30 days, compared to 43% of parenting students at four-year institutions. However, rates of homelessness are very similar among parenting students at both types of institutions (16% at four-year colleges and 17% at two-year colleges).

FIGURE 2. Basic Needs Insecurity Among Parenting Students, By Institution Type
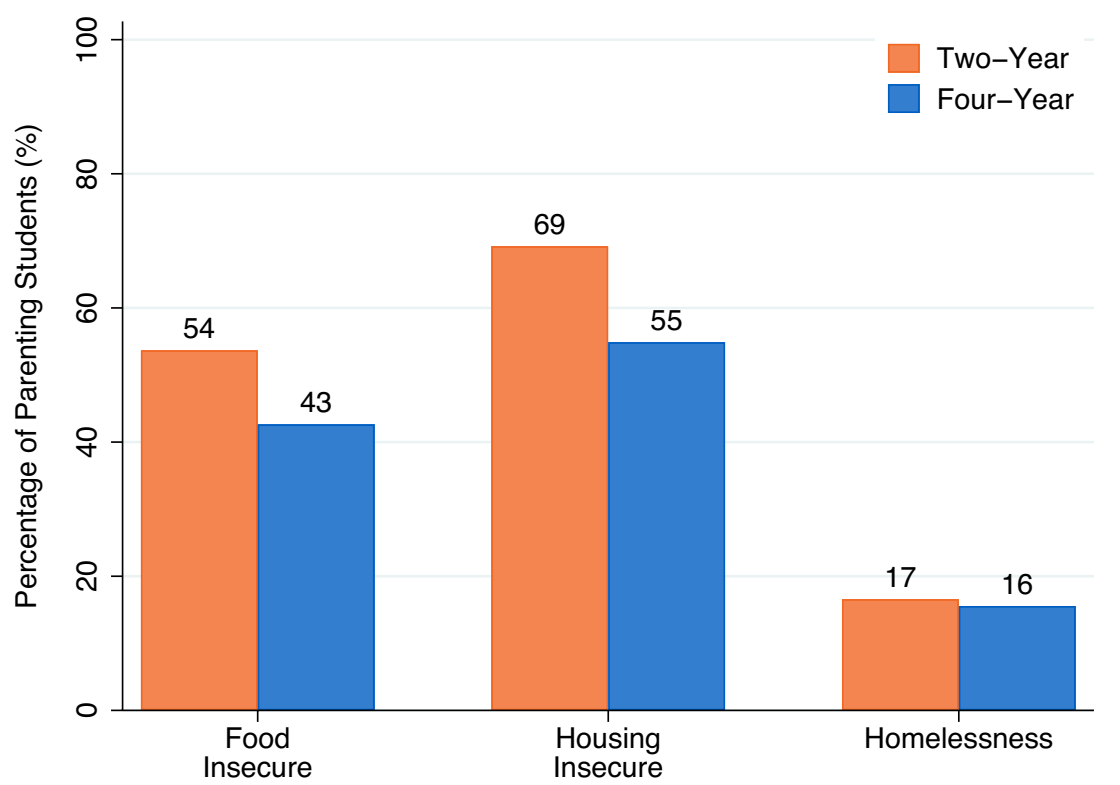
Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the web appendices.

While they represent a very small fraction (1%) of all parenting students in this sample, individuals who are non-binary are especially at risk of basic needs insecurity. Female-identified parenting students are generally at higher risk than male-identified students, but not when it comes to homelessness (Table 5). More than half of all Black female parenting students experience basic needs insecurity, and at both community colleges and four-year institutions their rates of housing insecurity are more than 70%. Across two and four-year institutions, housing insecurity rates for White female and Latinx female parenting students are also notably high, ranging from 53% to 76%.

TABLE 5. Rates of Basic Needs Insecurity Among Parenting Students, By Demographic Characteristics and Institution Type

	Two-Year			Four-Year		
	FI (%)	HI (%)	HM (%)	FI (%)	HI (%)	HM (%)
Overall	54	69	17	43	55	16
Gender Identity						
Female	55	72	16	45	58	15
Male	46	60	19	32	46	15
Non-binary/Third Gender	76	79	44	79	68	32
Prefer to self-describe	70	79	33	64	79	57
Racial or Ethnic Background						
American Indian or Alaska Native	67	81	26	63	70	31
Black	64	80	21	57	72	17
Hispanic or Latinx	59	74	17	52	66	16
Indigenous	70	82	31	67	70	35
Middle Eastern or North African or Arab or Arab American	52	66	21	47	62	17
Other Asian or Asian American	50	58	19	50	49	22
Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian	64	74	28	61	65	35
Southeast Asian	52	61	19	52	56	23
White	51	67	16	36	49	14
Other	56	71	20	52	68	17

TABLE 5. Rates of Basic Needs Insecurity Among Parenting Students, By Demographic Characteristics and Institution Type (Cont.)

	Two-Year			Four-Year		
	FI (%)	HI (%)	HM (%)	FI (%)	HI (%)	HM (%)
Race/Ethnicity and Gender Identity						
Black female	66	81	21	59	74	17
Black male	55	73	21	45	58	18
Latinx female	60	76	16	55	68	17
Latinx male	56	64	22	41	57	9
White female	53	69	15	39	53	14
White male	41	56	19	25	38	14
Age						
18 to 20	55	51	22	53	43	22
21 to 25	62	78	24	54	59	20
26 to 30	61	78	20	49	67	17
Over 30	50	68	13	36	53	13

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Classifications of gender identity and racial/ethnic background are not mutually exclusive. Students could self-identify with multiple classifications. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the web appendices.

Parenting students who are single experience substantially higher rates of basic needs insecurity in comparison to their married counterparts (Table 6). Rates of food insecurity are 20–30 percentage points lower for married parenting students compared to single parenting students, depending on type of college. Rates of homelessness are twice as high if a parenting student is single than if they are married.

Parenting students who do not have a partner residing with them experience basic needs insecurity at much higher rates than those who live with a partner. For example, the rate of homelessness for parenting students without partners is almost double that of parenting students with partners.

Parenting students with more than two children experience higher rates of food and housing insecurity than those with two or fewer. However, with respect to homelessness, the number of children is less determinative—at community colleges the number of children is not definitively associated with the odds of homelessness, whereas at four-year institutions, students raising very large families (5–6 children, or about 3% of this sample) have especially high rates of homelessness.

Parenting students raising older children (ages 13 and up) have lower rates of basic needs insecurity than those raising younger children. For example, 64% of parenting students raising teenagers experience housing insecurity, while about 73% of parenting student raising children ages 0–5 experience housing insecurity. Parenting students raising young children also experience slightly higher rates of homelessness than those raising teenagers, irrespective of the type of college they attend.

TABLE 6. Basic Needs Insecurity Among Parenting Students, By Family Characteristics and Institution Type

	Two-Year			Four-Year		
	FI (%)	HI (%)	HM (%)	FI (%)	HI (%)	HM (%)
Relationship Status						
Single	67	78	23	59	63	24
In a relationship	61	76	21	56	65	20
Married or domestic partnership	40	60	10	29	46	9
Divorced	64	81	19	51	72	15
Widowed	63	74	26	18	45	36
Do you have a spouse or partner who lives with you?						
Yes	45	64	12	32	50	11
No	66	77	22	58	63	22
Number of Children in Household						
1	54	69	18	43	56	17
2	52	68	15	38	48	12
3	57	72	15	46	58	14
4 or more	65	77	17	53	61	19
Ages of Children in Household						
0 to 18 months	55	73	24	46	61	18
19 months to 2.5 years	57	75	20	40	57	19
2.5+ to 5 years	56	74	18	43	59	17
6 to 9 years	57	73	16	44	59	18
10 to 12 years	58	72	15	48	62	17
13 years or over	52	66	13	45	53	13

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the web appendices.

FOR COLLEGE, COMMUNITY, AND JUSTICE

CHILDCARE AND BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY

Accessible high-quality childcare can support parents' ability to work and improve their capacity to engage in college coursework. But many parents with low incomes do not have access to high quality childcare. A 2019 report estimated that the average annual cost of childcare in the United States is more than $9,000 per child.[34] This suggests that a single parent has to allocate 36% of their household income to cover the cost of childcare for one child.

Despite a historic funding increase in 2018, the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), the primary federal grant program that provides childcare assistance for families in need, currently serves less than one in six families who qualify for assistance.[35] The nation's only childcare program designated specifically for college students, Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS), can be used to establish or expand campus-based childcare programs, provide before- and after-school services for older children, or help with the costs of off-campus childcare services.[36] But CCAMPIS is also insufficiently funded to meet the needs of all eligible parenting students. Therefore, we next consider the role that childcare plays in the education and lives of the parenting students in the #RealCollege survey.

Rather than assume that all parenting students need or utilize childcare, we asked them directly "Do you need, use, or plan to use childcare this year?" As Figure 3 shows, about 40% of the parenting students said yes, while 60% said no. That distribution was nearly identical at two- and four-year institutions. It was also very similar for single parents, although a lower percentage of single parents at four-year institutions (32%) said they needed, used, or planned to use childcare.

**FIGURE 3. Childcare Need and Use Among Parenting Students, By Institution Type**
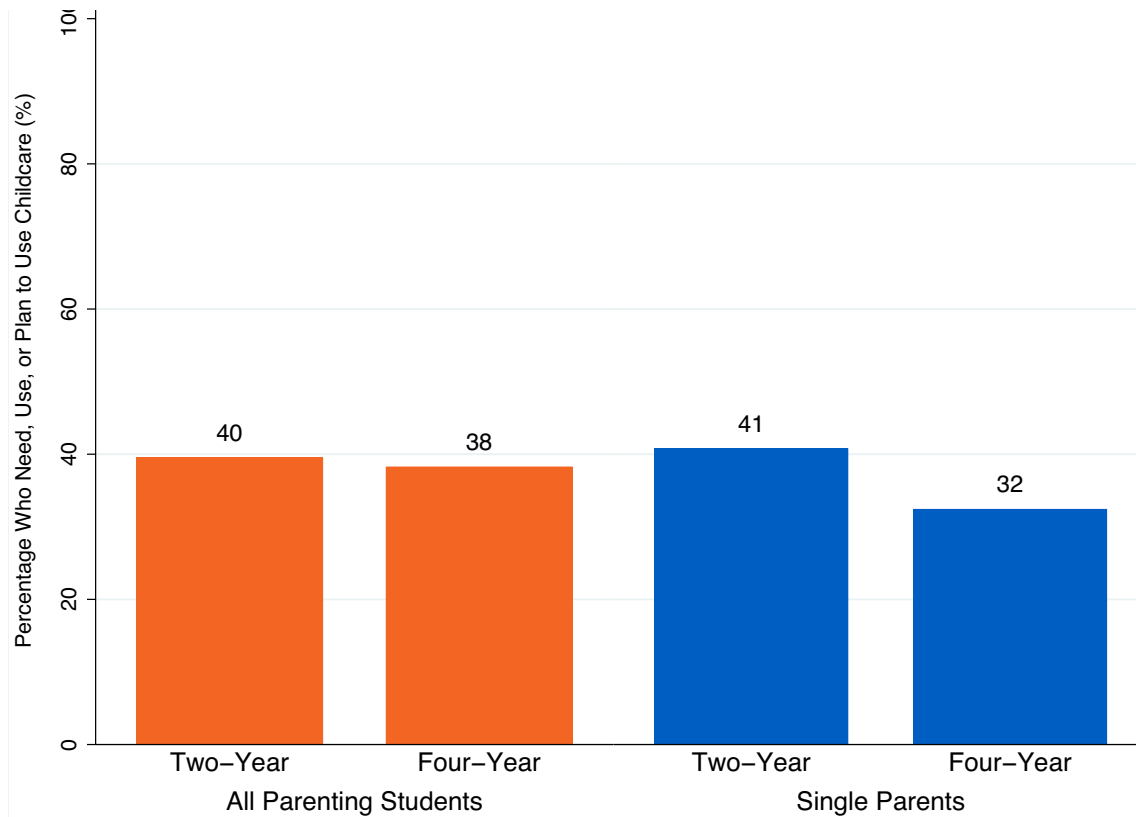
Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: The survey question about needing, using, or planning to use childcare was only administered to parenting students.

Childcare utilization is related to the age of a student's children (Figure 4). Recall that 50% of parenting students have at least one child ages 0–5 (Table 2). More than three in four students (78%) who need, use, or plan to use childcare have children in that age range. We also consider the possibility that sibling care is occurring in these homes, since four in 10 parenting students have a teen in the home. In an analysis not shown, we examined whether childcare utilization among parenting students with two or more children differs by whether at least one of those children is a teenager. We found that only one in four of these parenting students report needing or using childcare.

FIGURE 4. Childcare Use Among Parenting Students, By Age of Youngest Child
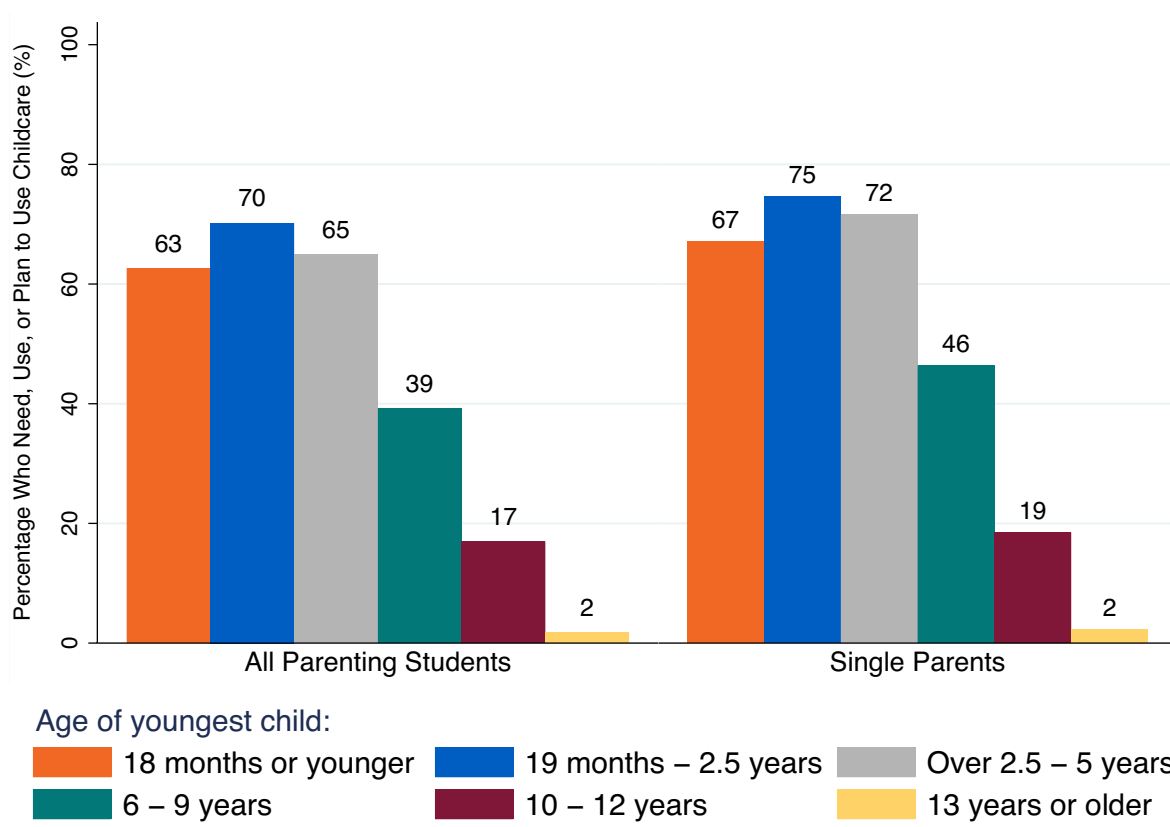
Age of youngest child:
- 18 months or younger
- 19 months – 2.5 years
- Over 2.5 – 5 years
- 6 – 9 years
- 10 – 12 years
- 13 years or older

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: The survey question about needing, using, or planning to use childcare was only administered to parenting students.

We next examine the cost of childcare. The costs faced by parenting students are similar, whether they are single or partnered (Figure 5). Among parenting students who need, use, or plan to use childcare, just over one in five say that they pay nothing for childcare. Another quarter of parenting students—and 30% of single parents—pay $1–$99 per week, while 28% of both groups pay $100–$199 per week. The latter extrapolates to annual childcare costs of up to $10,000 per year (for 50 weeks of care). About one in five parenting students pay $200 or more per week for childcare, which greatly exceeds national averages.

More than three in four parenting students who do not pay for childcare have a child ages 0-5 in the household. Among those students with multiple children, 22% also have a teenager in the household who may be assisting.

FIGURE 5. Cost of Childcare Per Week Among Parenting Students Who Use Childcare
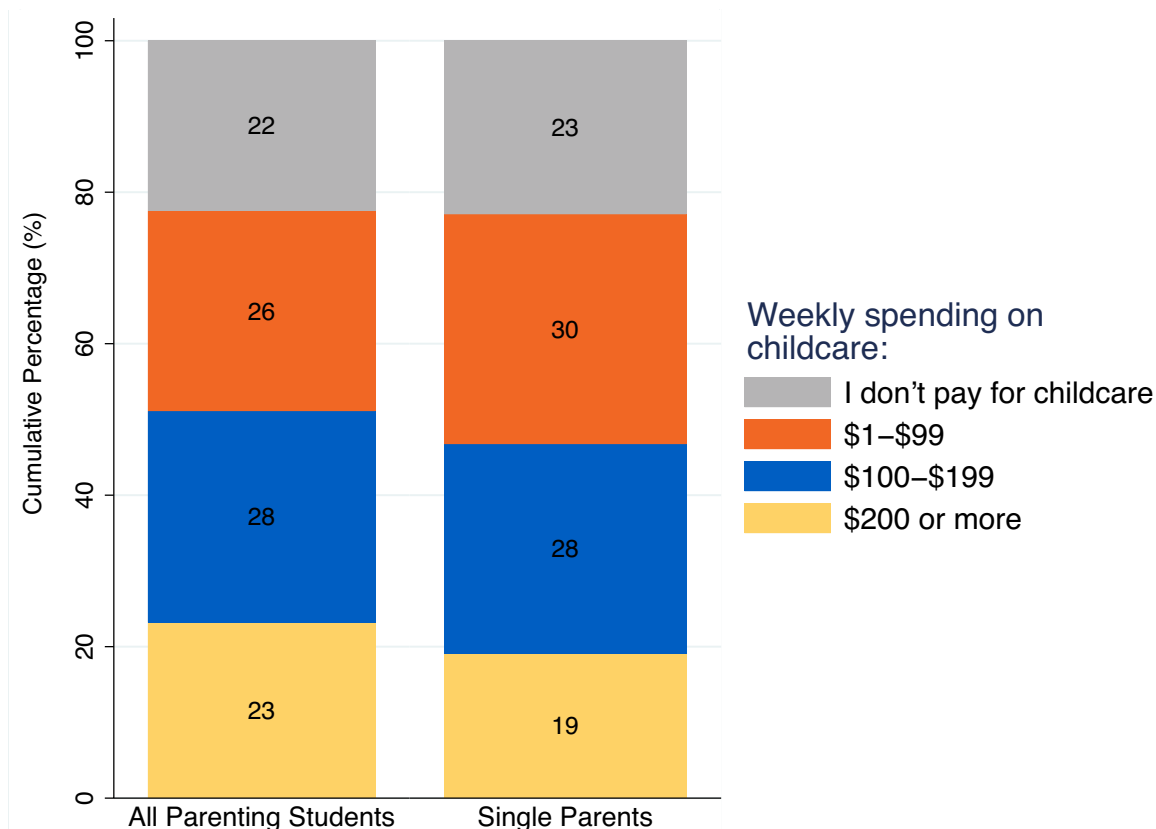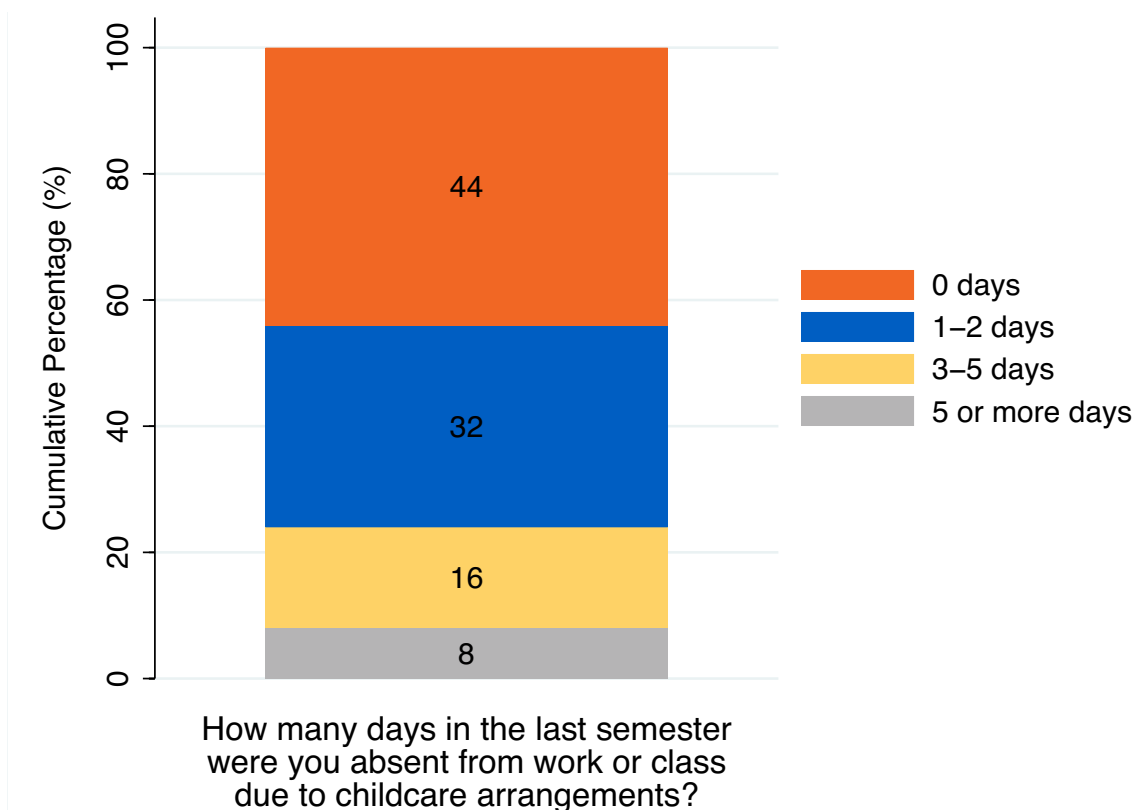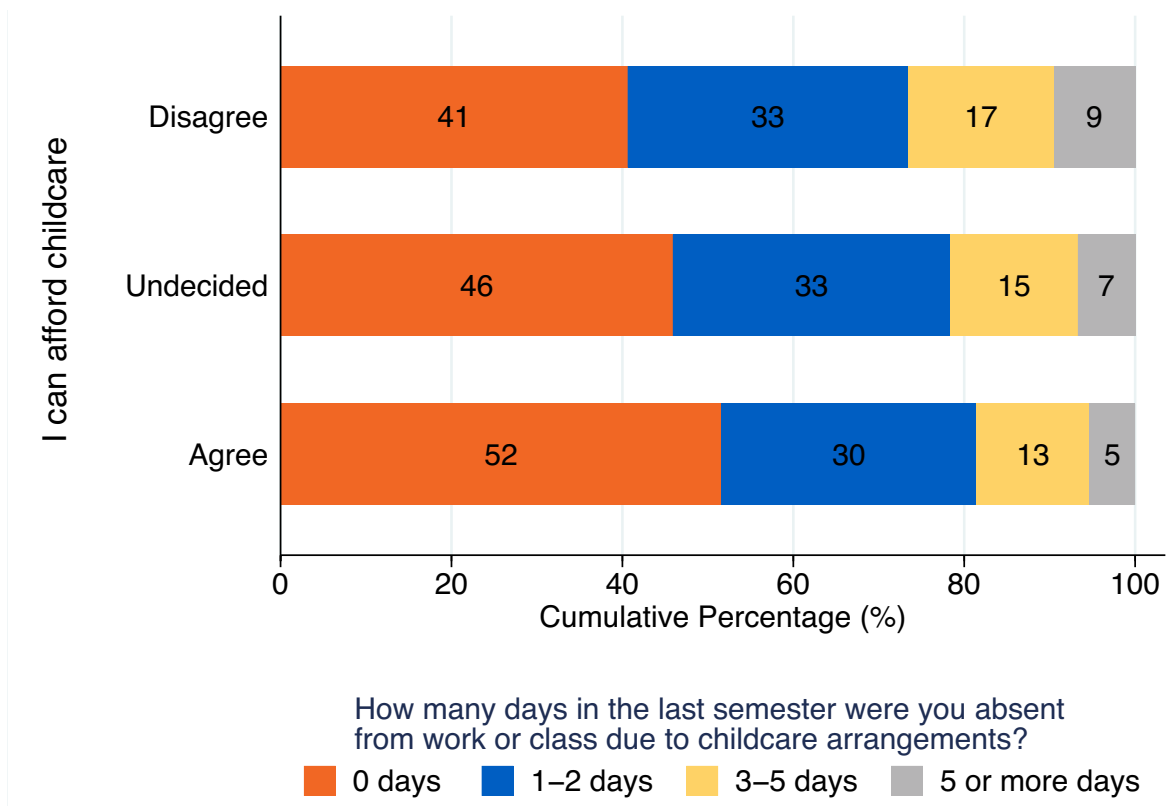

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: The survey question about weekly spending on childcare was only administered to parenting students who reported that they need, use, or plan to use childcare. Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding error.

Household spending does not necessarily imply that a family can afford that spending. Parenting students who need or use childcare were asked about the extent to which they agree with the statement "I can afford to pay for childcare." More than three in five (62%) parenting students, and 70% of single parents disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement (Figure 6). However, almost one in four parenting students who need or use childcare said they found it affordable—roughly corresponding to the percentage who pay less than $100 per week.

FIGURE 6. Childcare Affordability Among Parenting Students Who Use Childcare
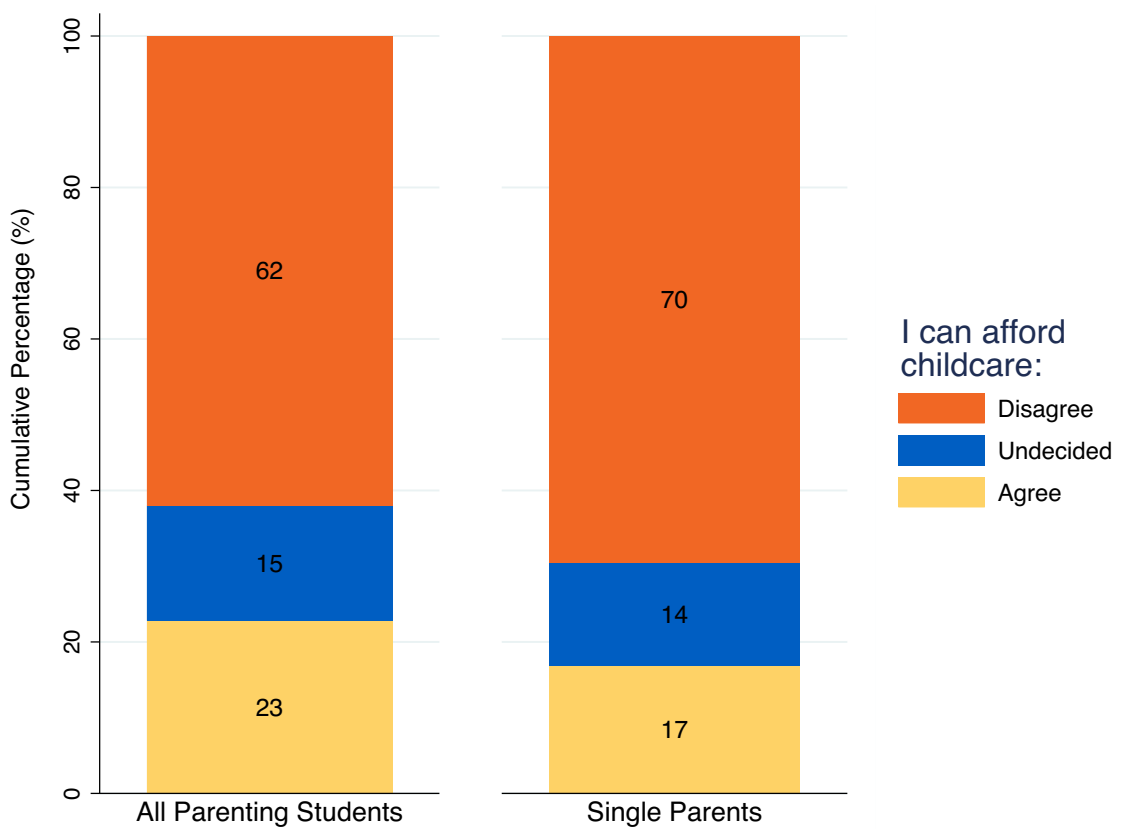
Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: The survey question about childcare affordability was only administered to parenting students who reported that they need, use, or plan to use childcare. Students who responded "Strongly Disagree" are included in the "Disagree" group, while those who reported "Strongly Agree" are included in the "Agree" group. Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding error.

Childcare arrangements are often complex, especially for parents with young children, and when faced with challenges arranging or affording childcare, parenting students may miss school and/or work.[37] Fifty-six percent of parenting students using childcare said that they missed at least one day of school and/or work in the prior semester due to childcare arrangements (Figure 7). Most of those students missed one or two days, but 24% missed at least three days.

FIGURE 7. Absences From Class or Work Due to Childcare Challenges Among Parenting Students Who Use Childcare

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: The survey question about weekly spending on childcare was only administered to parenting students who reported that they need, use, or plan to use childcare. Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding error.

The number of absences from class and/or work due to childcare is related to whether the parenting student finds childcare affordable. More than half of students who agreed or strongly agreed that childcare is affordable did not miss any school or work, compared to 41% of parenting students who found childcare unaffordable yet did not miss any school or work (Figure 8).

FIGURE 8. Absences From Class or Work Due to Childcare Challenges, By Childcare Affordability Among Parenting Students Who Use Childcare

How many days in the last semester were you absent from work or class due to childcare arrangements?
■ 0 days ■ 1–2 days ■ 3–5 days ■ 5 or more days

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Survey questions about childcare affordability and absences from class or work were only administered to parenting students who reported that they need, use, or plan to use childcare. Students who responded "Strongly Disagree" are included in the "Disagree" group; while those who reported "Strongly Agree" are included in the "Agree" group. Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding error.

Basic needs insecurity is much more pronounced among students who find childcare unaffordable (Table 7). In fact, more than two-thirds of parenting students who reported that childcare is unaffordable were food insecure, and nearly all of them (85%) were housing insecure.

TABLE 7. Rates of Basic Needs Insecurity, By Childcare Affordability

"I can afford to pay for childcare"	FI (%)	HI (%)	HM (%)
Disagree or Strongly Disagree	69	85	23
Undecided	50	73	19
Agree or Strongly Agree	38	58	14

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: The survey question about childcare affordability was only administered to parenting students who reported that they need, use, or plan to use childcare. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the web appendices.

Given the evident need and desire for affordable childcare, we explored what sort of childcare parenting students would prefer to have on campus. We offered five response options—after-school, half-day, full-day, sick care, and childcare for children with special needs. (We omitted drop-in care, and will examine that in future #RealCollege surveys.) Table 8 shows that full-day care is the most popular option among students who currently use childcare—two in five parenting students, regardless of whether or not they were single parents and irrespective of the type of college they attended, prefer that support. The next most desired options were after-school care and half-day care. Notably, 13% of parenting students using childcare said that they would not prefer any of the on-campus options offered.

TABLE 8. On-Campus Childcare Preferences Among Parenting Students Who Used Childcare This Year, By Institution Type

If on-campus childcare were offered and affordable, which form of childcare would you prioritize?	All Parenting Students			Four-Year Colleges		
	All	Two-Year	Four-Year	All	Two-Year	Four-Year
After-school (%)	21	21	22	27	26	33
Half-day (%)	18	19	11	13	14	6
Full-day (%)	40	39	41	41	41	39
Sick care (%)	4	4	5	4	4	7
Childcare for children with special needs (%)	3	3	3	4	4	6
None of the above (%)	13	13	17	11	12	9

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: The survey question about childcare preferences was only administered to parenting students who reported that they need, use, or plan to use childcare. Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding error.

THE SQUEEZE: TIME DEMANDS AMONG PARENTING STUDENTS

Parenting students face multiple competing demands on their time. IWPR's analysis of that time squeeze focused on single mothers, illustrating that they spend more time providing care, doing housework, and working in paid employment, compared to female students without children.[38] We next examine time pressures among parenting students by considering employment, care-taking, and academic activities.

While most studies of college students only report whether the students are working or not, the #RealCollege survey also considers whether students are unemployed—seeking work but unable to find it. A job search is time-consuming but does not pay. Table 9 shows that while about 60% of parenting students are employed, another 13% are not working but are seeking work. Just 28% of parenting students are neither working nor seeking work. These figures are somewhat similar across types of colleges and for single parents as well.

TABLE 9. Employment Among Parenting Students, By Institution Type, Overall and For Single Parents

	All Parenting Students			Single Parents		
	All	Two-Year	Four-Year	All	Two-Year	Four-Year
Employed	59	58	69	60	60	65
Unemployed, looking	13	14	8	16	16	15
Unemployed, not looking	28	29	22	24	24	21

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Survey questions about work status were administered to a subset of randomly selected respondents. Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding error.

Parenting students who face basic needs insecurity are much more likely to be working or trying to find work (Figure 9). For example, 62% of parenting students who are basic needs insecure are working, compared to 53% whose basic needs are secure. Moreover, 30% of those with basic needs insecurities work more than 30 hours per week. Another 14% are not working but are seeking work (compared to 10% of secure parenting students), and just 24% are neither working nor seeking work (compared to 37% of secure parenting students).

FIGURE 9. Employment Behavior Among Parenting Students, By Basic Needs Security Status
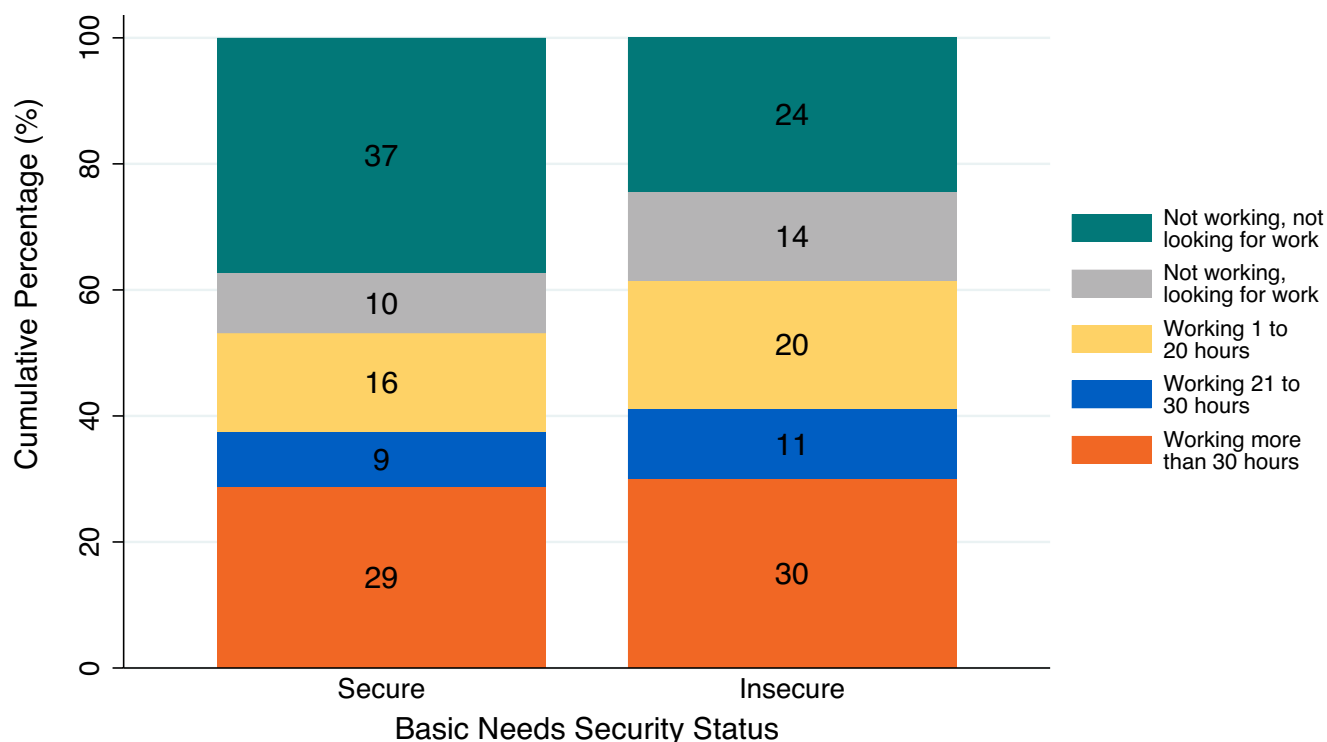
Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey questions about work status and number of hours worked were administered to a subset of randomly selected respondents. For more details on how each measure of insecurity was constructed, see web appendices.

In addition to working, parenting students spend a considerable amount of time on family care. Parenting students estimate that they spend 40 hours per week taking care of a child or an adult family member, while students without children spend eight hours per week taking care of a child or adult family member. Despite these considerable differences, both parenting and non-parenting students spend about the same amount of time preparing for and attending class (Figure 10).

FIGURE 10. Weekly Time Usage, By Parenting Status
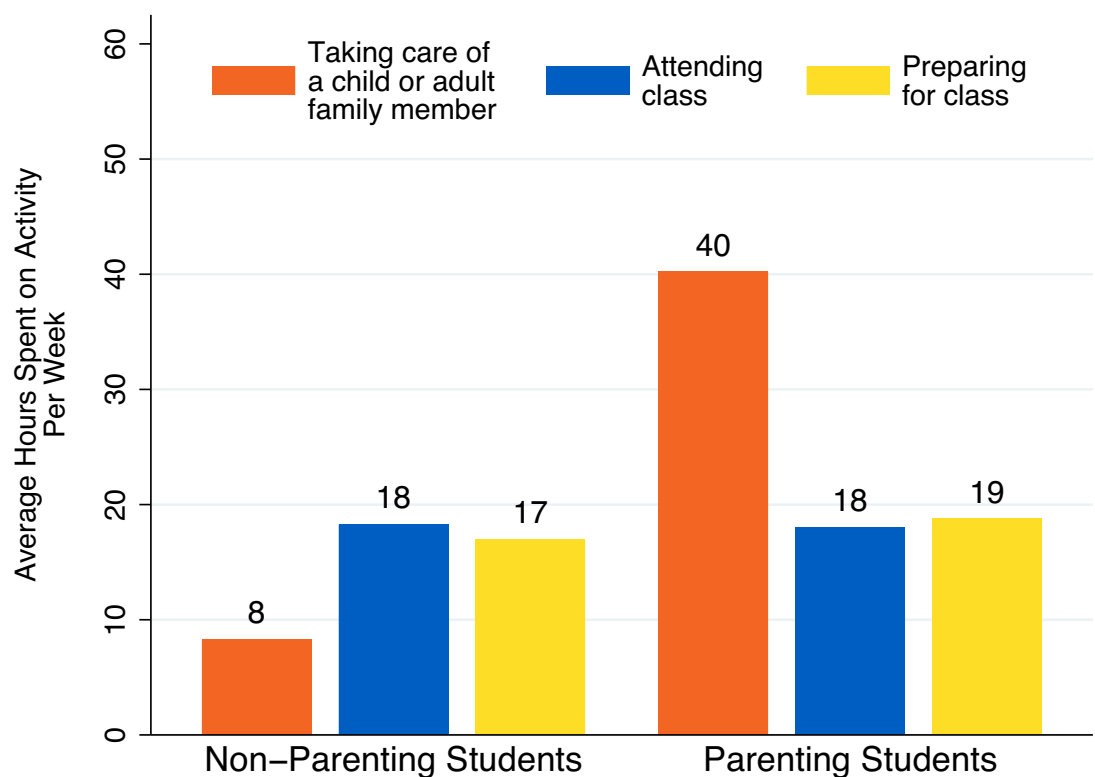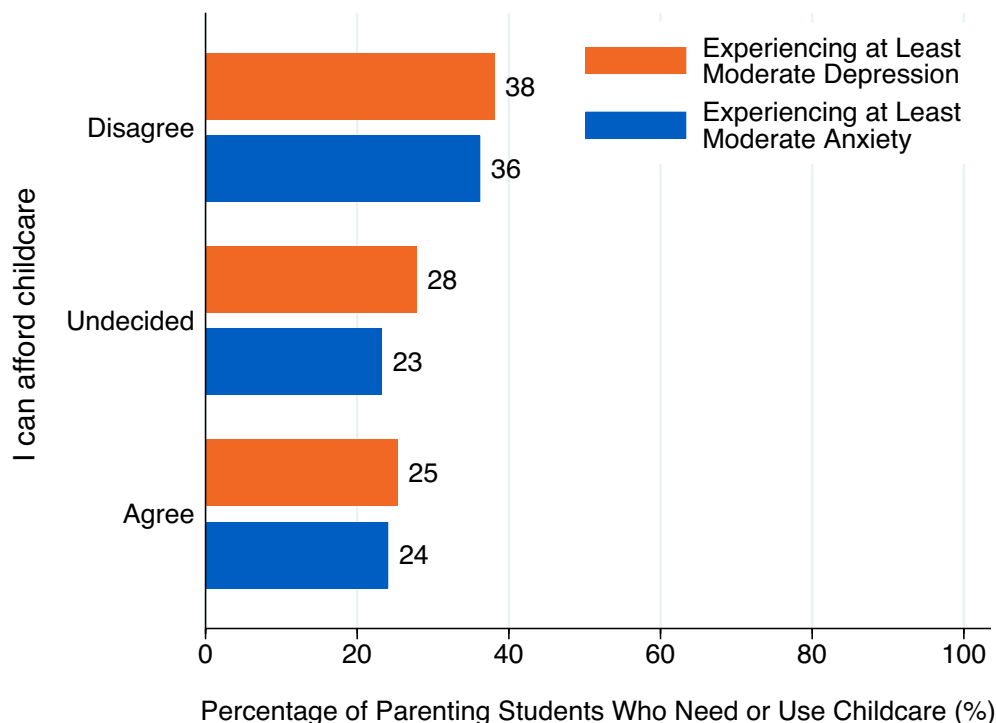

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Survey questions about time use were administered to a subset of randomly selected respondents.
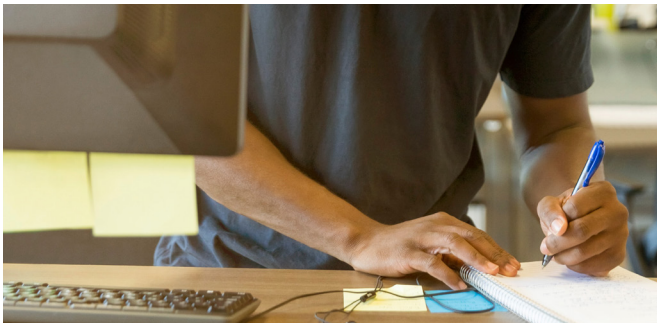
MENTAL HEALTH OF PARENTING STUDENTS

How do financial and time pressures, as well as basic needs insecurity, affect the mental health of parenting students? Table 10 examines depression and anxiety among survey respondents. Thirty percent of parenting students were experiencing depression at the time they were surveyed, with 15% experiencing at least moderately severe levels of depression. In addition, 27% were experiencing anxiety, with 13% experiencing severe anxiety.

TABLE 10. Depression and Anxiety Among Parenting Students

Level of Depression	
Experiencing at least Moderate Depression (%)	30
Minimal (%)	41
Mild (%)	29
Moderate (%)	15
Moderately severe (%)	8
Severe (%)	7
Level of Anxiety	
Experiencing at least Moderate Anxiety (%)	27
Minimum (%)	45
Mild (%)	28
Moderately (%)	14
Severe (%)	13

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Survey questions on mental health were administered to a subset of randomly selected respondents. Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding. For more details on how measures of depression and anxiety were constructed, refer to the web appendices.

Depression and anxiety are much more pronounced among parenting students who perceive that they cannot afford childcare (Figure 11). Among parenting students who need or use childcare, almost four in 10 who cannot afford childcare experience depression or anxiety, compared with one in four who can afford childcare.

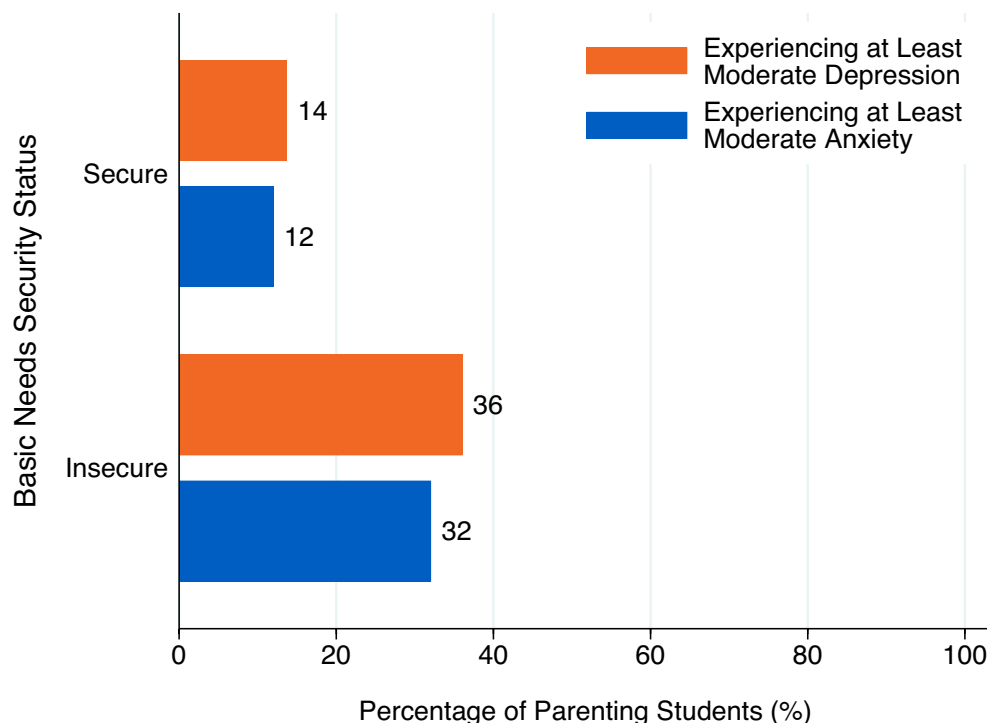**FIGURE 11. Depression and Anxiety Among Parenting Students, By Childcare Affordability**

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Survey questions on mental health were administered to a subset of randomly selected respondents. The survey question about childcare affordability was only administered to parenting students who reported that they need, use, or plan to use childcare. Students who responded "Strongly Disagree" are included in the "Disagree" group; those who reported "Strongly Agree" are included in the "Agree" group. For more details on how measures of depression and anxiety were constructed, refer to the web appendices.

Depression and anxiety are also more common among parenting students dealing with basic needs insecurity (Figure 12). About one in three parenting students who are basic needs insecure experience depression or anxiety, while about one in 10 parenting students who are basic needs secure face these challenges.

FIGURE 12. Depression and Anxiety Among Parenting Students, By Basic Needs Security Status

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Survey questions on mental health were administered to a subset of randomly selected respondents. For more details on how measures of basic needs insecurity and measures of depression and anxiety were constructed, refer to the web appendices.

SUPPORTS FOR BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY

Perhaps as a result of the increased financial burdens they face, and the extent to which they are more likely to meet eligibility criteria, parenting students are more likely than non-parenting students to utilize public benefits programs.[39] Among parenting students with basic needs insecurities at two-year colleges, approximately four in five utilize at least one public benefit, with Medicaid or public health insurance, SNAP, and tax refunds being used most often (Figure 13). Among these students at four-year institutions, rates of benefits usage are slightly lower, with approximately three in four utilizing some sort of public assistance.

Nevertheless, many parenting students who could benefit from these supports do not receive them. For example, at four-year institutions, only 29% of parenting students who are food insecure utilize SNAP. Similarly, homeless and housing insecure students access benefits like housing assistance at very low rates; the highest rate of uptake (15%) is among homeless parenting students at two-year institutions.

Perhaps most surprisingly, parenting students are also unlikely to receive childcare assistance or benefits from the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC. While this can be due to a child's age—WIC only covers children ages 0–5, and childcare is most frequently needed for young children—usage rates still seem low given parenting students' evident needs.[40]

## FIGURE 13. Use of Public Assistance Among Parenting Students, By Basic Needs Security Status and Institution Type
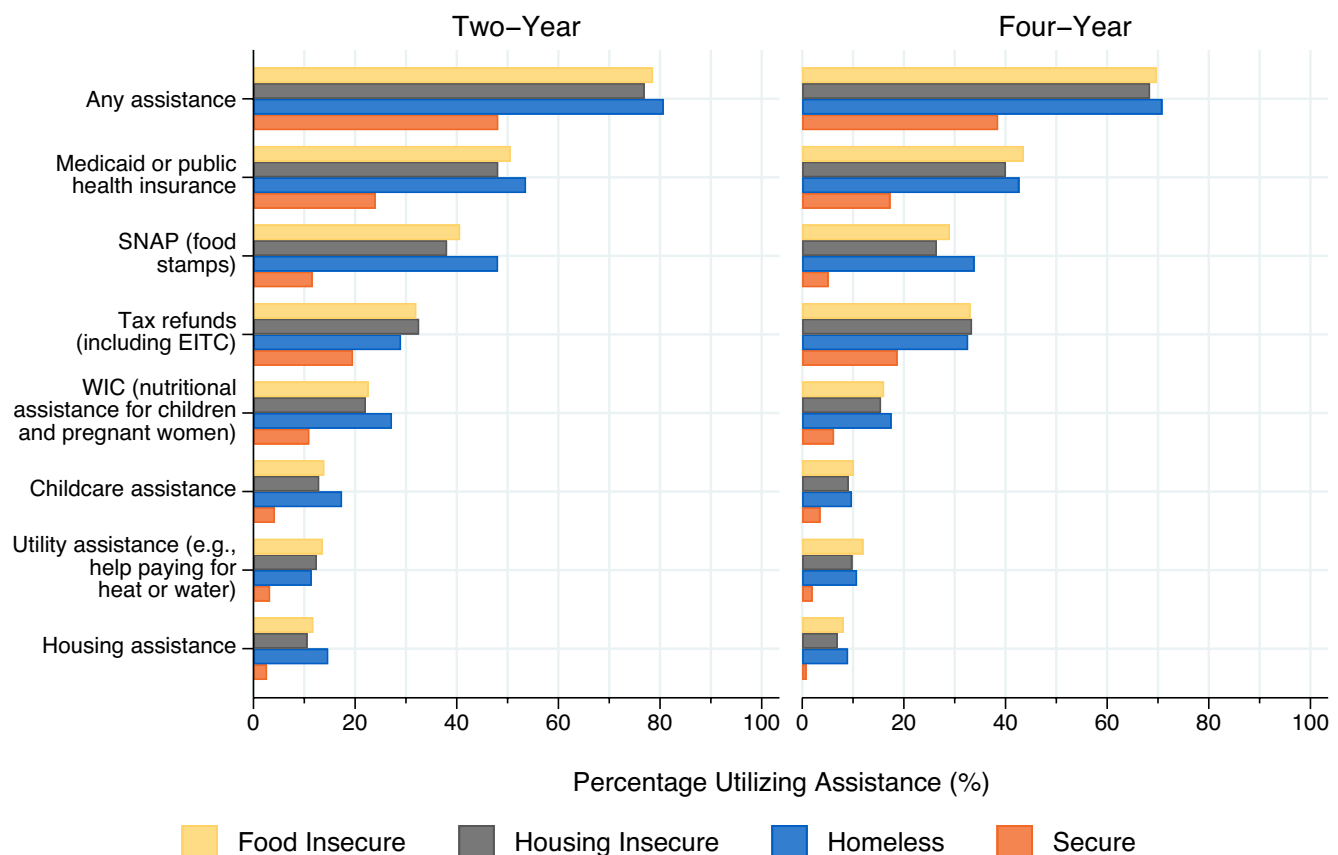
Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Not all types of public assistance are included in the figure above. See web appendices for more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed and rates of utilization for other types of public assistance.

Similarly, parenting students who experience basic needs insecurity are unlikely to receive on-campus support. Indeed, while on-campus supports have become more common, less than half of parenting students who are basic needs insecure reported utilizing them (Figure 14). Moreover, while there is some variation in the use of campus supports—for instance, campus health clinics are more commonly used at four-year institutions—rates are still low on the whole. For instance, at four-year institutions, only 16% of parenting students who are food insecure report utilizing an on-campus food pantry, and just 7% report receiving assistance obtaining SNAP.

FIGURE 14. Use of On-Campus Supports Among Parenting Students, By Basic Needs Security Status and Institution Type

Percentage Utilizing Supports (%)

Food Insecure   Housing Insecure   Homeless   Secure
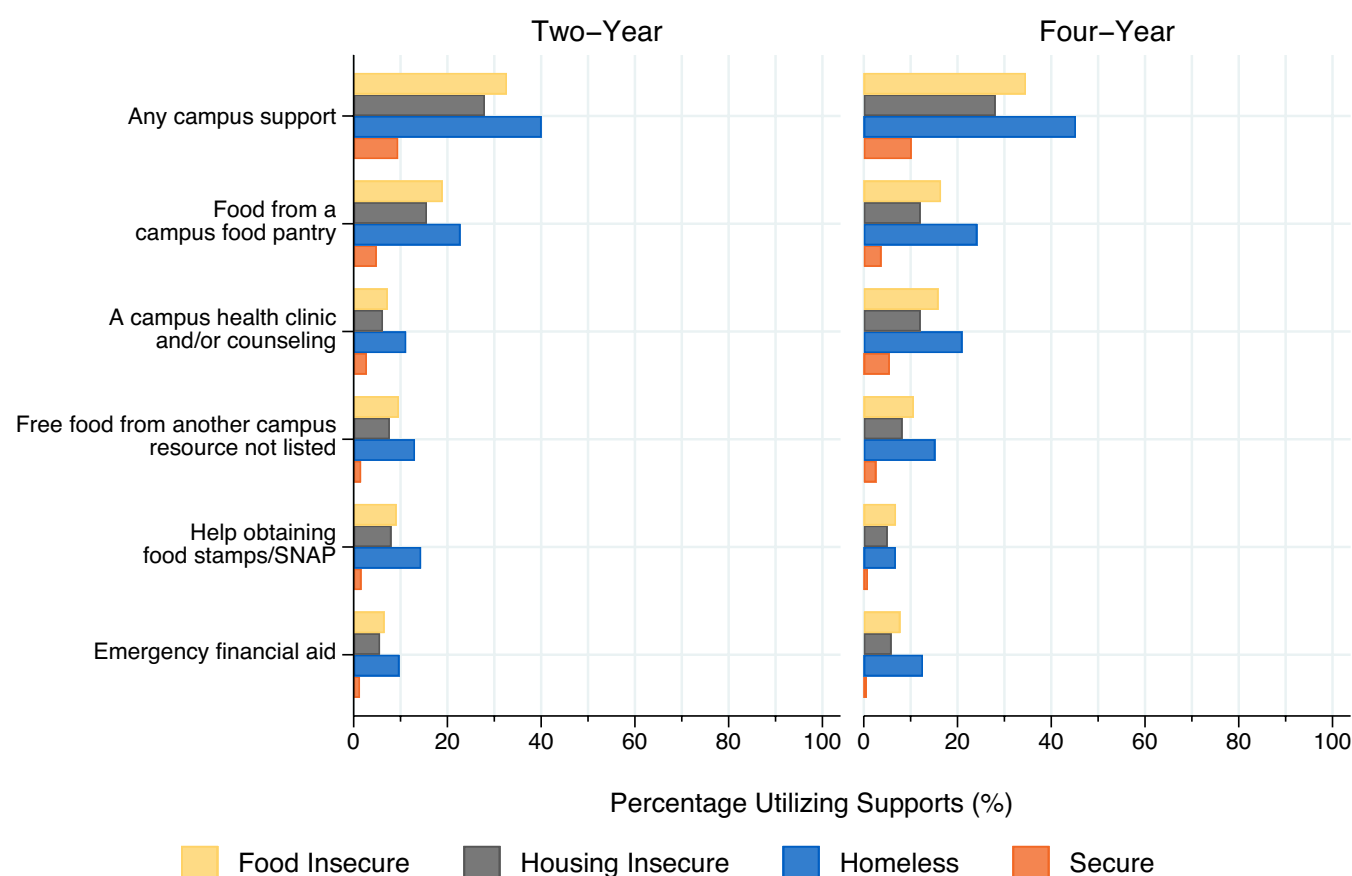
Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Survey questions about campus supports were administered to a subset of randomly selected respondents. Not all types of on-campus supports are included in the figure above. See web appendices for more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed and rates of utilization for other types of on-campus supports.

SECTION 3:
Conclusion and Recommendations

Parenting students are a group of today's #RealCollege students for whom degree completion is critical. But this report shows that they are at particular risk of basic needs insecurity and face additional time and financial pressures that put their educational goals and plans at risk.

The first step to addressing their needs is identifying who they are. We urge colleges and universities to ask whether a student is currently parenting during their course registration process (rather than during the admissions process, where it might be perceived as discriminatory). The #RealCollege survey reports we provided to every participating institution offer a look at how many parenting students we identified. These numbers should be compared to numbers the institution estimated using the FAFSA and other means. Institutions that wish to participate in this fall's survey can sign up here.

To support parenting students' basic needs and promote college attainment, colleges and universities should also take the following steps:

- Proactively and repeatedly reach out to parenting students to connect them to supportive resources, both on and off campus.

- Research your institution's ability to bring CCAMPIS or Head Start partnerships to students, faculty, and community members.[41] Colleges and universities that have done this effectively often include early childhood education programs to incorporate hands-on learning.[42]

- Centralize campus offices and resources, including financial aid, student services and organizations, academic advising, and basic need support initiatives to ensure that they are integrated and easily accessible for all students, which will help reduce stigma and communicate a culture of support.

- Pay close attention to the language used when communicating with students. Use terminology such as "childcare scholarships," as opposed to "childcare subsidies" or "vouchers," and "campus pantry," instead of "food banks." Language matters for creating conditions of accessibility.

- Identify and partner with local nonprofits that provide wraparound services for parenting students. Off-campus examples include Generation Hope and Family Scholar House.[43] Los Angeles Valley College's Family Resource Center is an example of an on-campus approach.[44]

- Coordinate and partner with local human service agencies to (1) identify which benefits students are eligible for, and (2) clarify enrollment verification processes (in order to receive benefits, students must verify that they are enrolled in college). These efforts would allow students to leverage public benefits as part of a comprehensive set of financial supports, while also reducing the administrative burdens students face when applying for benefits.

- Communicate with parenting students to ensure they are aware that they can use federal financial aid, including loans, to help pay for childcare. According to a report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO), as many as 2.5 million parenting students are leaving money on the table because they have to ask their college to provide a "dependent care allowance" and further prove their need with additional documentation.[45] They are often unaware that support is available. Advertise the nonprofit resource SwiftStudent, to help students request this support from the financial aid office.

- Ensure that your institution's emergency aid program includes support for childcare and other parent-related expenses.

To support parenting students' basic needs and promote college attainment, policymakers should:

- Ensure postsecondary activities are among the highest priorities in public benefit programs. This change from the current rules, which favor or even mandate low-wage, low-growth work over education, is a critical modification that will reap lasting benefits for families and the economy.

- Provide additional funding for both federal child subsidy programs, CCDBG and CCAMPIS. Ensuring all children who are eligible have access to high-quality childcare improves access to school and work and improves outcomes for children.

- Federal and state agencies should use unique identification numbers, a well-established practice in the health care field, to protect student privacy while improving data sharing coordination across programs and services.[46]

- The Department of Education should make clear that a person who answers "yes" to the FAFSA question about prior public benefit access will either be (1) routed to the simplified needs test or (2) have their expected family contribution set to zero. Additionally, they should be assured that benefits provided by these programs do not count as income and therefore will not reduce the amount of financial aid the student could receive.[47]

Despite the opportunities for economic and intergenerational mobility that a college education can provide, parenting students face significant systemic barriers that hinder their ability to access college, persist in their studies, and complete a college credential.[48] Outdated perspectives about who college students are—and worse, who they should be—and the respective policies reflecting these views limit the gains a college degree can provide for themselves, their children, and our society.

Higher education and public support programs often include administrative burdens that effectively undermine otherwise supportive policies.[49] These rules, application processes, and compliance requirements push parenting students to make detrimental trade-offs between barely subsisting on low-wage work or pursuing higher education to achieve economic security. The barriers in higher education result, in part, from a system that was constructed around White, middle-class normative values about the "right" pathway to education, career, and family.[50] As such, higher education has failed to adapt to the shifting dynamics and realities of the American family, both demographically and structurally.[51] Similarly, policy barriers in public benefit programs reflect historic and entrenched negative perceptions about people with low incomes, often rooted in racism, that have resulted in an emphasis on work that curtails education.[52] These barriers force parenting students to take on more debt than their peers, and significantly extend the time it takes for them to complete their degrees, if they complete them at all.[53]

These perspectives and subsequent policies are demonstrably counterproductive and undermine investments in state and federal higher education, workforce development, and public benefit programs that hurt economic growth. Parenting students arguably stand to achieve the most significant gains for themselves and their children from a college degree, yet they face the greatest barriers to success.[54] We are long overdue for a revision of both higher education and social support structures that reflect the realities of #RealCollege parenting students and a modern economy in which the vast majority of new jobs created require some form of postsecondary credential.[55]

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