



Supporting Single Mother Students: What We Have Learned

ECMC
Foundation

Based on work ECMC Foundation has supported, we now know that **there are an estimated 1.7 million undergraduate students in the United States who are single mothers**ⁱ. About half of these women attend community colleges. Single mother students face unique resource and time demands. Nearly nine in ten (88%) single mother students have incomes at or near the federal poverty level.ⁱⁱ Single mother students spend on average nine hours a day caring for their children and houseworkⁱⁱⁱ leaving little time for their other responsibilities.

Since 2016, ECMC Foundation has made **13 grants** to 10 organizations totaling **\$6.4 million** to support single mother students working towards an academic credential. This fact sheet highlights **what we have learned** to date. In addition to informing ECMC Foundation's strategy moving forward, these findings offer insights for other funders and the broader postsecondary field on strategies and solutions that support single mother students.

Our Grantee Partners Have:



Provided technical assistance to **15 community colleges** serving more than **19,000 single mother students**.



Produced research that made the case for over **\$42M** in additional state and federal funding towards student parents.



Launched or expanded direct service programs that offered supportive services for more than **300 single mother students** each year.

To continue advancing the success of single mother students, funders and the postsecondary field as a whole should:

- ✓ Increase investment in single mother students in all three categories: (1) direct services to pilot or scale programs, (2) technical assistance to build institutional capacity, and (3) research and evaluation to increase awareness and inform policy and practice.
- ✓ Support organizations that bring the voices of single mother students into the conversation and generate community, leadership and advocacy skills among this population.
- ✓ Acknowledge the importance of basic needs services such as childcare, housing, and transportation in increasing persistence and completion.
- ✓ Strengthen connections across organizations focused on success for single mother students.
- ✓ Articulate the needs and strengths of single mother students within philanthropy, higher education, and workforce development conversations.

Highlights & Learnings from Direct Service Projects *Piloting or Scaling Promising Programs*

We see that education, both postsecondary education for single moms, as well as early childhood education for her children, and then housing and family stability are really the key levers for disrupting intergenerational poverty for families.

- Jeremiah Program

ECMC Foundation made four grants to three organizations to pilot innovative approaches or scale promising direct service programs focused on improving completion rates for single mother students. Grantee highlights include:

- **Jeremiah Program.** 76% of participants increased their wages since entering the program and 88% of children are meeting their early childhood developmental milestones.
- **Project Self-Sufficiency.** While 73% of single mothers entered the program with an annual income of less than \$10,000, every single mother who completed the program left with an annual income over \$40,000.
- **Women's Foundation of Southern Arizona's Pathways Program.** Nine of the 12 women who enrolled in the first cohort of the Women's Foundation of Southern Arizona's Pathways Program were on track to complete the one-year certificate program at the end of 2020.

To address the time and resource constraints that single mother students face, these direct service programs offer financial supports, access to basic needs such as housing and food, and case management. Several organizations holistically address multiple challenges that mothers may encounter while working towards their educational goals. While all programs are focused on the educational goals of the mother, all three programs take a two-generation approach supporting access to stable, high quality childcare which supports the development of children and addresses some of the time constraints that single mother students face.

Key learnings:

Consider the full range of childcare needs and preferences. Stable, high quality childcare is an important component of two-generation models. However, some programs focus on mothers with infants and toddlers and neglect to address childcare needs of school-aged children as well as mothers who have multiple children. When developing programming for single mother students, it is important to understand the ages of the children as well as childcare preferences.

Help single mother students meet their basic needs. In addition to childcare, two basic needs that seemed particularly challenging for single mother students are housing and transportation.

Highlights & Learnings from Technical Assistance Projects

Increasing Institutional Capacity

Without building broader institutional support and capacity, many single mothers who stand to benefit will remain unidentified by institutions, unaware of what is available to support them on their campuses, and unserved, as a result.

- World Education, Inc.

ECMC Foundation made four grants to three organizations to develop and implement technical assistance models for community colleges focused on better supporting single mother students and improving their completion rates. Grantee highlights include:

- **Education Design Lab.** Began working with four community colleges^{iv} and published [several pieces](#) with key learnings-to-date on their website.
- **Generation Hope.** Released [a toolkit](#) in September 2020 for colleges and universities that focused on the top ten things colleges and universities can do to ensure student parents are not left behind due to the COVID-19 pandemic and to set student parents up for success post-pandemic.
- **World Education, Inc.** Began working with eight community colleges^v and released *No Matter What Obstacle Is Thrown My Way*, [a report](#) that summarizes the specialized programs, targeted supports, and/or campus-wide services available to single mothers at 17 community colleges.

Education Design Lab and World Education, Inc. are offering technical assistance and coaching to 12 community colleges that serve 200,820^{vi} students including an estimated 19,078 single mothers.^{vii} ECMC Foundation is focusing technical assistance efforts on community colleges because they serve the largest share of single mother students and often have access to fewer resources than four-year institutions.

Key learnings:

Build campus and system infrastructure that will enable baseline data collection and continuous data collection practices. Most institutions do not collect data on the parenting status of their students, so grantees helped partnering institutions to collect data on the number and characteristics of single mothers enrolled and services and policies that support or inhibit single mother student success.

Utilize a cohort-based approach to technical assistance and coaching. The grantees delivering technical assistance and coaching engaged institutions individually and in a group so campuses could share their strengths and successes with one another.

Ensure ties to ongoing institutional efforts and buy-in at multiple levels to sustain supports. Grantees have been strategic about how they developed their models to ensure that there was engagement (co-design or collaboration) and buy-in from multiple levels within different departments at partnering institutions. They have also been strategic about infusing their work into existing efforts on campuses such as equity and inclusion priorities, academic and workforce development, and strategic planning processes.

Highlights & Learnings from Research and Awareness-Raising Projects Increasing Awareness and Informing Policy and Practice

The more that we can build bridges and close gaps between the population that we're attempting to serve, the individual single mothers pursuing higher education and the decision-makers, the closer that those two groups can be to ideating and problem-solving the better.

- Roadtrip Nation

ECMC Foundation made five grants to four organizations with the ultimate goal of increasing awareness of single mother students, including a focus on informing institutional leaders and policymakers about the needs of this population. Grantee highlights include:

- **Institute for Women's Policy Research.** Conducted original research on single mother students, including estimating the number of single mother students, as well as the costs and benefits of supporting single mothers' completion of postsecondary degrees [nationally and in each state](#).
- **Family Resource Center (FRC) at Los Angeles Valley College.** Initial evaluation efforts of FRC support services (serving 800 student parents each year) demonstrated to institution leaders and policymakers that students who receive services through the FRC graduate at higher rates compared to the overall student parent population on campus.
- **Ascend at the Aspen Institute.** Developed [Policy Acceleration Partnership Grants](#) and the [Parent Powered Solutions Fund](#) to support government, postsecondary institutions and community-based organizations working together to serve single mother students.
- **Roadtrip Nation.** Produced a [documentary film](#), "A Single Mom's Story," highlighting the experiences of three single mother students that aired on public television stations across the country, reaching over 89 million households.

Key Learnings:

Disseminate research findings to inform policy change. In 2018, Congress more than tripled funding to \$50M for the Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools (CCAMPIS) program, which supports childcare on college campuses. Prior to passage, the Department of Education cited IWPR's ECMC Foundation-funded research on single mother students in the supporting documents justifying an increased budget request. IWPR's research was also used by policymakers and advocates in New York, Pennsylvania, California and Kentucky to make the case for more funding for programs that support student parents. The Women's Foundation of Southern Arizona helped inform the passage of a state law that allows childcare subsidies to be accessed for postsecondary education.

Use storytelling to elevate the insights of single mothers in policy and practice change discussions. Ascend's Parent-Powered Solutions Fund, which builds the capacity of community-based organizations serving college students with children was designed and driven by student parents, while Roadtrip Nation's documentary was used as a springboard for discussions around policy and practice change during a weeklong series, "[Together We Thrive](#)."

Accelerating Change for Single Mother Students Implications for Future Work

The field has needed some way of organizing, creating networks of single mothers themselves both for purposes of advocacy, but also mutual support and engagement in some sort of mass way. I think that that could make a big difference given the financial and budget challenges that colleges are experiencing right now.

- IWPR

Despite the progress that has been made, more work needs to be done in all three areas (direct services, technical assistance and research) to support single mother students and move the needle on postsecondary completion rates for this population. Although more attention has focused on nontraditional students in recent years, grantees noted that more needs to be done to bring resources to specifically support single mother students, who are often still invisible to the general public and key decision-makers, such as institutional leaders and policymakers. One grantee pointed out the unique challenge that, “single mother students run into cultural barriers and policies that just are not written for students who have caregiving responsibilities, particularly those who do not have other parental support.”

Grantees across all three categories addressed the importance of engaging single mother students in this work. Suggestions included soliciting feedback from clients about services, bringing together alumni to support current clients, ensuring that single mothers enrolled at partnering campuses have a seat on advisory groups leading institutional level work.

By increasing investment in direct service programs, technical assistance, and research and awareness-raising that address basic needs and elevate the voices of single mothers, funders and the postsecondary field as a whole can continue advancing the success of single mother students. When single mothers are able to get the education they want and need, we all benefit.



Single mothers on a road trip as captured in Roadtrip Nation’s “A Single Mom’s Story.”

Notes

- ⁱ Reichlin Cruse, L., Milli, J., Contreras-Mendez, S. Holtzman, T., Gault, B. (December 2019) Investing in Single Mothers' Higher Education: National and State Estimates of the Costs and Benefits of Single Mothers' Educational Attainment to Individuals, Families, and Society. Retrieved from https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/R600_Investing-in-Single-Moms-National.pdf
- ⁱⁱ Institute for Women's Policy Research (2019) Analysis of Data from the U.S. Department of Education, national Center for Education Statistics, 2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Reichlin Cruse, L., Gault, B., Suh, J (May 2018) Time Demands of Single Mother College Students and the Role of Child Care in their Postsecondary Success. Retrieved from <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/C468.pdf>.
- ^{iv} Education Design Lab's four partnering institutions are: Central New Mexico Community College, Albuquerque, NM; Delgado Community College, New Orleans, LA; Ivy Tech Community College, Indiana; and Monroe Community College, Rochester, NY.
- ^v World Education, Inc.'s eight partnering institutions are: Broward College, Fort Lauderdale, FL; Columbus State Community College, Columbus, OH; Delaware County Community College, Media, PA; Frederick Community College, Frederick, MD; Kingsborough Community College, Brooklyn, NY; Lee College, Baytown, TX; Western Technical College, La Crosse, WI; and University of Hawai'i, Windward Community College, Honolulu, HI. PERG-Learning and Achieving the Dream are also project partners.
- ^{vi} National Center for Education Statistics: Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS) College Navigator, Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>
Ivy Tech does not report student population by campus; therefore, the total student population for the system is used here.
- ^{vii} Estimate of single mother students calculated as total student population multiplied by 9.5% the national estimate for single mother students among undergraduate students.