

BRIGHT SPOT FROM THE FIELD:

IDENTIFYING AND SUPPORTING STUDENT PARENTS AT FRESNO STATE



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California State University, Fresno

California State University, Fresno is the largest state university in the Central Valley, serving over 25,000 students primarily from the surrounding counties. Fresno State is designated as both a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), with 60 percent of its students being Latinx, and an Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Institution (AANAPISI), with 18 percent Asian American students. An estimated 20 percent of students on campus are student parents who are raising one or more children age 18 and under.

Student parents are highly ambitious but more likely to experience unique barriers to success in higher education, such as “time poverty,”¹ a larger debt load, and employment demands.² Still, they tend to graduate with higher than average GPAs.³ Unfortunately, colleges and universities largely do not account for this population in their data collection – resulting in their unique needs, challenges, and assets not being reflected in student support efforts and university narratives. Fresno State, however, stands out as a bright spot for its actions, from campus data collection, to marshalling resources to meet students’ basic needs, to creating critical infrastructure supports to understand and support the educational aspirations of its student parents.

Student Parents Count

While the CSU application provides some initial data on new students who self-identify as having dependents, there is no systemwide mechanism for accounting for students who become parents after enrolling. In 2019, Fresno State became the first campus in the CSU to collect data on student parents. Faculty member Dr. Larissa Mercado-López partnered with the registrar’s office and IT team to identify data fields that would capture information about the status of students’ dependents and caregiving responsibilities to best inform the campus on how to support them. Fresno State’s data mechanism broadly defines “dependent” to include students who occupy various caregiving roles and asks students for the age of their dependent; their relationship to the dependent; the percentage of care provided; and the percentage of financial support provided. Since its inception, approximately 400 students have voluntarily shared this information. Other efforts, such as campus emails and tabling at orientation and other campus events, are underway to more widely educate students about the dependent data page and to encourage more students to submit their information.

The creation of this data collection mechanism has generated interest from other CSU campuses with whom Fresno State has been in conversation to help create mechanisms of their own and advocate to the CSU Chancellor’s Office for a more unified student parent data

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collection effort across the system. And at Fresno State, excitement about this data effort has generated momentum to promote a more student parent-oriented culture that provides specific supports for student parents, described in further detail below.

Services to Support the Whole Student Parent

A central support hub for student parents at Fresno State is [Programs for Children](#) (PFC), which includes three childcare centers that serve infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children year round. These programs, which existed prior to the campus' student parent data collection efforts, are designed to meet each child's individual needs by helping them build foundational skills and develop social relationships. However, in Fall 2020, a faculty and leadership team were awarded a \$1.5 million Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program (CCAMPIS) grant to supplement childcare costs, provide virtual schooling for children of student parents, and initiate a student parent coaching and workshop series. Additionally, Dr. Mercado-Lopez is working with the campus library to design and raise funds for a family study room to help strengthen students' sense of belonging and introduce the campus to children as a welcoming space.

Fresno State also offers material supports to student parents. Diapers for Degrees, the first university-based diaper bank in the country, is housed in the [Fresno State Student Cupboard](#) and serves as a diaper distribution site for the Fresno County Food Bank. The diaper bank, proposed by faculty member Dr. Jennifer Randles, was established in recognition of the need among low-income mothers and the critical role that diapers play in parents' ability to work and attend school (given that childcare centers require children who are not toilet trained to supply their own disposable diapers). From Fall 2019 to Spring 2021, a multimillion-dollar state grant provided Fresno State students with 30,000 diapers a month, extending parenting students' income for other critical needs such as transportation, housing, and books. Additionally, the Student Cupboard ensures formula and baby wipes are regularly in stock. Student Cupboard director Jessica Medina organizes workshops to connect representatives from CalFresh and WIC with eligible students, further increasing access to basic needs.

Another material support Fresno State offers is the CSU system's first children's clothing closet, the Lil' Bulldog Boutique. Opened in 2020, it provides new and gently used children's clothing to students regardless of their parenting status, in recognition of the fact that students are often financially responsible for extended family and children within their larger community. The Office of the President provided funding to initiate both this and Diapers for Degrees – an essential demonstration of the office's investment in student parents.

Fresno State serves as an excellent model for other colleges and universities in California around its work to support student parents. If individual campuses – and the CSU system more broadly – better tracks student parents going forward, they can be more visible on campus and met with more robust supports such as the ones described here for themselves and their families.

¹Time poverty refers to, relative to non-parents, a decreased amount of time student parents have to complete college work. Claire Wladis, Alyse C. Hachey, and Katherine Conway. "No time for college? An investigation of time poverty and parenthood." *The Journal of Higher Education* 89, no. 6 (2018): 807-831.

²"Hear My Voice II: Supporting Success for Parenting and Unhoused Women of Color," (Oakland, CA: EducationTrust--West, 2020), <https://west.edtrust.org/ed-equity-in-crisis-centering-higher-ed-student-experiences/>

³ Claire Wladis, Alyse C. Hachey, and Katherine Conway. "No time for college? An investigation of time poverty and parenthood." *The Journal of Higher Education* 89, no. 6 (2018): 807-831.