Student Parents and Academic Outcomes

Close to one-third (32 percent) of all community college students\(^1\) and half (51 percent) of Achieving the Dream FAFSA-filers have dependents. Students with children face unique challenges—such as childcare, employment, student loans, and housing issues—that make persisting and completing their postsecondary goals more difficult.\(^2\) While most postsecondary interventions are designed to support academic preparedness or provide social support, a number of recent initiatives have emerged focused specifically on student parent success.

For example, the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR) created the Student Parent Success Initiative, which focuses on supporting postsecondary student parents, especially low-income women, by providing resources and programs to aid them through persistence to credential completion and, thus, to become better equipped to enter the workforce as viable and skilled workers.\(^3\)

Given that single parents represent a substantial proportion of students on ATD college campuses, this issue of Data Notes contextualizes this student population and opens the discussion for how institutions can better serve students with children. More specifically, this issue of Data Notes examines and compares the outcomes of single female and male parents to students without dependents. Dependent status is based on students’ FAFSA application, so this analysis is limited to students in Rounds 1 through 6 who filed a FAFSA. Three-year persistence, course completion, and award completion outcomes were examined. Differences in outcomes between male and female students were analyzed by marital status, dependency status, and Pell grant receipt.\(^4\)

Student Parent Profile

Out of all single students, 58 percent were female compared with 42 percent of male students (Figure 1). Female students were more likely to be single parents than male students (39 percent versus 31 percent, respectively). Female single parents were also more likely to be low-income as well; of female Pell grant recipients, 41 percent were single with dependents compared with 27 percent of male Pell grant recipients.

Persistence Rates

Female single parents persisted at slightly higher rates than male single parents: 71 percent of female single parents persisted to the second term compared with 67 percent of their male counterparts (Figure 2). Female single parents continued to have higher persistence rates into their second and third year; 49 percent of female single parents persisted into year two compared with 47 percent of male single parents. Three-year persistence rates for female single parents were three percentage points higher than male single parents.

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\(^1\) U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007–08 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:08).


\(^5\) The number of students reporting dependents may be inflated; there may be students who have children but do not claim dependents on their taxes, do not have custody of the child, or are paying less than 50 percent in child support.

\(^6\) Achieving the Dream’s measure of low-income status is Pell grant receipt.
What Is a Cohort?
A cohort is a group of people studied during a period of time. The individuals in the group have at least one statistical factor—such as when they started college—in common.

The Achieving the Dream 2002 student cohort, for example, is the group of credential-seeking students that attended Achieving the Dream institutions for the first time in fall 2002.

Tracking a cohort makes it possible to compare progress and outcomes of different groups of students (e.g., groups defined by race, age or other demographic characteristics) and to determine if there are gaps in achievement among groups of interest.

Persistence rates by gender, marital status, dependency status, and Pell grant receipt

What Is a Cohort? (continued on next page)

Figure 1. Profile of ATD student parents by gender, marital status, dependency status, and Pell grant receipt

Figure 2. Persistence rates by gender, marital status, dependency status, and Pell grant receipt

Note: The following student cohorts were included in this analysis: Round 1, 2002, 2003; Round 2, 2003, 2004; Round 3, 2004, 2005; Round 4, 2005, 2006; Round 5, 2006, 2007; Round 6, 2007. Only students with valid FAFSA data were included.

Course Completion

Course completion rates differed for student parents compared with students without dependents (Figure 3). Female single parents completed all developmental classes referred to, gateway English, and gateway math (34, 35, and 15 percent, respectively) classes at lower rates than their female counterparts without dependents (37, 42, and 31 percent, respectively). Noteworthy is the fact that female single parents outperformed male single parents in all developmental and gateway English completions, 29 percent of male single parents completed all developmental education, and 31 percent completed gateway English. However, the gateway math completion rate for male single parents was slightly higher than that of female single parents, 16 percent compared with 15 percent.

*Female single parents outperformed male single parents in all developmental and gateway English categories.*

Interestingly, receipt of a Pell grant was related to mixed course completion outcomes. Female single parents with Pell grants fared better in terms of developmental education completion: 37 percent of female single parents with Pell grants completed their developmental education coursework, compared with 27 percent of female single parents who did not receive Pell grants. Female single parents’ gateway English and math completion rates were the same for Pell grant recipients and non-recipients: 35 percent completed in gateway English and 15 percent in gateway math.

The course completion pattern also fluctuated for male parents. More male single parent Pell grant recipients completed their developmental coursework (32 percent) than non-recipients (26 percent). This same pattern was evident for gateway English and math, but to a smaller degree; male single parents who received a Pell grant were slightly more likely to complete gateway English than male single parents who did not receive a Pell grant (32 percent versus 30 percent), as well as more likely to complete gateway math (16 percent versus 15 percent, respectively).

Credential Completion and Transfers

Completion, transfer, and re-enrollment rates during the third year indicate that, overall, single parents had slightly lower credential completions and higher third year stop-out rates compared to their married counterparts and students without dependents (Figure 4). Three-year completion rates did not vary greatly between female and male single parents (7 percent compared with 6 percent), but male single parents were more likely than their female counterparts to drop out during their third year (62 percent compared with 59 percent). The transfer and enrollment rates for female single parents (8 percent and 26 percent, respectively) were fairly consistent with those of male single parents (9 percent and 24 percent, respectively).

Female single parents who received Pell grants completed credentials, transferred, or re-enrolled during their third year (7 percent, 3 percent, and 29 percent, respectively) at similar rates as compared with their male counterparts (6 percent, 3 percent, and 27 percent respectively). However, single parent Pell grant recipients did not re-enroll, complete, or transfer by the third year at higher rates than other student groups. Sixty-

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four percent of male single parents who received Pell grants did not enroll during their third year, 2 percent higher than the average dropout rate (62 percent) of all males who received Pell grants. Sixty-one percent of female single parents who received Pell grants were not enrolled during year three, which is three percentage points higher than the average rate of all other female students who received Pell grants (58 percent). Further more, single parent Pell grant non-recipients were more likely to stay enrolled or transfer than single parent Pell grant recipients. Only 40 percent of male single parent non-recipients compared to 36 percent of the male single parents who received Pell Grants were enrolled by year three. Similarly, only 55 percent of female single parent non-recipients dropped out compared to 61 percent of the female single parents who did receive a Pell Grant.

**What Does It Mean?**

Overall, persistence and course completion rates were higher for students without dependents than for students with dependents: 79 percent and 58 percent of students without dependents persisted to the second term and second year, respectively—both of these rates were 8 percentage points higher than that of student parents. Noteworthy, is the fact that completion and transfer rates were higher for student parents than for students without dependents, 17 percent of student parents completed credentials or transferred by the end of the third year compared with 12 percent of those without dependents.

Furthermore, studies have shown that female students have higher enrollment, persistence, and completion rates than that of males. Students in Achieving the Dream Colleges are no exception. Given that the majority of student parents are female, and that student parents face unique challenges in pursuing postsecondary education, it seems single mothers still have higher success rates than single fathers.

Across the board, single mothers, including those who received Pell grants, had similar academic outcomes when compared with other females in the cohort and consistently higher outcomes than single fathers. This may be because single mothers have more resources at their disposal, such as help from other family members, or they may be more likely to be targeted by initiatives and reforms to support and assist them in their academics.

Despite receiving financial aid, single parents had lower completion and re-enrollment rates than their non-aided counterparts. This could be due a lack of sufficient financial aid and social supports to allow them to continue pursuing their award. Unlike married parents, single parents do not have the benefit of familial stability shared childcare responsibilities. Furthermore, single parent Pell grant recipients are faced with the challenges of supporting their families financially as well as pay for school. Possibly, as time goes on, the financial burden gets to be too great for a student to persist.

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As colleges develop their strategies and initiatives to help guide students toward academic success, given the differences in outcomes, consideration of student parents and their varying successes is important. Some things to consider:

- Do student’s marital status, income, and number of dependents change over time?
- What effect do these status changes have on their abilities to succeed?
- Do student parents’ outcomes differ? Is it different for Pell grant recipients, males, or females?
- What strategies do we have in place for single parents? Are the same programs available to males as well as females?

Achieving the Dream colleges can download the companion tables to this issue of Data Notes, featuring your college’s data, at the Achieving the Dream National Database website, www.dreamwebsubmission.org.