

# Pillars of Support

**Results from an Evaluation of  
the Parenting Students Project  
at Austin Community College**

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# Executive Summary

Parenting students face higher rates of financial and basic needs insecurity compared to their non-parenting peers. They are also more likely to work while enrolled, and they frequently experience time poverty as they balance school, work, and family obligations.<sup>1</sup> A student's overall wellbeing and stability can have a big impact on their academic success, making financial support a promising avenue for increasing parenting student success.

The Parenting Students Project (PSP) is an initiative organized by United Way for Greater Austin (United Way) in coordination with Austin Community College District (ACC) to provide tangible support to parenting students. Qualifying students receive a \$500 monthly stipend and attend monthly peer meetings, in which they meet fellow parents and participate in seminars on topics such as mental health and building credit. The PSP also provides resource-connection to ACC's support services, notably the Student Advocacy Center. All PSP participants receive case management from a Student Advocate, and many parents also make use of the childcare scholarship offered through the center. Funding for the monthly stipends is provided by a private funder, while support staff time is provided directly by ACC and United Way. Current funding for the project extends through the Spring 2025 semester.

To be eligible for the PSP, parenting students must be under 30 years old with a child under 12 years old and must be enrolled in at least nine credit hours per long semester at ACC. From the program's establishment in Fall 2021 through the Spring 2024 term, the PSP has supported a total of 95 students and 137 children.

Trellis Strategies, on behalf of ACC, evaluated the impact of the PSP on students' experiences, financial wellbeing, and academic outcomes. Trellis researchers conducted interviews with eight recent PSP participants to understand how the PSP impacted their college experience. The interviews covered students' interactions with different PSP and ACC resources, as well as their broader experiences surrounding academics, employment, and family life.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Trellis researchers analyzed records for 7,626 student parents who enrolled at ACC between Fall 2021 and Spring 2024, including 91 students who participated in the PSP, to investigate the effect of PSP participation on academic intensity, GPA, retention, and completion.<sup>3</sup> This report outlines the key findings of this mixed-methods evaluation.

Recent PSP participants felt that the program had an overwhelmingly positive impact on their academic experience. They spoke to both practical and emotional support from the PSP, which resulted in positive growth of their financial wellbeing, academic confidence, and mental health. Analysis of student records confirmed that PSP participation had a meaningful impact on student retention and financial stability, including a reduction in their use of emergency funding. While some interview participants discussed opportunities to strengthen the support system, the overall conclusion of this report is that the PSP provides meaningful support to address critical needs among parenting students at ACC.





# Key Findings

This evaluation found that support from the Parenting Students Project (PSP) impacted student parents across multiple areas of their college experience, from retention to mental health.

## Impact Area #1: Academic Progress

- PSP participation was associated with improved retention and graduation outcomes. Ninety-five percent of students who participated in the PSP in a given term were retained into the following long semester, compared to 75 percent term-to-term retention among parenting students who did not participate in a given term.
- Students who participated in the PSP were more likely to complete at least nine credit hours, compared to their non-PSP peers. Interview participants reported both positive and negative consequences of increased enrollment intensity.
- While the quantitative analysis found only a limited association between PSP participation and students' academic standing, interview participants reported that resource-connection to Student Advocates had a meaningful impact on their attitudes and confidence around college.

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## Impact Area #2: Financial Wellness

- PSP participation increased students' overall financial stability. Students borrowed on average \$1,052 less per semester, and required less emergency funding, during terms they participated in the PSP, as compared to students who did not participate in the PSP in a given term.
- For interview participants, financial support from the PSP alleviated critical transportation insecurity and gave parenting students the flexibility to choose the work schedule that best supported their goals, reducing their overall time poverty.

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# 95%

of students who participated  
in the PSP in a given term  
**WERE RETAINED INTO THE  
FOLLOWING LONG SEMESTER.**



### Impact Area #3: Family Life

- Resource-connection to the childcare scholarship played a key role in alleviating time poverty for students. Receiving a childcare scholarship was associated with increased retention and higher GPAs.
- Support from the PSP and the network of other parenting students gave participants the time, energy, and tools to be better parents. Interview participants also emphasized how their own success in college translated into a better future for their children.

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### Impact Area #4: Mental Health & Belonging

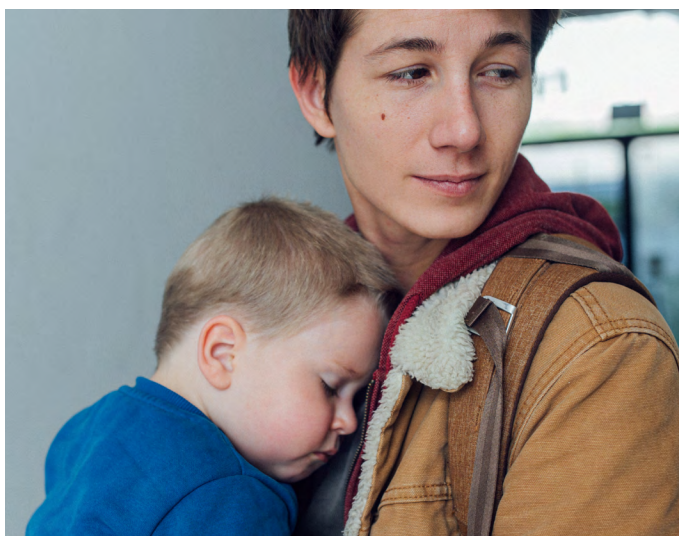
- Connecting with other student parents helped participants stay motivated and encouraged during their own college journey, and a strong sense of institutional support helped parents further develop their sense of belonging as a student .
- Participating in the PSP gave parenting students the knowledge and confidence to seek out other support resources as they prepare for life after graduation.

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### Opportunities for Growth

- Some interview participants described challenges with the required enrollment intensity and peer meetings, indicating opportunities to review and confirm the intent of program requirements.
- Interview participants also reported some challenges with ACC's childcare scholarship, reaffirming the need for easy-to-access childcare support options which meet students' varied needs.
- Male parenting students are underrepresented among PSP participants compared to the overall parenting student population at ACC. Further investigation is necessary to understand the reasons and possible solutions for this disparity.

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**A STRONG SENSE OF INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT  
HELPED PARENTS FURTHER DEVELOP THEIR  
SENSE OF BELONGING AS A STUDENT .**

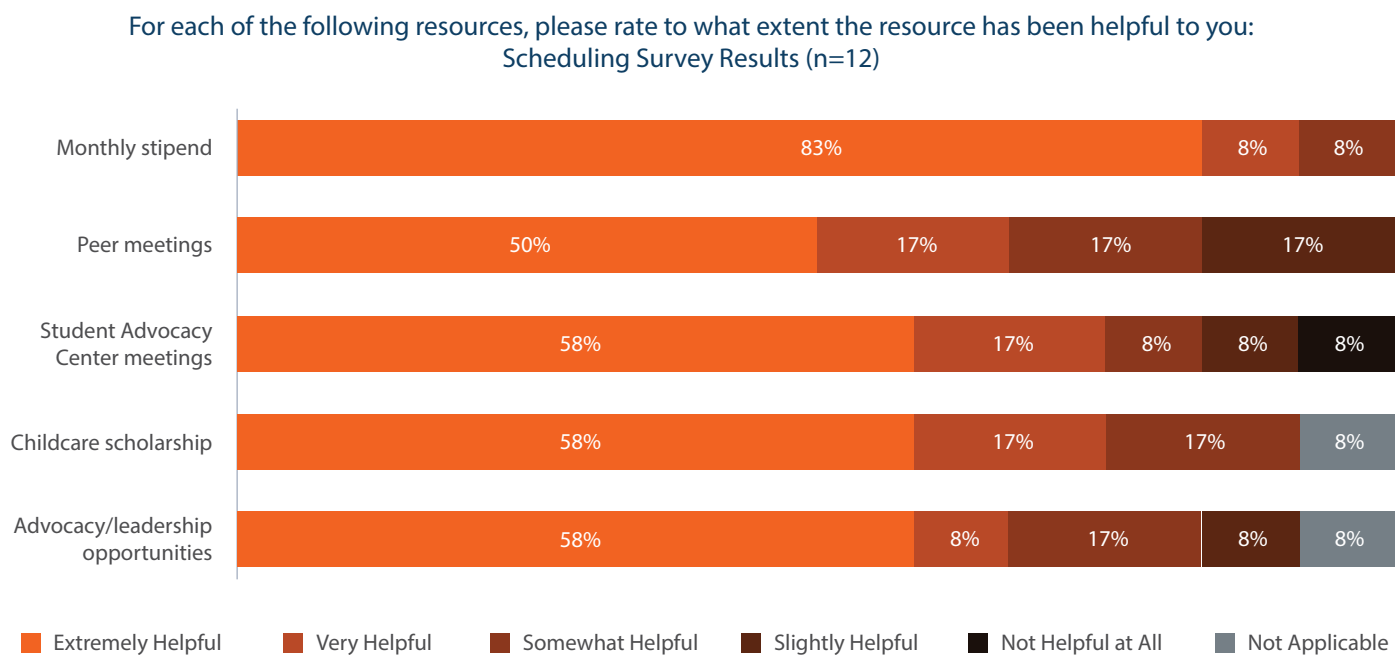


# Overall Reactions to PSP and ACC Resources

Prospective interview participants (n=12) were asked to rate the helpfulness of various support resources during the recruitment survey (see Figure 1). Overall, respondents rated the resources very highly. The monthly stipend received the most consistently positive response, while the peer meetings were the least likely to be rated “Extremely Helpful”.

OVERALL, RESPONDENTS RATED THE RESOURCES VERY HIGHLY.

FIGURE 1. RATED HELPFULNESS OF PSP RESOURCES



**Monthly stipend:** The \$500 monthly stipend was the most highly-rated resource among survey participants. Interview participants explained the impact the stipend had on their financial wellness and how the resulting employment flexibility aided their academic progress (see page 14). While every interviewee stated that the stipend made a big impact on their family, in some cases it was insufficient to fully stabilize their financial situation; this may account for respondent who rated the stipend as only “Somewhat Helpful”.

**Peer meetings:** Participants had mixed responses to the monthly peer meetings hosted by United Way, with a third of survey respondents (n=4) designating the meetings as only “Somewhat” or “Slightly Helpful”. While some interview participants found the educational topics useful, others felt they didn’t gain much from the sessions. However, many participants did value the sense of community they gained from the program as a whole, which was facilitated by regular meetings as a group (see page 19).

**Student Advocacy Center:** As part of their participation with the PSP, students meet regularly with ACC’s Student Advocates. While a quarter of survey respondents (n=3) rated the Student Advocacy Center meetings as “Somewhat Helpful” or lower, all interview participants reported positive experiences with their advocates, saying the advocates helped them maintain academic confidence and momentum (see page 13).

**Childcare scholarship:** In general, interview participants who used the childcare scholarship from ACC’s Student Advocacy Center said it improved their access to childcare. However, some reported issues with the quality of childcare available, and other had bureaucratic challenges accessing the scholarship (see page 17), which likely accounts for the two students who rated this resource as only “Somewhat Helpful”.

**Public speaking opportunities:** Some students were offered opportunities to engage in advocacy events with United Way. Survey responses to this aspect of the program were mixed, likely because most students had not participated in such an event. Those interviewees who had spoken at an event were overall pleased with the experience. Some participants mentioned that they had not been able to engage in these events before, but that they were eager to speak up on behalf of the PSP, which motivated them to participate in the interview study.

## MONTHLY STIPEND

“It makes me feel safe. Having that \$500 a month payment is like having the parental support that I don’t have.”

## PEER MEETINGS

“I think [some topics are] definitely helpful for sure for women, especially reproductive health... it’s good information to have. I just feel like for me personally, it didn’t add any value.”

## STUDENT ADVOCACY CENTER

“[My advocate] is awesome. Like we do check-ins. She makes sure that I’m on my A-game. She also does a lot of encouraging, so that does wonders for me.”

## CHILDCARE SCHOLARSHIP

“ACC is paying for [childcare], which is incredible. It’s a huge help... [but] I’ve had a lot of issues with my daycare and they haven’t been really helpful with that.”

## PUBLIC SPEAKING OPPORTUNITIES

“I’d never spoken publicly before, and afterwards a lot of people came up to me and were like, ‘Wow, you’re so good at public speaking.’ And so that gave me a different sense of confidence for sure.”





## Demographic Characteristics of PSP Participants

ACC provided Trellis researchers with term-level records for students enrolled between Fall 2021 and Spring 2024 who had a dependent child recorded in their financial aid records. Table 1 summarizes the demographics of these parenting students, the subset of 91 students who participated in the PSP for at least one term, and the eight PSP students who participated in the interview study.

Most PSP participants were either Hispanic (53 percent), white (21 percent) or Black (15 percent), which is broadly representative of the overall parenting student population at ACC in this date range. Nearly all PSP participants (98 percent) were women, while female students made up a smaller majority (79 percent) of the overall parenting student population. Additionally, the majority of students

who had ever participated in the PSP (83 percent) were between 25 and 35 years old in 2024.<sup>4</sup> While nearly half (49 percent) of the parenting student population was 35 or older in 2024, these students did not participate in the PSP as the program is only available to students under 30 whose children are under the age of 12. Younger student parents are thus overrepresented in the PSP, with 18 percent of participants being under 25 in 2024, compared to just eight percent of all parenting students in the study population.

The demographics of the interview study cohort were broadly representative of the full PSP participant population. All interviewees were female, 63 percent were Hispanic, and 88 percent were 25 or older.



**NEARLY ALL PSP PARTICIPANTS (98 PERCENT) WERE WOMEN, WHILE FEMALE STUDENTS MADE UP A SMALLER MAJORITY (79 PERCENT) OF THE OVERALL PARENTING STUDENT POPULATION.**

TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PARENTING STUDENTS AT ACC

	All Parenting Students (n=7,626)	All PSP Participants (n=91)	Interview Participants (n=8)
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>			
American Indigenous/Alaska Native	1%	1%	0%
Asian	3%	3%	0%
Black	20%	15%	0%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	<1%	0%	0%
Hispanic	41%	53%	63%
Non-Resident Alien	<1%	0%	0%
Two or more races	3%	6%	0%
Unknown	1%	1%	13%
White	30%	21%	38%
<b>Gender</b>			
Female	79%	98%	100%
Male	21%	2%	0%
<b>Age</b>			
55-65	2%	0%	0%
45-54	12%	0%	0%
35-44	35%	0%	0%
29-34	29%	41%	38%
25-28	15%	42%	50%
19-24	8%	18%	13%
18 or younger	0%	0%	0%

# Impact Area #1: Academic Progress

## Retention and Graduation Outcomes

The retention analysis of parenting students at ACC found that participating in the PSP had a significant, positive impact on student retention. PSP participation in a given term resulted in 95 percent retention into the following long semester, a 20-percentage-point increase in term-to-term retention compared to parenting students who were not participating in the PSP (75 percent). While the cohort of PSP participants is demographically different from overall population of parenting students (see Table 1 on previous page), the substantial positive impact of PSP participation on term-to-term retention was statistically significant independent of other factors impacting retention, such as race, gender, age, and whether the student received a childcare scholarship. Furthermore, the effect persisted regardless of whether the student was participating in the PSP during the following semester.

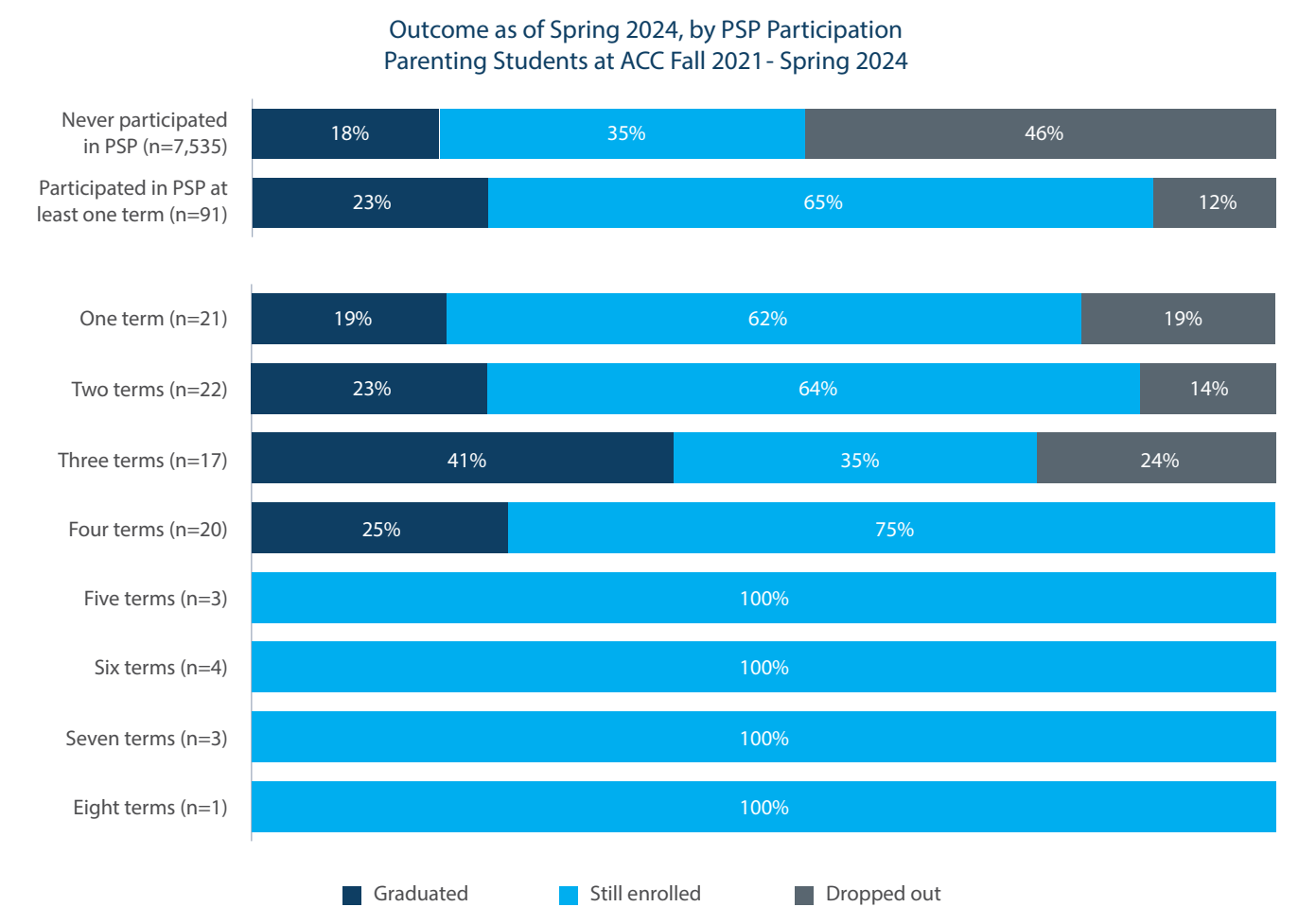
PSP participation was also associated with longer-term retention and completion outcomes. Eighty-eight percent of students who had ever participated in the PSP had either graduated or were still enrolled at ACC in Spring 2024, compared to 54 percent of parenting students who had never participated in the PSP. Additionally, there was a positive association between the number of semesters that a student participated in the PSP and their retention/completion rates. All 31 students who participated in the PSP for at least four semesters either graduated or were still enrolled in Spring 2024 (Figure 2).

**ALL 31 STUDENTS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE PSP FOR AT LEAST FOUR SEMESTERS EITHER GRADUATED OR WERE STILL ENROLLED IN SPRING 2024.**





FIGURE 2. EFFECTS OF PSP PARTICIPATION ON RETENTION AND COMPLETION OUTCOMES



A Safety Net in a Crisis

One interview participant discussed how access to the PSP came just in time to support her retention, as she was struggling to prioritize her education after a personal crisis in her family. Her story emphasizes the importance of maintaining contact with students throughout their journey. For this mother, connection to PSP resources was the safety net that caught her fall and allowed her to continue her degree.

**“I WAS NOT PLANNING ON RETURNING TO SCHOOL. BUT [MY ADVISOR] DID THE PAPER-WORK FOR AN ADVOCATE, AND THEN SHORTLY AFTER THAT I GOT THE E-MAIL ABOUT PSP.”**

Increased Credit Hours

To qualify for the PSP, parenting students must enroll in at least nine credit hours each long semester. This had a meaningful impact on the number of credit hours completed each term. On average, a student who participated in the PSP during a given semester had a 64 percent chance of successfully completing nine credit hours, compared to just 36 percent for a student not participating in the PSP in a given term. Taking more credits at a time may result in higher graduation rates and reduced time-to-degree.

Increased enrollment intensity has both benefits and drawbacks for parenting students, and interview participants expressed mixed feelings about the requirement. While they acknowledged that it likely helped them progress more quickly towards graduation, that benefit was balanced by the increased time pressure which they felt affected their mental health, grades, and time with their children.





"You know it's a balancing act... I would say like on the semesters that I can handle it, right, I think it's sped things up, cause like, [nine credit hours] is always better. But you know life has its ups and downs, and there are times where like maybe I should have done less and I didn't because it would mean losing \$500 a month. And so that reflects like either in my grades or just like stress levels, working hours, what have you."



"Like I said, it pushes us to take three classes. I feel like if it would have not been for the program, I would probably be taking two or sometimes even one. So, I think it's a good part that it pushes us to take more, that way we graduate faster... [But] sometimes it's difficult with a child, taking three [classes], because I have guilt that I'm spending too much time in school rather than spending it with him."

## Academic Support & Success

In interviews, current PSP participants reported that the PSP had significantly aided their academic success. In particular, these students highlighted how regular meetings with their student advocates helped keep them accountable to their goals. Student advocates also assisted with bureaucratic hurdles and counseled students through challenging times. Participants described their advocates as "encouraging", "non-judgmental", and "a god-send"; one student reported their advocate "would go above and beyond, and help me with something that I didn't even think of." Participants' academic success was also supported by their increased financial stability (see page 14) and access to childcare (see page 17), both of which helped alleviate time poverty.

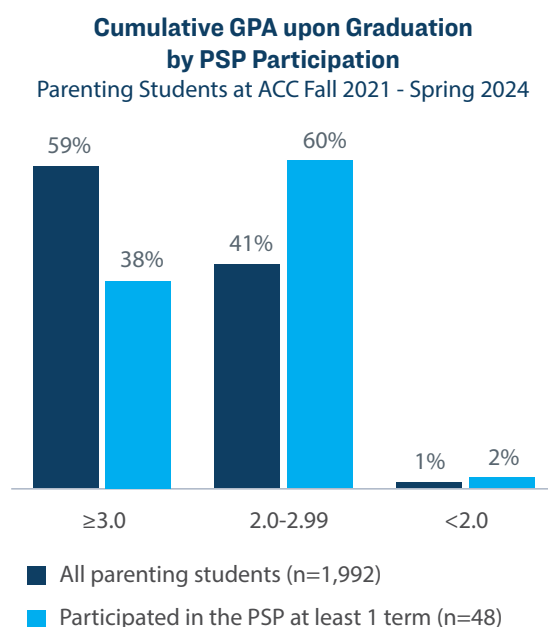
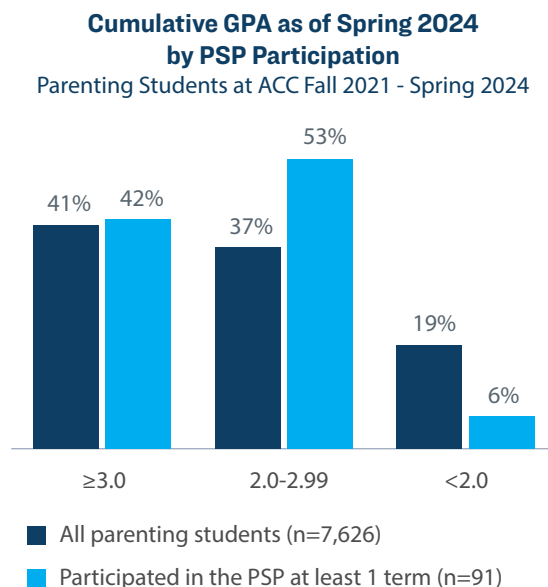


"I feel like if it weren't for the program, I wouldn't meet as much with [the student advocate]. I would probably choose my own classes or go my own route. And [instead] I've met with my advocate, and I feel like she's pushed me more."

While interview participants shared positive stories about how PSP participation had impacted grades, the statistical analysis of student records revealed a more complicated picture. When considering all students who were ever enrolled from Fall 2021 to Spring 2024, regardless of outcome, 95 percent of PSP participants had a cumulative GPA of 2.0 or higher as of Spring 2024, compared to just 78 percent of the overall parenting student population. More specifically, while PSP participants attained GPAs of 3.0 or higher at a similar rate to the overall parenting student population; they were more likely to attain a cumulative GPA between 2.0 and 2.99. However, on a term-by-term basis, students had similar academic success in semesters they

participated in the PSP as in semesters when they did not. Additionally, considering only students who had graduated as of Spring 2024, PSP participants had lower than average academic standing upon graduation (see Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3. EFFECTS OF PSP PARTICIPATION ON CUMULATIVE GPA**



In summary, there is only limited evidence that participating in the PSP affected students' academic standing. However, participation did have a substantial positive impact on students' retention, and the advising, financial assistance, and community support system offered by the PSP had a meaningful reported impact on interview participants' attitudes and confidence around college.

# Impact Area #2: Financial Wellness

## Financial Stability and Basic Needs

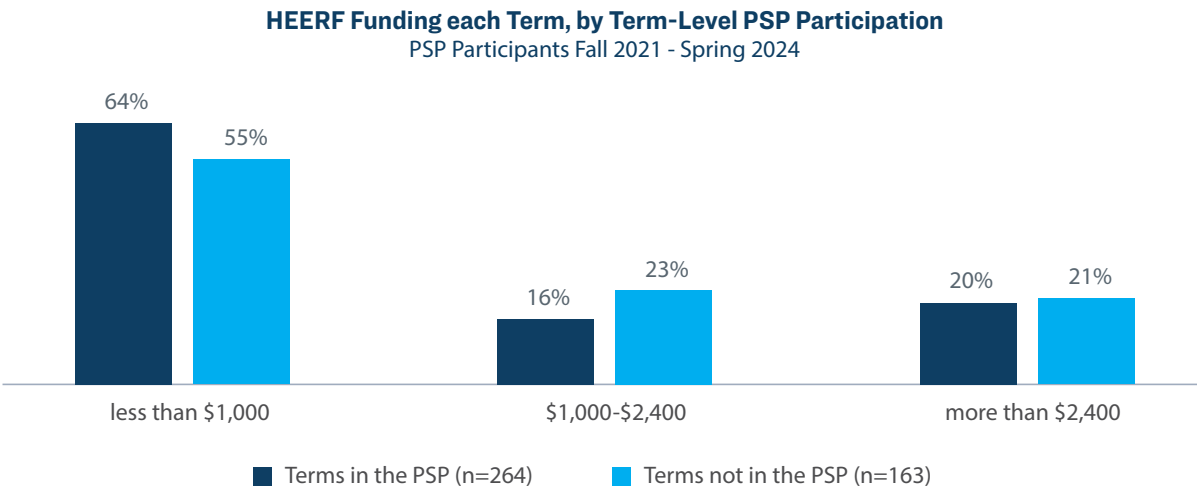
All the parents who participated in the interview study reported some level of financial precarity. While these students were clear that they were making it work, they mentioned indicators of low emergency-preparedness such as living off tax returns and selling possessions to cover expenses. One participant described how a late fee or other unexpected charge “is enough to take the whole budget over.”

However, interview participants also explained how the stipend they received from the PSP had meaningfully increased their sense of financial stability, with one participant describing it as “truly life changing.” Analysis of parenting student records at ACC also revealed that students in the PSP borrowed less per semester and required less emergency funding, indicating that PSP participation had increased their financial stability. Students who had participated in the PSP at least one term took out an average of \$4,012 per semester in loans, compared to \$5,064 per semester among parenting students who had never participated in the PSP. Additionally, among those who had ever participated in the PSP, students had only a 36 percent chance of receiving \$1,000 or more in HEERF funds during semesters they participated in the PSP, a nine-percentage point decrease compared to terms they did not participate (see Figure 4).

**LIKE MOST PARENTING STUDENTS, FIVE OF THE EIGHT INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS WERE WORKING FOR PAY WHILE ENROLLED IN THE SPRING 2024 SEMESTER.**



FIGURE 4. EFFECTS OF TERM-LEVEL PSP PARTICIPATION ON HEERF FUNDING THAT TERM



Transportation emerged as a key area of impact in the interviews, with five of the eight interview participants mentioning transportation (in)security as a major consideration in their lives. These parents explained the importance of having a reliable vehicle in order to fully access childcare, classes, and errands in Austin. Prior surveys run by United Way have indicated that students often used the monthly stipend to cover car payments; two participants specifically reported relying on the stipend for this purpose.

“As soon as I heard I was getting [the monthly stipend] I was like, ‘This is my chance to buy a car.’ And so that gave me the ability to go to class and complete college without having that worry, ‘How I’m gonna go to the grocery store?’”

Work Flexibility

Like most parenting students, five of the eight interview participants were working for pay while enrolled in the Spring 2024 semester. Three of these working parents explained that receiving the stipend from the PSP had enabled them to work less, which helped alleviate (at least to an extent) their time poverty and allowed them to better balance their academics with their family responsibilities. These responses from interview participants are representative of a trend identified by United Way’s end-of-semester surveys; for example, in the Fall 2023 survey, 71 percent of PSP participants reported that participating in the program had allowed them to reduce their work hours.

“Without any financial help, I just wouldn’t have been able to go to school and not work full time... And it’s still a huge struggle to get everything done, but I was able to only work one day a week, you know, versus like 20 plus hours a week. I don’t think I would have done as well in my classes if I had been working more hours.”

One participant further explained how the financial stability provided by the monthly stipend gave her more agency to choose a job that worked for her. While previously she had felt tied to a job that could promise regular hours, with the stipend she was able to transition to a job which had highly irregular hours, but which paid better overall.

A Safety Net in a Crisis

One student shared a story about crisis moment for her family, when she suddenly had to take time off work. During this challenging time, the monthly payment from the PSP helped her feel like she was still contributing to the household.

Supporting their family financially is an important value for many parenting students. For this mother, the \$500 stipend from the PSP provided both tangible financial support and psychological support, allowing her peace of mind as she prioritized her education.

“I AM A VERY WORK-ORIENTED PERSON. I DON’T LIKE TO TAKE OFF FROM WORK, I DON’T LIKE TO FEEL LIKE I’M NOT CONTRIBUTING TO MY FAMILY... AND THAT STIPEND MADE ME FEEL AS THOUGH I WAS CONTRIBUTING TO MY FAMILY, EVEN THOUGH I PHYSICALLY COULDN’T GO TO WORK. KNOWING THAT I WAS CONTRIBUTING... IT JUST FELT NICE AND VERY FREEING FROM MY OWN GUILT.”



## Financial Confidence and Budgeting

When asked about their confidence in managing money, the interview participants expressed overall confidence in budgeting and monitoring their spending. Some participants were the primary budgeter in their household, while others identified their partner as the one to handle finances. They often referenced how frugality was a habit for them, as many had lived with financial insecurity for a long time. When discussing financial planning, participants frequently mentioned prioritizing their children's needs over their own and saving as much money as possible during periods of financial security.



"I try to budget out very specifically of what I can and what I can't have. I don't splurge for myself at all. I just get the necessities that my daughter needs."



"You know, \$500, it's not a lot, but to us it is. So, I want to be able to see if there is a way that I can manage just a little bit more into savings and still be able to meet the needs of my kids."

These parenting students also prioritized financial goals and planning; many reported that financial security through career advancement was their key motivation for pursuing postsecondary education. Some participants mentioned an informational session on improving and maintaining credit as a particularly valuable monthly meeting topic from the PSP. Two students expressed a desire for financial planning guidance on how to increase their savings—and thus their financial security—despite their low income.





# Impact Area #3: Family Life

## A Safety Net in a Crisis

One interview participant described how, in the middle of the semester, her childcare arrangements suddenly fell through. In the matter of a few days, she would no longer have anyone to watch her child while she was in class. She contacted her Student Advocate, who helped her apply for the childcare scholarship and identify a compatible facility that would work for her family. For this parent, her existing connection with the Student Advocacy Center supported her during a personal crisis that could have otherwise derailed her semester.

**"THAT AFTERNOON, ALL OF A SUDDEN, I DIDN'T HAVE CHILDCARE. I WAS WONDERING IF I WAS GOING TO NEED TO DROP [OUT OF CLASSES] ... I DON'T THINK I WOULD HAVE BEEN ABLE TO FINISH HAD I NOT HAD THESE RESOURCES IN PLACE, I REALLY BELIEVE THAT."**

## Access to Childcare

During the prior semester, five interview participants had used a childcare facility paid for either by the ACC childcare scholarship or a similar public support program. One had previously accessed a daycare through the childcare scholarship, but at the time of the interview provided all childcare herself. Two others relied on family for childcare.

Analysis of parenting student records at ACC demonstrated that access to the ACC childcare scholarship had a substantial impact on student success, independent of PSP participation. Receiving a childcare scholarship was associated with improved term-to-term retention and a quarter-point increase in the median cumulative GPA.

For some interview participants, the childcare scholarship had been highly effective. They were pleased with the childcare options that were available and highlighted the



ways that access to childcare is crucial to succeeding as a parenting student. However, other interview participants reported challenges with the childcare scholarship, including restrictions on which childcare options are covered and poor experiences with specific facilities. Additionally, two participants had faced administrative difficulties coordinating the scholarship payment with their childcare providers.



"The program provided after school care. I would not have been able—I don't even think potentially—pass if I wasn't able to access the tutoring after hours. I mean classes ended at 4:20, and tutoring would sometimes keep me there till 6:00, 7:00 at night."



"At first, I was taking advantage of that childcare scholarship at ACC, which was amazing. The daycare we picked didn't really work well with us though, it was kind of in a bad area and so we stopped."

Resource-connection to the childcare scholarship was an important role performed by the PSP, but that scholarship could not fully address students' needs. Two students expressed a desire for accessible, on-campus childcare,\* while another student mentioned she was more comfortable having a family member provide childcare and wished that support was available for this type of community-based option.



"I'd love to see childcare on campus, maybe even instead of the childcare scholarship. I get both are good options, [but] I think what would work better for like my family is let me drop off my child while I'm in school, while I'm studying, and then I'll leave."

The range of experiences among interview participants speaks to the highly individualized nature of childcare needs for parents and their families.

## Parenting Resources

When asked whether their participation in the PSP had impacted their children, many parenting students responded that the program had enabled them to be more attentive and prepared as parents. For example, some interview participants discussed educational activities for children, such as summer reading programs and a local children's museum, that they had heard about through the PSP. Others discussed how their peers had shared time management strategies, gentle parenting advice, and other parenting "tips and tricks".



"I was able to just spend like normal time with [my kids]. I definitely was still busy, [but] I was able to work less and not have them be in [evening]

aftercare... I think their well-being and their overall, like health and happiness and everything—like their quality of life was better because I was able to be home and be with them and not be completely burnt out."

Parents also discussed how the alleviated time poverty had allowed them to spend more quality time with their children. The mental health benefits of having a community support network can also have a lasting impact on the family as a whole. One participant described how the genuine care she received from others had improved her outlook on life and society. "The type of mom that [my son] has now is not the same mom that he had last year," she said. "To believe that people are good, and believe that help is out there, has been a huge shift in me."

## Children's Basic Needs

Some interview participants also mentioned the more material impacts on their children as a result of the PSP's assistance. The peer network shared information about support resources, like basic needs closets that had free diapers. The monthly stipend gave them more confidence in stocking caretaking supplies and providing for their children's broader needs. For example, one participant shared how she used the stipend to buy diapers, wipes, and bottles, saying "it's helping more than anyone knows." Another participant discussed how the stipend has allowed her to buy a car, increasing her family's transportation security (see page 15) and providing access to a larger community network for her kids. "It's life changing," she said. "I mean, my kids can get to the park, they can go to their abuela's house. They can go wherever they want and that made a huge difference."

## Inspiration and a Better Life

Finally, when discussing the ways the PSP had impacted their children, interview participants reiterated that the PSP's resources had allowed them to be more successful in college. Many student parents see their own academic success as directly related to a better future for their children. PSP participants cited their children and other family members as a source of inspiration and drive for pursuing college. Some parents looked forward to the increased standard of living they hoped to provide for their family after graduation, while others talked about the stories they would tell their children in the future, hoping to create a lasting intergenerational impact.



"I'm not just coming back for myself. I'm trying to finish this college experience for my kids. I also have younger siblings, I want to be able to tell [them], 'I got the degree that I dreamed of having.'"

\* ACC offers multiple on-campus childcare options, although not at all campuses. One interview participant referred to a long waitlist for her desired on-campus resource, the Children's Lab School at Eastview Campus. ACC administrators clarified that there was no waitlist for drop-in childcare at Highland Campus.



# Impact Area #4: Mental Health & Belonging

## Sense of Community

Interview participants often mentioned the importance of community in their lives. Community networks can have a practical function: parents accessed childcare and other resources via their communities, whether through the PSP, a church, or their family. For example, one participant mentioned that her mother-in-law was watching her kids during the upcoming weekend, giving her and her partner the opportunity to connect and plan for the week.

A sense of community can also play a more symbolic role, by giving community members a sense of belonging and purpose. In interviews, these PSP participants discussed how meeting other parenting students through the PSP meetings gave them confidence as they pursued their education. Some participants had participated in and enjoyed peer meetup activities, whether online or in person. But even those who weren't interested in socializing with peers spoke to the positive impact of having a cohort of parenting students.



“Just knowing that there’s other student parents out there makes me feel better. Because if they’re doing it, I can continue to do this.”

## Institutional Support

Of the eight interview participants, four parents specifically compared ACC to other institutions, noting how ACC offered more comprehensive resources for parenting students. One interview participant discussed how, at a previous institution, professors had not provided the accommodations that she needed as a pregnant and postpartum student. She compared this experience with the compassionate treatment she encountered at ACC, noting that her student advocate was willing to create a check-in schedule that worked for her





needs. “I just felt like it was a breath of fresh air,” she said. “I hadn’t gotten that in college before.” For this parent, the resources available through ACC and the PSP made her feel welcomed and valued as a student.

Another parent discussed their concerns about receiving enough support at their future transfer institutions, saying “I think out of the entire US, I would be very impressed if there was another university that cared as much as ACC.” In general, these student parents were highly aware that transitioning away from the PSP and ACC would mean a significant downshift in the support they received.

## Empowerment to Seek Out Resources

While interview participants were looking forward to completing their degrees, they were also wary of the resource cliff that awaits them. “That car payment is like 10 years,” one student noted. “[I’m] not gonna be at ACC for 10 years.” Some interview participants worried they might

not find a well-paying job right away, and transfer-intending students recognized that their new institutions might not have a program as generous as the PSP. “I am extremely nervous,” one student said of her upcoming transfer plans. “It’s hard to find parenting support at four-year universities, or any support, really.”

However, participating in the PSP gave these parents a better sense of what resources they needed, and more confidence in advocating for their needs. Two transfer-intending students were making plans to seek out support networks at their new institutions; one explained, “I’ll have to find my PSP group there, you know?” Other interview participants were carefully planning their transition back into full time work or anticipating what their childcare needs would be after leaving ACC. When asked, they felt that the PSP had supported them in planning for their future.







# Opportunities for Growth

## Fine-Tuning Program Requirements

Interview participants had mixed feelings about the minimum credit hour requirement; while they saw the value of increased enrollment intensity to maintain momentum towards graduation, they also felt the increased time pressure could be detrimental to their mental health (see page 12). While students in the PSP were more likely to successfully complete nine credit hours compared to parents not in the program, the program had only limited impact on students' GPA (see page 13). This indicates there may be room to fine-tune program requirements to best support students' success. For example, one interview participant suggested scaling the \$500 stipend based on the number of credit hours taken, allowing students to choose the schedule that works best for them each semester without losing access to the financial security offered by the PSP.

Participant reactions to the monthly peer meetings also revealed areas for program improvement. While responses to these meetings were overall positive—especially with regards to a sense of belonging and community—some interview participants wished they had been able to choose topics that would be most helpful to them. Expanding on the key areas of need discussed below might provide more comprehensive support for parenting students.

## Key Areas of Need

Interview participants identified a few areas where they felt the PSP and/or ACC could provide more support through resource-connection, advising, or peer meeting topics. Most prominent among these was the desire for more flexible childcare solutions, such as increased access to on-campus

options (see page 17). Other resource-areas mentioned by student parents included housing insecurity support, cooking and nutrition classes, and resources for children such as diapers and toys; while interview participants had sometimes encountered support systems in these areas, they felt the PSP could provide more guidance. Finally, some students discussed a desire for financial planning advice, especially geared towards long-term planning and stability on a low budget.

## Supporting Fathers

Male parenting students are underrepresented in the PSP, making up just two percent of PSP participants but 21 percent of the overall parenting student population at ACC. Further investigation is necessary to understand the reasons and possible solutions for this disparity. National studies have found that student fathers are more likely to be married and more likely to receive childcare support from family; they are also older on average than student mothers, with 65 percent of student fathers being 30 years old or older.<sup>5</sup> This may mean they are less likely to qualify for the PSP or require assistance. However, researchers have also found that student fathers face specific mental health challenges<sup>6</sup> and are more likely to stop-out of college compared to student mothers.<sup>7</sup>

**STUDENT FATHERS FACE SPECIFIC MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AND ARE MORE LIKELY TO STOP-OUT OF COLLEGE COMPARED TO STUDENT MOTHERS.**



## Conclusion: “Pillars of Support” for Parenting Students

Time poverty is a key concern for parenting students. Parents’ daily routines leave little time for rest, personal care, or getting ahead. The increased time that parenting students spend on childcare and working to support their family means they have substantially less discretionary time than non-parenting students, which negatively impacts their persistence and momentum. In interviews, PSP participants echoed this experience, discussing the long hours they put in each day to manage the obligations of family, work, and school. For many, every spare moment is spent on completing their coursework. These parenting students described how they fell asleep while studying, attended classes online while cradling young children, and worked on homework during down moments of their job.

However, these parents also reported how PSP and ACC resources allowed them more flexibility—as one participant phrased it, “a sliver of freedom”—to focus on their studies. The combination of a monthly stipend and, for some, the childcare scholarship, allowed PSP participants to attend tutoring sessions, access reliable transportation to campus, choose employment opportunities that aligned better with their schoolwork, and worry less overall about their family’s finances. These first-hand accounts of success from interview participants were reinforced by quantitative analysis of student records showing that participating in the PSP was associated with increased retention and completion rates, decreased student loans, and decreased need for emergency funding. Overall, this evaluation found that PSP participation, in tandem with the strong culture of caring offered by ACC, successfully provided much-needed support to parenting students and had a significant positive impact on student outcomes.

**“I CANNOT EXPRESS HOW GRATEFUL I AM THAT THAT WAS SOMETHING IN MY LIFE. IT’S LIFE CHANGING. JUST OFFERING STUDENTS \$500 A MONTH CAN CHANGE THEIR ENTIRE LIFE.”**

**“HAD THOSE PILLARS OF SUPPORT NOT BEEN THERE, I PROBABLY WOULD HAVE PSYCHED MYSELF OUT.”**



## Endnotes

- 1 Fletcher, C., Cornett, A., Plumb, M.H., and Pyka, R. (2024). *Student Financial Wellness Survey Fall 2023 Report: Parenting Students at Texas Community Colleges*. Trellis Strategies. <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/student-financial-wellness-survey-fall-2023-report/>  
  
Wladis, C., Hachey, A. C., & Conway, K. (2018). No Time for College? An Investigation of Time Poverty and Parenthood. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 89(6), 807–831.
- 2 Eligible interview participants had been enrolled at ACC and participating in the PSP during the Spring 2024 term. Interviews were conducted in June 2024.
- 3 Quantitative analysis was conducted with significance set at  $p < 0.05$ . Exploratory analysis included descriptive statistics and Chi-squared tests, followed by logistic regression models for comparisons of interest. Logistic regression models included variables for gender, race and ethnicity, Expected Family Contribution, year of birth, Pell eligibility, first semester at ACC, loans and grants received, and GPA, alongside variables for PSP participation and childcare scholarship receipt.
- 4 Age is calculated using birth year only. Statistics represent all parenting students' ages in 2024, regardless of whether they were still enrolled at ACC at that time.
- 5 Ascend at the Aspen Institute (2023). *"We Are Here Too": Who Are the 1 Million Fathers in College?* <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/resources/we-are-here-too-who-are-the-1-million-fathers-in-college/>  
  
U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2016). *National postsecondary student aid study: Undergraduates (dataset)*. <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/npsas/>
- 6 Ascend at the Aspen Institute & JED Foundation (2021). *Mental Health of Student-Parents: Original research findings*. <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/new-study-student-parents-in-college-experience-unique-mental-health-challenges-but-lack-access-to-support-on-campus/>
- 7 Contreras-Mendez, S., & Reichlin Cruse, L. (2021). *Busy with purpose: Lessons for education and policy leaders from returning student parents*. Institute for Women's Policy Research. <https://iwpr.org/busy-with-purpose-lessons-for-education-and-policy-leaders-from-returning-student-parents/>



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