

*This issue of Fast Focus is based on an article published by Sara Goldrick-Rab and Kia Sorensen in the fall 2010 issue of The Future of Children (Vol. 20, No. 2; used here with permission), which focuses on “fragile families,” defined as families in which the parents were unmarried when the child was born. The authors examine unmarried parents in college at a time when postsecondary education and training have become increasingly important to workers’ success in the U.S. labor market and therefore to families’ economic security. Noting that access to higher education has dramatically expanded in the past several decades, Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen focus on how unmarried parents fare once they enter college. They argue that, contrary to the expectation that college access consistently promotes family stability and economic security, deficiencies in current policy lead to adverse consequences for some families headed by unmarried parents. And although rates of college attendance have substantially increased among unmarried parents, their college completion rates are low. The authors examine their barriers to success, and the effects of their studies on family life, describing empirically tested supports that have helped more unmarried parenting students attain a degree and thus find better employment at higher wages.*

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## Unmarried parents in college: Pathways to success

Sara Goldrick-Rab and Kia Sorensen

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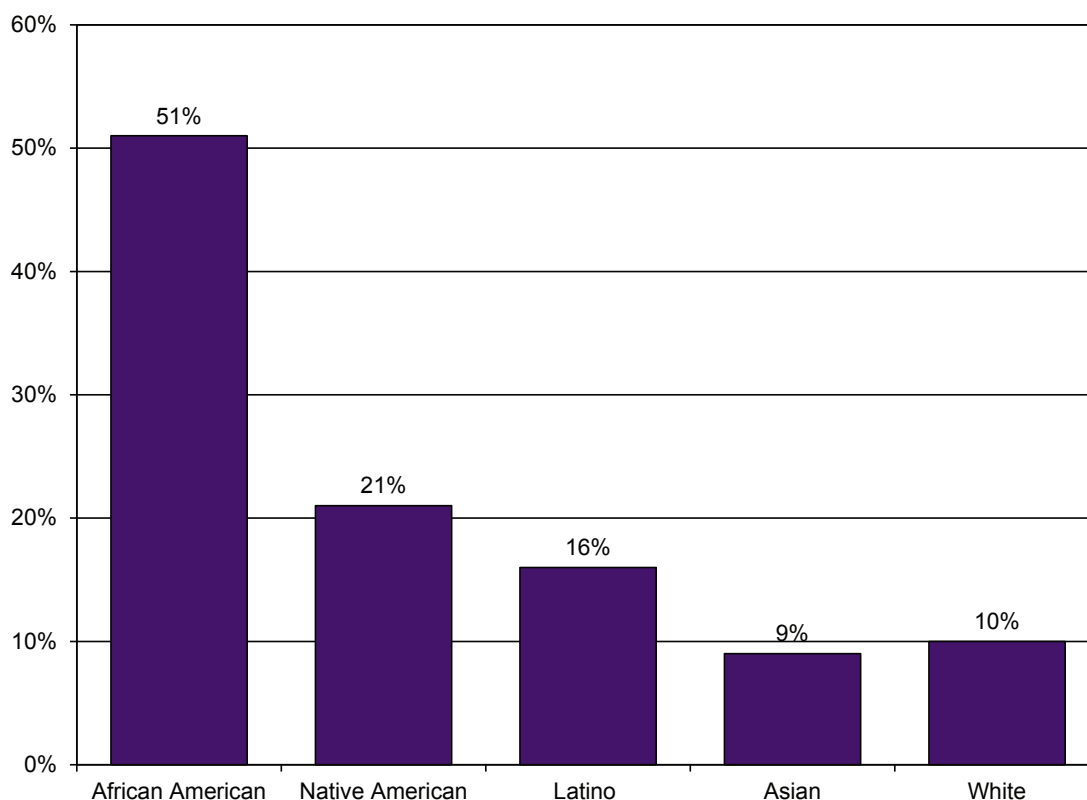
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With the unemployment rate high and demand for skilled labor increasing, the dramatic expansion of access to higher education in the past several decades proves potentially beneficial to American families, especially those headed by unmarried parents. In fact, unmarried parents compose a fair share of those seeking the benefits of a college degree, and studies show that the benefits extend beyond individuals to their families, as families headed by college-educated adults are more likely to be intact, stable, and economically secure than those headed by adults who have not attended college. And the advantages of higher education also appear to be transmitted across generations, further increasing its returns.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to the expectation that college access consistently benefits family stability and finances, however,

we argue that deficiencies in current policy render college attendance harmful to some families headed by unmarried parents.

Meager, and in some cases counterproductive, financial aid policies, lack of adequate campus-based child care, and reductions in cash assistance to unmarried parent students combine with social factors to make getting an advanced degree difficult if not impossible. Even those who succeed do so under great duress, which can strain parent-child relationships. In this brief, we examine unmarried parents’ college participation and completion rates, effects of college attendance on family well-being, shortcomings of current policies, and recommended reforms to enhance participation and support college completion.

Research into this field is in its earliest stages, so even providing a statistical portrait of college enrollment among unmarried parents is difficult. National statistics on undergraduates collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) likely underreport the presence of parents by limiting the definition of “parent” to students claiming financial responsibility for one or more children. Until recent data collection reforms were undertaken (at the behest of the lead author), students with children for whom they



**Figure 1. Share of undergraduates who are unmarried parents by race/ethnicity, 1986–1992.**

**Source:** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), multiple years.

**Note:** The share of unmarried parents among all undergraduates is 13%. Statistics for sex of unmarried parents were available only for African American students (female = 36% and male = 15%).

are not financially responsible were therefore not flagged as parents in NCES data. This may be a growing problem, given strengthened social policies (for example, child support laws and statutory rape laws) that provide incentives for some parents to avoid or decline to claim financial responsibility. Moreover, NCES data do not make it possible to assess marital status at the time of childbirth, or to know whether parenting students reside with their children.

### Unmarried parents' college access and success

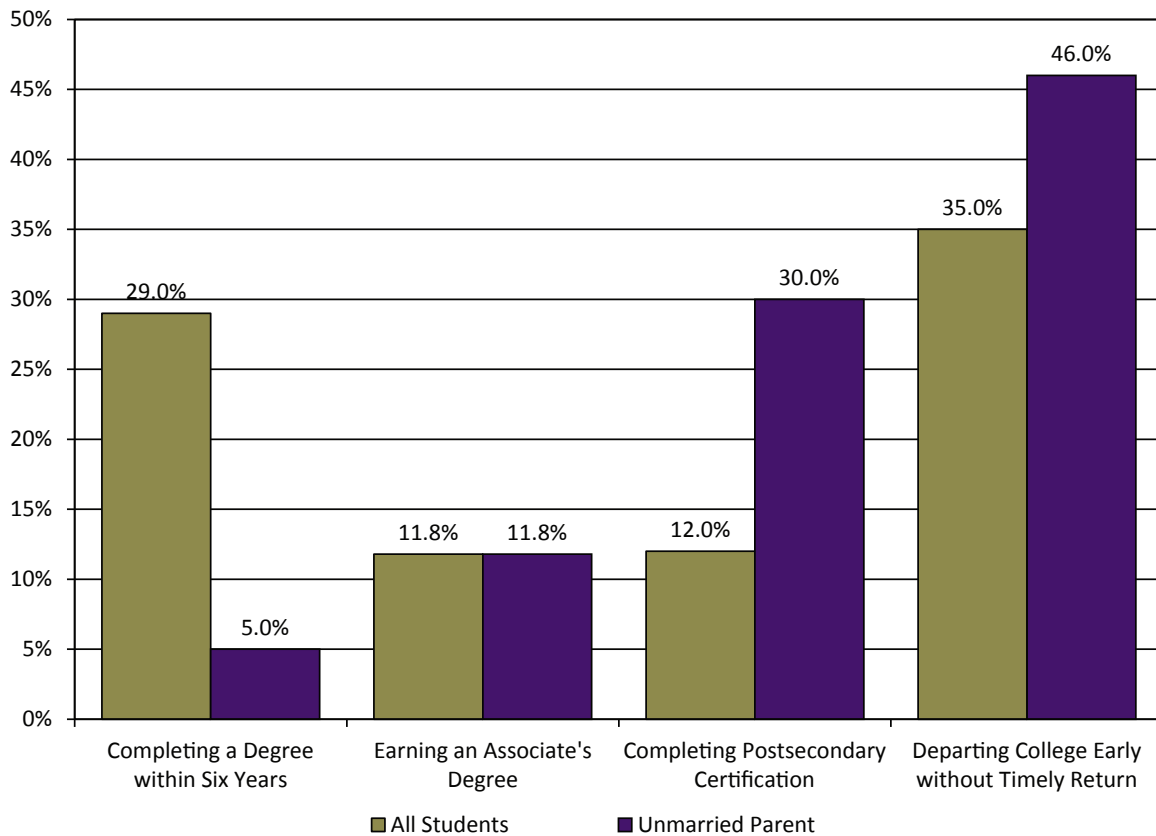
The hope of attending college among young Americans across all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines has grown over the past 50 years. The share of African American high school seniors expecting to attend at least some college rose from 85 percent in 1972 to 94 percent in 2004. The share of low-income (bottom quartile of the socioeconomic distribution) high school seniors expecting to attain more than a high school degree rose from 66 percent to 89 percent. The percentage of unmarried parents experiencing some form of postsecondary education has also increased significantly over the decades, with unmarried mothers participating more than fathers.

### College participation rates

Among all undergraduates, the share of unmarried parents nearly doubled over the past 20 years (from 7 percent to just over 13 percent).<sup>2</sup> Unmarried parents make up an especially substantial segment of undergraduates from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds (see Figure 1). For example, more than one-third (36 percent) of African American female undergraduates nationwide are unmarried mothers, and 15 percent of African American male undergraduates are unmarried fathers. Unmarried parents make up more than one in five Native American undergraduates (21 percent) and 16 percent of all Latino undergraduates (compared with 10 percent of white and 9 percent of Asian undergraduates).<sup>3</sup> Overall, 8 percent of male undergraduates and 17 percent of female undergraduates are unmarried parents.<sup>4</sup> We note, however, that the appearance of these trends may be affected by the way parenting students have been counted in federal data.

### College completion rates

Not surprisingly, parenting students who are not married while they are enrolled tend to complete four-year degrees at rates far lower than other college students, on average



**Figure 2. College completion rates of all students and of unmarried parent students.**

**Sources:** National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Baccalaureate and Beyond Study, 2000–2001; and calculations using the 1995–1996 Beginning Postsecondary Study, NCES.

**Note:** Rates are among all students who started college in 1995–1996.

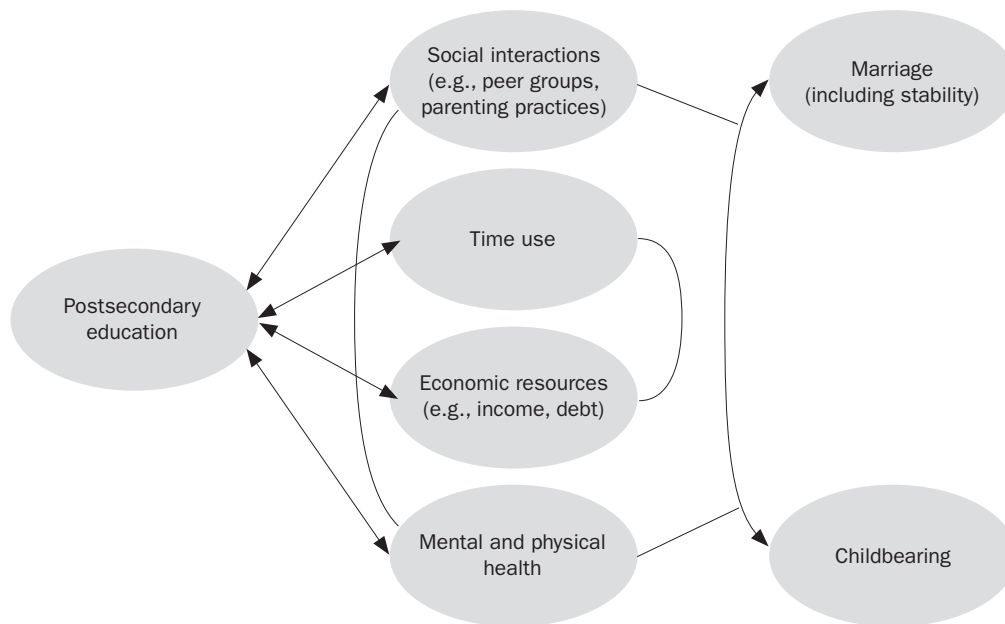
(Figure 2).<sup>5</sup> Among all students who started college in 1995 to 1996, 29 percent attained a bachelor’s degree by 2001, compared with nearly 5 percent of unmarried parents. Among unmarried parents, 11.8 percent earned an associate’s degree, and 30 percent completed a postsecondary certificate (compared with 12 percent of the cohort as a whole). Unmarried parents were much more likely to depart college early, without a timely return to school (46 percent compared with 35 percent).<sup>6</sup> One reason for these lower rates of completion is that it can take longer for parenting students to finish degrees.<sup>7</sup> Analysts sometimes make ultimate rates of degree completion lower than they are by neglecting these longer time periods to degree attainment. Many unmarried mothers eventually acquire postsecondary degrees, but do so over longer periods.

### Effects of college attendance on family well-being

Children are increasingly experiencing divergent destinies shaped by their mothers’ education. Children born to well-educated women are gaining from their mothers’ substantial investments of both money and time in higher education, while those born to less-educated women are not. In particular, Sara McLanahan notes that “although their parents

are more educated than they were 40 years ago, children’s claims on their parents’ resources are weaker.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, increasing access to postsecondary education has not led to uniformly positive, widespread benefits for future generations. Although college-educated adults are, on average, better off on a wide variety of measures, college-going does not result in uniformly positive benefits for everyone—and under current policy conditions it cannot.

We begin with a conceptual framework (Figure 3) showing the four primary pathways by which postsecondary education can affect family formation and stability: social interactions, time use, economic resources, and mental and physical health. Our conceptual model posits that these four characteristics of individuals are affected by college attendance in ways that, in turn, affect their children and family well-being. Some of these hypothesized relationships are positive, while others are negative. The benefits of college attendance among unmarried parents may be especially substantial because college-educated parents serve as role models for their children and acquire skills that both improve their parenting and help increase their household income. But attending college may reduce the amount of time parents have to spend with their children and generate economic and emotional stressors that compromise the quality of parent-child interactions.



**Figure 3. Conceptual model of how postsecondary education affects family formation and stability.**

### Effects on social interactions and time use

Attending college helps students form social networks, which are thought to result in a variety of benefits, including economic returns. But the social networks have other, nonmonetary benefits as well. In particular, as a group of researchers recently noted, attending college can give students increased opportunities for selecting romantic partners.<sup>9</sup> Attending college also affects family well-being by helping unmarried mothers form networks of similarly well-educated friends, including friends who shape their decisions about parenting practices and expectations of educational success for children.<sup>10</sup> Studies tend to show that parents with more education (regardless of marital status) commit more time to their children than do less-educated parents and exhibit less gender specialization between the spouses.<sup>11</sup> But although all parents who have completed college may tend to spend more time with their children, unmarried parents who are attending college find that the time they have to spend with their children is quite constrained.

Analyses of data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement indicate that unmarried parents attending two-year colleges spend a substantial amount of time both working and caring for their children. More than one-third report spending thirty or more hours each week working for pay, while another 17 percent devote twenty-one to thirty hours. In addition, nearly 60 percent of unmarried mothers and 30 percent of unmarried fathers say they allocate thirty or more hours each week to child care, while also attending school.<sup>12</sup>

### Effects on economic resources

The links between college attainment and individuals' income and occupation are positive and well-established.<sup>13</sup> But as the cost of college attendance rises, and need-based finan-

cial aid diminishes, attending college compromises some students' economic resources. The many public programs that offer support to unmarried parents attending college—Pell Grants; federal subsidized loans; Temporary Assistance for Needy Families; the Earned Income Tax Credit; the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps); subsidized housing; the nutrition program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); Medicaid; the Workforce Investment Act; and Head Start—are neither well coordinated nor easily accessed.

### Effects on mental and physical health

As for health effects of higher education, on average, college-educated adults are said to live longer, healthier lives and to have better access to health care.<sup>14</sup> But experiences may also vary widely; for example, while in college, many unmarried parents forego health insurance.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the severe time and economic constraints facing parents exacerbate their stress levels. Lorraine Johnson and her colleagues note that more mothers (married or unmarried) could complete degree programs if they could “work with community college staff and faculty members to resolve stress-related problems early in their academic careers.”<sup>16</sup>

### Shortcomings of current policies

The way the nation's postsecondary education system is structured complicates the efforts of unmarried parents to enroll and succeed in college in several ways. Financial aid policies that are intended to make college affordable include rules that make it difficult for parenting students to access the money they need to succeed in college. And policies that make individuals with drug convictions incurred while in school ineligible for financial aid make it much more

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difficult for unmarried fathers to participate—let alone succeed—in postsecondary education.

With enrollment growing extremely fast at nonresidential two-year colleges, more and more students mix class attendance with heavy work schedules, participating in student activities to only a limited extent. In addition, many students are enrolled at multiple colleges—switching between them, combining attendance, and cycling in and out.<sup>17</sup> Many attend college near home while working, supporting their families, and also attending online.

As the composition of the undergraduate population has grown more diverse, financial support for college students has gradually eroded. In particular, over the past three decades, loans have increasingly replaced grants as the most common form of federal and state support for students seeking to finance college. Student borrowing has grown substantially, and debt burdens have become more unequal, with students from low-income households, black students, and Hispanic students significantly more likely to have debt exceeding 8 percent of their monthly income, even net of family income and other background factors, such as gender, occupation, and the type of college attended.<sup>18</sup>

Current financial aid rules reward students who attend college full time without working and penalize those who take fewer classes and integrate work for pay into their schedules.<sup>19</sup> The Pell Grant (to which all students are entitled if they meet income-based qualifications and file a FAFSA) is perhaps the most important element of federal policy affecting an unmarried parent's ability to enroll in higher education.<sup>20</sup> Both the amount of the grant and the process through which it is accessed limit its usefulness and reflect several flawed assumptions.<sup>21</sup> Students who most need the Pell Grant struggle to make ends meet (which requires them to work and reduce their course loads), are less well-prepared academically for college, and are more likely in need of second attempts at a college degree.<sup>22</sup>

## Recommendations for reform

Federal, state, and local policies shape decisions made by unmarried parents with regard to college-going and completion in important ways. Policy reforms could greatly enhance the extent to which the benefits of postsecondary education accrue to unmarried parents and also ensure that those benefits are distributed more equitably. One possible reform would be to simplify the notoriously complex application form, especially its demands for information from applicants.<sup>23</sup> For applicants with children, who must file as “independent” students for financial aid purposes, the process is especially complicated. A recent experimental evaluation of a program conducted with H&R Block has shown that, among financially independent adults with no previous college experience, simplifying the aid application process substantially increased the likelihood of attending college and receiving need-based grant aid.<sup>24</sup>

Dual enrollment programs are another promising approach to increasing rates of college attendance and completion, particularly among students whose parents did not attend college. These programs are designed to move students more seamlessly from high school to college by allowing them to earn college credit while still in high school, thereby potentially reducing the time (and associated costs) spent in college. Today, nearly every state has some form of dual enrollment policy, either formalized at the state level or locally negotiated between colleges and high schools.<sup>25</sup>

## Reforms aimed at supporting college completion

One key to enhancing the college completion rates of unmarried parents is providing a strong safety net, including robust academic, financial, and emotional supports, for vulnerable students.<sup>26</sup> As intermediate goals, policymakers could focus on increasing rates of full-time attendance among unmarried parents and reducing the time they spend working while parenting and in school.

There is a growing body of experimental evidence on the effects of providing social supports to community college students. For example, as part of the MDRC Opening Doors initiative, low-income students who were just starting college and who had histories of academic difficulties were provided with additional counseling and given a small stipend of \$150 per semester when they used those services in two Ohio community colleges. Program effects were positive and statistically significant while services were being provided, though most of the initial effects diminished over time.<sup>27</sup>

Child care is another form of support that studies suggest unmarried parents need in college, though it has not yet been empirically linked to improved degree completion. Although surveys consistently indicate that a lack of high-quality, affordable, on-campus child care prevents full engagement in college life, only half of all colleges provide any form of care on campus, and most child care centers are over-enrolled. In fact, national data indicate a serious shortage of campus child care centers—with existing resources meeting only one-tenth of demand. The shortage is particularly severe when it comes to infant care—only about one-third of campus child care centers accept infants. And between 2002 and 2009, federal support for the Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program (the sole federal funder of such centers) fell 40 percent (to just \$15 million)—or (at most) just \$8 for each family headed by a parenting student, according to calculations by the Institute for Women's Policy Research.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

Postsecondary education can confer many important benefits on those privileged to engage in it and these benefits extend both to participants and to their children. But participation could be far broader and more beneficial if vulnerable groups of students had more effective support in their efforts to com-

plete degrees. One group especially in need of support is unmarried parenting students, a segment of the undergraduate population that is growing in numbers and yet is increasingly at risk of not completing college.

Each of the reforms described here has the potential to enhance degree completion rates among unmarried parents. For all of the reasons we have described, making postsecondary education a more successful experience for more parents ought to be an important part of any family-friendly agenda. ■

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<sup>1</sup>P. Oreopoulos and K. Salvanes, “How Large Are Returns to Schooling? Hint: Money Isn’t Everything,” NBER Working Paper 15339, National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER): Cambridge, 2009; L. Barrow and C. Rouse, “Does College Still Pay?” *Economists’ Voice* 2, No. 4 (2005): 1–8; B. Wolfe and R. Haveman, “Social and Nonmarket Benefits from Education in an Advanced Economy,” in *Education in the 21st Century: Meeting the Challenges of a Changing World*, ed. Y. Kodrzycki (Boston: Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, 2003); P. A. Trostel and T. M. Gabe, “Fiscal and Economic Effects of College Attainment,” Staff Paper 566, University of Maine School of Economics, 2007, available at [www.umaine.edu/soe/files/2009/06/soe\\_566trostel.pdf](http://www.umaine.edu/soe/files/2009/06/soe_566trostel.pdf); P. Attewell and D. E. Lavin, *Passing the Torch: Does Higher Education for the Disadvantaged Pay Off across the Generations?* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007).

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS): 1986–1997 (NPSAS:87), 1989–1990 (NPSAS:90), 1992–1993 (NPSAS:93), 2008 (NPSAS:08), Data Analysis Systems. Available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsw/97578f.asp>.

<sup>3</sup>As of 2007–2008, undergraduates who were unmarried parents were disproportionately nonwhite (45 percent white, 30 percent African American, and 17 percent Latino).

<sup>4</sup>C. Chang Wei and colleagues, “A Decade of Undergraduate Student Aid: 1989–1990 to 1999–2000, NCES 2004–158,” NCES: Washington, DC. Available at <http://nces.ed.gov/DAS/epubs/2004158/overview.asp>.

<sup>5</sup>U.S. Department of Education, NCES, *Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study, 2000–2001*, Washington, DC, B&B uses the same definition of unmarried parents as the NPSAS. Available at <http://nces.ed.gov/dasolv2/tables/mainPage.asp?mode=NEW&filename=20>.

<sup>6</sup>Calculations using the 1995–1996 Beginning Postsecondary Study, Quick Stats, (NCES: Washington, DC). Available at <http://nces.ed.gov/datalab/quickstats/>.

<sup>7</sup>Attewell and Lavin, *Passing the Torch*.

<sup>8</sup>S. McLanahan, “Diverging Destinies: How Children Are Faring under the Second Demographic Transition,” *Demography* 41, No. 4 (2004): 607–627.

<sup>9</sup>R. Arum and others, “The Romance of College Attendance: Higher Education Stratification and Mate Selection,” *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 26, No. 2 (2008): 107–121.

<sup>10</sup>Oreopoulos and Salvanes, “How Large Are Returns to Schooling?”; Attewell and Lavin, *Passing the Torch*; A. Martin and colleagues, “The Joint Influence of Mother and Father Parenting on Child Cognitive Outcomes at Age 5,” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 22, No. 4 (2007): 423–439.

<sup>11</sup>L. C. Sayer and colleagues, “Educational Differences in Parents’ Time with Children: Cross-National Variations,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66, No. 5 (2004).

<sup>12</sup>K. Miller and colleagues, “Improving Child Care Access to Promote Postsecondary Success among Low-Income Single Parents,” Institute for Women’s Policy Research: Washington, DC, forthcoming.

<sup>13</sup>Wolfe and Haveman, “Social and Nonmarket Benefits from Education.”

<sup>14</sup>M. Grossman, “Education and Nonmarket Outcomes,” in *Handbook of the Economics of Education*, Vol. I, ed. E. Hanushek and F. Welch (Amsterdam: Elsevier B.V., 2006), pp. 578–635.

<sup>15</sup>K. B. Wilson, “Institutional Influences Affecting the College-Going Decisions of Low-Income Mothers Attending a Rural Midwestern Community College” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Missouri–Columbia, 2008, p. 107.

<sup>16</sup>L. G. Johnson and others, “Managing Stress among Adult Women Students in Community Colleges,” *Community College Journal of Research & Practice* 24, No. 4 (2000): 289–300.

<sup>17</sup>S. Goldrick-Rab, “Following Their Every Move: How Social Class Shapes Postsecondary Pathways,” *Sociology of Education* 79, No. 1 (2006), 61–79; S. Goldrick-Rab and F. Pfeffer, “Beyond Access: Explaining Socioeconomic Differences in College Transfer,” *Sociology of Education* 82, No. 2 (2009): 101–125.

<sup>18</sup>D. V. Price, “Educational Debt Burden among Student Borrowers: An Analysis of the Baccalaureate & Beyond Panel, 1997 Follow-Up,” *Research in Higher Education* 45, No. 7 (2004): 701–737. Single parents faced additional challenges when welfare regulations decreased that form of support for single parents in college—the proportion of single parents receiving welfare while enrolled in college full time declined from 34 percent in 1995–1996 to 9 percent in 1999–2000.

<sup>19</sup>For further detail on the penalty for working while in college, see the last paragraph, which begins on page 183 of *The Future of Children* article, available at <http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/journals/article/index.xml?journalid=73&articleid=536>. S. Goldrick-Rab and J. Roksa, A Federal Agenda for Promoting Student Success and Degree Completion, Center for American Progress: Washington, DC, 2008, available at [www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/08/degree\\_completion.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/08/degree_completion.html); S. Goldrick-Rab and colleagues, “How Money Matters (or Doesn’t) for College Success,” *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Practice*, Vol. 24 (Netherlands: Springer, 2009), pp. 1–45.

<sup>20</sup>N. S. Seftor and S. E. Turner, “Back to School: Federal Student Aid Policy and Adult College Enrollment,” *Journal of Human Resources* 37, No. 2 (2002), 336–352; Wilson, “Institutional Influences Affecting the College-Going Decisions.”

<sup>21</sup>D. Deming and S. Dynarski, “Into College, Out of Poverty? Policies to Increase the Postsecondary Attainment of the Poor,” Working Paper 15387, NBER: Cambridge, 2009.

<sup>22</sup>Goldrick-Rab and colleagues, “How Money Matters (or Doesn’t).”

<sup>23</sup>S. Dynarski and J. Scott-Clayton, “Complexity and Targeting in Federal Student Aid: A Quantitative Analysis,” Working Paper 13801, NBER: Cambridge, 2008.

<sup>24</sup>E. Bettinger and colleagues, “The Role of Simplification and Information in College Decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment,” Working Paper 15361, NBER: Cambridge, 2009.

<sup>25</sup>M. Karp and colleagues, *Dual Enrollment Students in Florida and New York City: Postsecondary Outcomes*, New York: Community College Research Center, 2008.

<sup>26</sup>Goldrick-Rab and colleagues, “How Money Matters (or Doesn’t)”; R. Deil-Amen and S. Goldrick-Rab, “Institutional Transfer and the Management of Risk in Higher Education,” working paper, Wisconsin Center for the Advancement of Postsecondary Education: Madison, 2009.

<sup>27</sup>S. Scrivener and M. Weiss, *More Guidance, Better Results?*, MDRC: New York, 2009. Available at [www.mdrc.org/publications/524/full.pdf](http://www.mdrc.org/publications/524/full.pdf).

<sup>28</sup>Because single parents are undercounted, the amount per family is likely overstated. K. Miller, B. Gault, and A. Thorman, *Improving Child Care Access to Promote Postsecondary Success among Low-Income Single Parents*, Institute for Women’s Policy Research: Washington, DC, forthcoming.

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