



# EmpowerED Dads

Amplifying Voices, Advancing Higher  
Education for Student Fathers

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## Executive Summary

**Student parents often navigate higher education unnoticed, and solutions that support their success are overlooked. Within this often unseen demographic, student fathers face an even greater lack of recognition. By understanding their unique needs and perspectives, we can improve their graduation rates.**

Student fathers have a lot to say about their experiences and what empowers them, and we listened. Their paths to graduation include caregiving, working, and overcoming the stereotype that they are not actively involved in their children's lives. When asked for advice for fellow fathers in college, a current student father attending a public four-year institution shared:

**“The journey of a student father is filled with challenges, but it's through these trials that we grow in resilience and wisdom.”**

“EmpowerED Dads: Amplifying Voices, Advancing Higher Education for Student Fathers” is a research report focused on advocating for policy reforms and institutional support systems tailored to the unique needs of student fathers in higher education. Through focus groups and journal entries with ten student father participants, this project aims to shed light on their experiences, address systemic challenges they face, and champion their academic and personal successes.

### Key Objectives:

- **Amplifying Voices:** By delving into the narratives of student fathers, we seek to bring attention to their experiences and challenges, often overshadowed in discussions about higher education and caregiving.
- **Advancing Policy Reforms:** We aim to inform policy changes and institutional practices that better support student fathers in their academic pursuits.
- **Tailored Support Systems:** Our research seeks to identify specific needs and barriers faced by student fathers, paving the way for the further development of targeted support programs and resources.

Our research illuminates the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education, including advocating for policies and practices that recognize and value the experiences of student fathers.

*Please note: All quotes included in this report were shared by student fathers during focus groups and/or in their survey responses. These quotes have been made anonymous to respect the privacy of respondents and their families. Any photographs used throughout this report have no correlation with the anonymous respondents' quotes.*



## Breaking the Silence

The purpose of “EmpowerED Dads: Amplifying Voices, Advancing Higher Education for Student Fathers” is to advocate for policy reforms and institutional support systems that uplift the voices and address the unique needs of student fathers in higher education.

By immersing ourselves in their narratives, we aim to illuminate the intricacies of their experiences, shedding light on the intersectional dynamics at play. **The ultimate goal is to inform the design of support programs that bolster their academic pursuits and nurture their well-being, while also encouraging dialogue for education policy reform and systemic change.**

“  
It means a lot to see people starting to recognize that there are student fathers out there.”

– A current student father attending a public four-year institution.



## Why This? Why Now?

Student parents represent a large and intersectional demographic. However, researchers have called student fathers even more invisible among this historically under supported and underserved population, often overlooked in discussions surrounding higher education policies and support strategies (Alderman-Swain & Battle, 2000). College students who are fathers navigate a unique intersection of responsibilities, balancing the rigors of higher education with the joys and challenges of parenthood. Yet despite their presence, they often lack visibility within the campus landscape, overshadowed by prevailing stereotypes and societal norms.



The erasure of fathers within the realm of caregiving is a multifaceted issue, rooted in deep-seated gender biases and cultural assumptions (Sharma et al., 2016). Traditional notions of caregiving have long been associated with maternal roles, perpetuating the belief that fathers are secondary or even unnecessary figures in their children’s lives. This misconception is compounded for fathers of color, particularly Black and Brown fathers, who face the additional burden of combating stereotypes that portray them as absent or uninvolved parents.

Within the college environment, students are expected to devote themselves wholeheartedly to their studies and extracurricular activities, rather than parenting obligations or responsibilities. As a result, college fathers may feel compelled to conceal or downplay their parental status, fearing judgment or alienation from their peers and professors. Yet, their presence and unique challenges deserve recognition and proactive measures to ensure they succeed in academia and beyond. **By understanding the specific needs and challenges faced by fathers in higher education, organizations, policymakers, and service providers are able to design programs and interventions to better support them in their parenting journeys.** This research has the potential to enhance the effectiveness of existing support services and ensure that they are inclusive of all fathers’ perspectives and experiences (Denaro et al., 2022).

In the landscape of higher education, the achievements and perseverance of student fathers are often seldom acknowledged or celebrated. “We don’t get enough credit” was a common theme among the student fathers who were a part of our study, grappling with the disparity between the efforts they put in and the recognition they receive. Despite their dedication, this lack of recognition can impact their own self image and worth. Here is what we heard from participants:

“  
It’s hard for me to acknowledge anything positive I’ve [accomplished].”

“  
I do not look to society to give me any praises or opinions.”

“  
I always wonder, ‘Am I doing enough?’”

These sentiments echo the complexities of being both a student and a father. Despite their silent struggles, their stories deserve to be heard, their accomplishments celebrated, and their challenges addressed with empathy and understanding.

Family economic mobility requires pathways to family-sustaining careers for all parents, including fathers. **Through tailored support programs that recognize their potential as scholars and leaders within their communities, student fathers are more likely to experience academic success.** Beyond academic achievement, fathers deserve to have their holistic wellbeing prioritized **by promoting their mental health, emotional well-being, and overall wellness, and by creating environments that nurture their personal growth and fulfillment.**



“

I really try to embrace the notion that I must be well to be able to effectively care for others.”

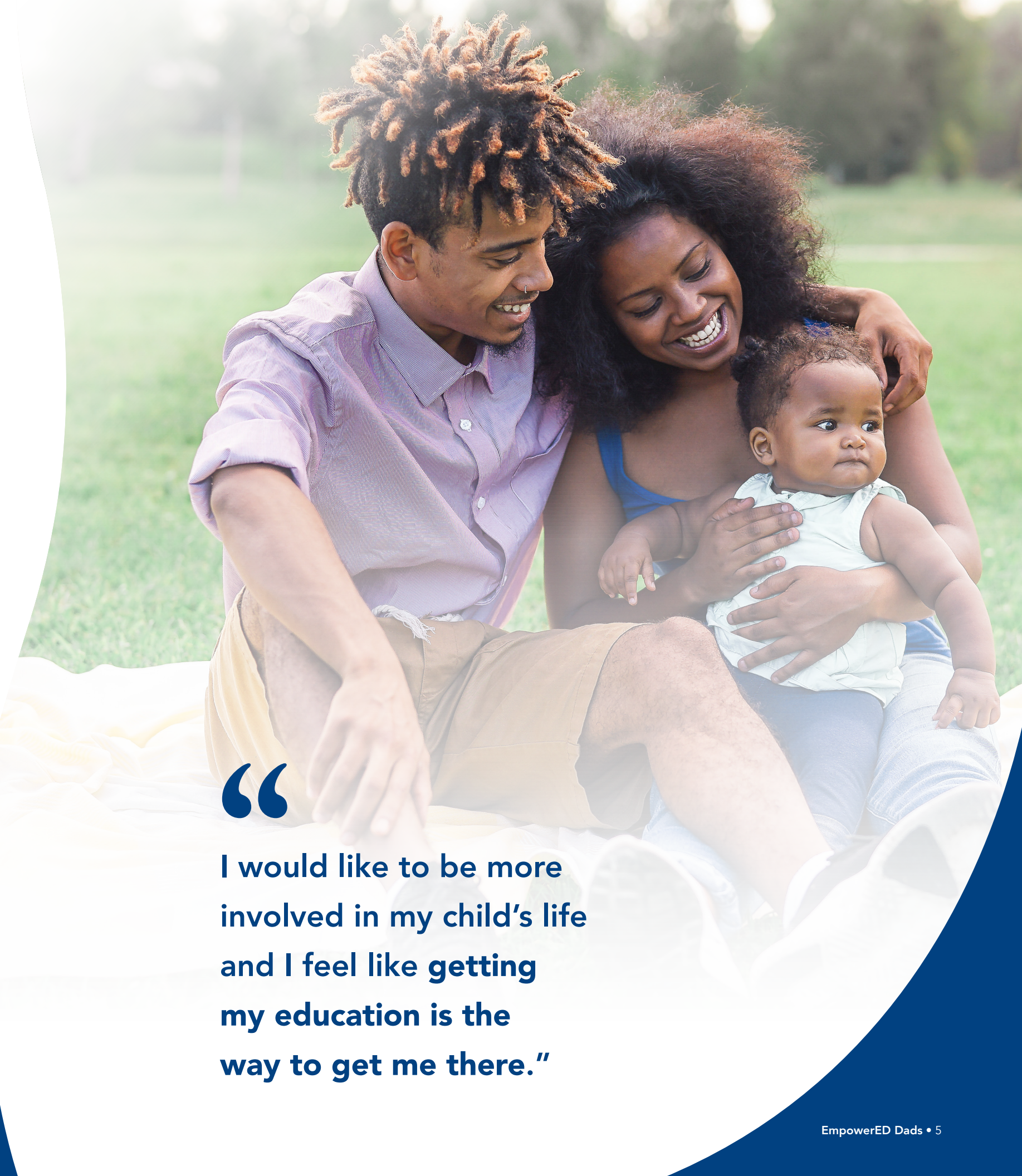


“

If you don't take care of yourself, you can't take care of your family, so that has to be #1.”

Central to our exploration is the recognition of the critical role student fathers play in their children's lives. Supporting their active engagement in parenting helps to strengthen family bonds and contribute to the positive development of future generations (Tsui, 2002). Our findings and approach negates many common stereotypes about young fathers, particularly fathers of color, and elucidates the harmful impacts of prevailing misconceptions about this critical population.

**Eliminating racial barriers and discrimination that are historical and current drivers of poverty and oppression creates a world where all families are truly free.** Through our research, we advocate for policies and practices that recognize and value the diversity of student experiences.



“

I would like to be more involved in my child's life and I feel like getting my education is the way to get me there.”



## What Do We Know?

**In the United States, more than 1 in 5 college students are attending college part- or full-time while raising children. Thirty percent of parenting college students are fathers, and close to 1.1 million student fathers are currently parenting while pursuing their degrees (IWPR, 2020).** For students simultaneously managing their higher education and parenthood responsibilities, degree attainment can be nearly impossible without tailored support. This is especially true for student fathers. A 2019 report from the Institute of Women’s Policy Research indicated that 61% of student fathers stop out of college before earning their degree (compared to 48% of student mothers) and that the stop-out rate increases to 72% and 66% when looking specifically at Black and Latino student fathers, respectively (Contreras-Mendez & Reichlin Cruse, 2021, Dundar et al., 2023, Hanson, 2024).

Black student fathers have the highest rates of stopping out of college across all racial and gender identities. They also experience additional struggles, including high levels of basic needs insecurity, such as stable housing and access to food. (Contreras-Mendez & Reichlin Cruse, 2021; Boesch, 2023). While many college students face basic needs insecurity, (NPSAS, 2023)<sup>1</sup> the 2020 #RealCollege survey conducted by Temple University’s Hope Center found that only 60% of Black single fathers experiencing basic needs insecurity reported using public benefits and only 34% utilized specific campus-based support services (Heckstall & Collins, 2023).<sup>2</sup>

Throughout their educational journeys, student parents are impacted by the intersection of their parenting status with other identities and experiences, including race, ethnicity, immigration status, socioeconomic status, sexuality, gender identity, faith, and more. The majority of student parents in the United States are students of color. According to Ascend at the Aspen Institute, available data show that some groups of men in college are disproportionately more likely to be parenting: nearly 1 in 7 (15%) men in college are fathers, with Black, Native American, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander men more likely to be parenting (21%, 21%, and 23%, respectively).

Persistent gender, cultural, and racial stereotypes and stigmas also contribute to the overall invisibility of student fathers. In 1965, The U.S. Department of Labor published a highly criticized report that has contributed to the prominent societal stigmas held against people of color that persist today. The Negro Family: The Case for National Action, authored by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, argued that the decline of the Black nuclear family would significantly impede Black Americans’ progress toward economic and social equality (Acs et al., 2013).<sup>3</sup>

Throughout history, Black fathers have pervasively been stereotyped as “absent,” and Black children as “fatherless,” in society and in the media (The Truth about Black Fatherhood, 2020). This fallacy ignores the fact that Black fathers are actually more involved in their children’s lives and care than fathers of other races. Nationwide the majority of Black dads (2.5 million of around 4.2 million) live with their children,

<sup>1</sup> Students of color are more likely to experience food insecurity than their white peers. According to the 2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) data, the rate of food insecurity among white students is 16.6 percentage points lower than it is for Black students and 6.9 percentage points lower than it is for Hispanic students.

<sup>2</sup> See (Johns et al., 2023) for more information on how student parents experience basic needs insecurity and what tools and services they utilize to provide for themselves and their families.

<sup>3</sup> See (Acs et al., 2013) to learn more about Moynihan’s controversial report and modern discussions on the circumstances of black families and reducing racial disparities.

regardless of their relationship statuses with their co-parents (The Truth about Black Fatherhood, 2020). They are also more likely to be caregivers, provide them with physical care such as bathing them or changing diapers, read to them, and help them with their homework. Non-residential fathers of color are also very active and involved parents.

In the United States today, more than 23 million children live in a single-parent family (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023 B). It’s estimated that more than 6 million children in the U.S. live with cohabiting parents and about 3.5 million live in father-only households (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023). Research suggests that involved and caring fathers are important to the optimal development of children (Behson & Robbins, 2016). Children who feel a closeness to their father are twice as likely as those who do not to enter college or find stable employment after high school, 75% less likely to have a teen birth, 80% less likely to spend time in jail, and half as likely to experience multiple depression symptoms (Children’s Bureau, 2018). They are generally more confident, sociable, and able to demonstrate self-control. Children with involved fathers are less likely to act out in school or engage in risky behaviors in adolescence. Research also shows that involved fatherhood makes children happier and healthier (Behson & Robbins, 2016). On the other hand, the absence of a father can hinder childhood development from infancy into adulthood.

Student fathers who are committed to their role as the breadwinner for their families often experience time poverty when balancing one or more jobs while going to school and parenting.<sup>4</sup> Financial poverty and time poverty are likely related issues, as student parents are more likely to face economic hardships and thus, also work more in order to support their families (Conway et al., 2021). Unfortunately, very little research has directly explored the relationship between parenthood, time poverty, and the amount of time parents have to devote to their studies in higher education (Conway et al., 2021).

“

**I don’t see myself having more time. You continue getting busier as time goes on... it’s about being intentional and making the time.”**

“

**It feels like it’s a race against time.”**

Available resources aimed at supporting student parents are usually designed with mothers in mind and do not serve the needs of fathers in higher education (Roy et al., 2023). Additionally, research on childhood development often focuses on mothers, which excludes men from conversations around caregiving and improving conditions for students who are attending school while raising children. Fathers in higher education can also be disadvantaged by the fact that their parental status is not always visible, such as a mother’s may be during her pregnancy (Roy et al., 2023).

**Overall, the body of research focusing specifically on student fathers is extremely limited, and there is a clear need for an increased investment in initiatives to identify and mitigate barriers that impact student fathers on their paths to and through higher education.**

<sup>4</sup> Time poverty is a condition that reduces the quantity and quality of time student parents can spend on their studies. See (Johns et al., 2023) for more information on how student parents are impacted by time poverty.





## Methodology

This research utilized a qualitative approach, specifically employing focus groups and journal prompts following the focus group meetings. The same participants for the focus groups also completed the follow up journal prompts. This approach facilitated in-depth exploration and discussion of the research topic, allowing participants to share their experiences and perspectives in a group setting. The methodology implemented for this research was thematic analysis.

In the focus groups, we asked questions about identifying as a student father, as well as what support systems and resources fathers utilize or wish to have/had access to in order to enhance their parenting skills, cope with stress, and address the challenges they face. The journal prompts allowed participants to expound on the narratives that were shared in the focus groups.

Based on the narratives shared in the focus groups and follow-up journal prompts written by participants, key themes and patterns were identified and analyzed to gain deeper insights into the experiences and perspectives of the individuals involved. The analysis involved several stages, including familiarization with the data, coding of transcripts and journal responses, identification of themes, and interpretation of findings. Themes were derived from the participants' responses, capturing recurring patterns, experiences, and perspectives related to fatherhood.

### PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to intentionally select participants based on their gender and parenting status in college, targeting fathers from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Recruitment efforts involved reaching out to the current and alumni student fathers within Generation Hope's D.C.-area direct-service programming (the D.C. Scholar Program) and The City University of New York (CUNY) Fatherhood Academy alumni. Inclusion criteria included being a father and being willing to participate in a focus group discussion on parenting experiences.

## Study Framework

### PARTICIPANT PROFILES

We conducted four focus groups with a total of 10 participants. Participants were both current students and recent graduates (within the last three years) who attended both 2- and 4-year institutions across Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs).

### ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical principles were upheld throughout the research process. Participants provided informed consent before participating in the focus group discussions, and their confidentiality and privacy are protected. Participants were compensated for completing one focus group session and a follow-up journal prompt. The research was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines and standards for research involving human participants.

### LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be acknowledged, including the potential for self-selection bias among participants and the subjective nature of qualitative data analysis. Additionally, the findings may not be generalizable to all fathers due to the specific sample characteristics and context of the study.

## What We Learned

The narratives delve into the experiences of student fathers navigating the intricate balance of parenthood and their education. Throughout the discussions, several key themes emerged, shedding light on their motivations, challenges, and triumphs.

“

When you think of the word parent, you think of mothers.”

“

People confuse me as a babysitter...but I'm the provider.”



### OVERCOMING STIGMA AND REDEFINING GENDER ROLES

Discussions explored overcoming societal stigma and stereotypes associated with fatherhood, as well as challenging traditional gender roles. Participants advocated for greater recognition of the diverse ways fathers contribute to their children's upbringing, emphasizing the importance of breaking cycles of absenteeism and actively engaging in their children's lives. Through their experiences, participants challenged societal norms and redefined the narrative surrounding fatherhood.



### FATHERHOOD AND EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

The narratives depicted fatherhood as a shared journey filled with moments of joy, learning, and growth. The discussions highlighted the profound significance of being a father, emphasizing the multifaceted roles and responsibilities involved. Participants expressed a deep emotional connection to their roles as fathers, viewing themselves as leaders and guides for their children. They recognized the importance of nurturing and supporting their children unconditionally, expressing that "Being a father is being a leader" and "Fatherhood means everything to me."



“

Navigating fatherhood with three sons offers a wealth of rewarding experiences. One of the most rewarding aspects is the opportunity to embody the role of a shepherd to my sons, guiding them in the way they should go. It's not just about teaching them right from wrong, but about instilling in them a deep-rooted sense of morality, compassion, and faith that they can carry throughout their lives.”

“

Balancing full-time work, scattered class schedules, and juggling responsibilities as a father was tough. Time management became my lifeline, ensuring every moment counted for my family and academic pursuits.”



“

I had to find employment that worked with my child’s schedule first, then my school schedule. It was difficult but you do what you have to for your kid.”



### TRANSITION AND ADAPTATION

Conversations touched upon the journey of career transitions, sparked by circumstances like job loss during the pandemic. Participants recounted instances of overcoming obstacles, such as upgrading technology for homeschooling, which led to newfound interests and career exploration. Through these experiences and more, student fathers demonstrated strength and adaptability in navigating challenges while striving for personal and professional growth.



### PARENTING, PURSUIT OF EDUCATION, AND TIME MANAGEMENT EQUALS PERSONAL GROWTH

Balancing parenting responsibilities with academic pursuits poses significant challenges for student fathers.

Time management emerged as a recurring theme, underscored by the sense of urgency for finishing a degree to achieve upward economic mobility that accompanies limited time. Despite these challenges, participants reflected on their personal growth and development as fathers, acknowledging the transformative impact of their educational journey on their parenting approach. They expressed pride in their accomplishments and recognized the positive influence that being a student has had on their children’s lives.

Motivation for pursuing education stems from multifaceted aspirations, including personal growth, professional advancement, and the desire to provide a better future for their families.

Participants viewed education as a means to establish economic stability and ensure greater involvement in their children’s lives.

As one participant stated, **“I would like to be more involved in my child’s life, and I felt like getting my education is the way to get me there.”** Another shared the positive feeling of **“making your kids happy, being able to do more because you’re pursuing your education.”**

**In summary, the findings underscore the impressive strength, determination, and unwavering commitment of student fathers in navigating the complexities of parenthood and education.** Despite facing challenges and societal barriers, they demonstrate a profound dedication to their families and a relentless pursuit of personal and professional fulfillment.

“

Sharing the journey of pursuing a higher education with my sons really has its highs and lows, but we really get to learn from each other and it gives us a deep connection that’s both grounding and lightning.”



## Discussion

**The intersection of parenthood and education is complex, as students who are also fathers navigate unique and competing demands and responsibilities.** Our findings corroborate existing literature, which highlights the significant impact of parenthood on educational attainment and career trajectories. Student fathers often face unique challenges. However, despite these challenges, our study illuminates the resilience and determination exhibited by student fathers in pursuing higher education to create better opportunities for themselves and their children.

## Future Directions and Implications for Research

Limited research has been done on student fathers and their experiences navigating degree and career attainment. **Moving forward, future research should continue to explore the experiences and needs of student fathers from diverse backgrounds,** including those from marginalized communities and non-traditional family structures. Longitudinal studies can provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of father involvement in their children’s academic achievement, socio-emotional development, and overall well-being. Additionally, qualitative inquiries that center the voices and perspectives of student fathers themselves can deepen our understanding of their lived experiences and inform the development of targeted interventions and support services.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, our study underscores the importance of recognizing and supporting the unique needs of student fathers as they navigate the complexities of parenthood and education. By fostering inclusive environments, promoting father involvement, and addressing structural barriers, we can empower student fathers to achieve their academic and personal goals while nurturing strong and resilient families. **Advocacy efforts by and for student parents must inclusively represent the voices of fathers, who are often marginalized within the narrative surrounding parenting students.**



## Policy Recommendations



### FEDERAL

- **Spearhead initiatives aimed at celebrating and supporting fathers, especially fathers of color**, in order to combat historical misconceptions and stigmas. The Office of Family Assistance within the Administration for Children and Families should grow the [Family-focused, Interconnected, Resilient, and Essential](#) (Fatherhood FIRE) grants program to fund organizations that are working to support fathers in their parenting journeys and focus on supporting organizations that work with young fathers. This program currently funds 58 organizations across the United States to provide Responsible Fatherhood services (The Office of Family Assistance, 2024).
- **Increase federal [Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program](#) (CCAMPIS) funding to meet the needs of student parents, ensuring that grant recipients can utilize dollars in a way that supports the fathers on their campuses.** Access to child care helps student parents stay in school and earn their degrees, as evidenced by the fact that the persistence rate for students participating in the CCAMPIS program was 82% in the 2016–2017 academic year (Heckstall & Collins, 2023).
- **Advocate for developing and implementing federal student-parent data collection initiatives** to spread awareness about the needs and experiences of young fathers in higher education. Although the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) does provide valuable data, it lacks questions directly asking about parenting status and is not submitted by every potential student in the country. Ongoing issues with the updated FAFSA in 2024 also reduced completion rates — as of late March, 40% fewer high school students had completed the form than they did by the same time in 2023 (Federal Student Aid, 2024).



### STATE

- **Expand [Child Care and Development Fund](#) (CCDF) funding and allow states more flexibility to use this funding to ensure that all student parents, including student fathers, can have their basic needs met.** This critical program that helps states provide financial assistance to low-income families to access child care is woefully underfunded and only reaches one in six eligible children (Heckstall & Collins, 2023).
- **[Champion state legislation](#) aimed at requiring institutions of higher education to collect data on the parenting status of all of their students.** Without comprehensive data collection on this vital student population, policymakers and institutional leaders struggle to truly understand student parents' experiences and dismantle the barriers impeding their academic and professional success. To date, only four states have passed legislation that directly or indirectly requires collecting the parenting status of students — Oregon, Illinois, California, and Texas (Breakstone, 2024).
- **Improve access to basic needs supports for all college students, especially students of color and those who are parents.** Student parents are far more likely than their non-parenting peers to experience high rates of basic needs insecurity: 53% of student parents experience food insecurity, 68% experience housing insecurity, and 17% experience houselessness (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). In creating systems to support students' basic needs, states should ensure that policies allow for equitable access to resources and connect students in need, including student parents, with programs for which they qualify.



### INSTITUTIONAL

- **Create tailored supports for student fathers.** Establish or expand programming such as fatherhood initiatives, clubs, gatherings, etc. for peer support that can likely increase student father retention and degree completion.
- **Invest in additional research exploring the needs and experiences of student fathers in higher education.** The lack of focus on student fathers in higher education research contributes to the overall invisibility of this population. Researchers should focus on collecting and disaggregating data that elucidates the nuanced barriers faced by student fathers of all races.
- **Expand access to mental health services for all students and be intentional about working to combat societal stigmas around mental health supports for young people, including men and fathers in higher education.** In 2021, only 40% of men with a reported mental illness received mental health care services in the past year (National Institute of Mental Health, 2023). Student fathers who are juggling the responsibilities of academics and parenthood are especially vulnerable and need access to these services in order to thrive and provide for their families.
- **Appreciate and encourage the insights and leadership offered by student fathers on campuses, in classrooms, and in communities.** Student fathers deserve to be acknowledged and rewarded for their dedication to going to school in pursuit of economic mobility for themselves and their families. Institutions of higher education should work with student parents to create a more diverse and richer campus environment where more students can thrive.





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## About Generation Hope

Founded in 2010, Generation Hope is a nonprofit organization that engages education and policy partners to drive systemic change and provides direct support to teen parents in college (i.e. Scholars) as well as their children through holistic, two-generation programming to ensure all student parents have the opportunities to succeed, experience economic mobility, and build wealth. We engage in local and national advocacy work, amplifying the student-parent voice and centering their experiences. We also leverage our data and best practices to serve as a thought partner to colleges, providing them with the tools, resources, and support that they need to implement programs, adjust policies, and change structures and culture to improve outcomes for student parents.

To date, our Scholar Program has served 435 teen parents in college and celebrated more than 200 degrees. We currently serve 200 Scholars in the D.C. metro region and New Orleans area. We have also worked with more than 30 colleges and universities to enhance their student parent work through our technical assistance program, FamilyU, impacting nearly 100,000 student parents across the country. Find out more at [generationhope.org](http://generationhope.org).





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