

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Securing a Better Future: A Portrait of Female Students in Mississippi's Community Colleges

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report presents findings from a survey of female community college students in Mississippi conducted by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) and commissioned by the Women's Foundation of Mississippi. The survey is designed to identify supports and practices that can help women succeed in community college and attain economic security. It explores women's motivations for pursuing college, their personal and career goals, their support needs, and the economic, health, and time challenges that they experience. The survey was designed as a part of the Institute for Women's Policy Research's Student Parent Success Initiative, which provides information and tools to promote the success of student parents in postsecondary education.

ABOUT THE WOMEN'S FOUNDATION OF MISSISSIPPI

The Women's Foundation of Mississippi (WFM) is a nonprofit foundation that seeks to promote social change and increase women's economic self-sufficiency through advocacy and strategic grantmaking. WFM is the only grantmaking and advocacy organization in Mississippi entirely dedicated to funding programs that improve the lives of women and girls statewide.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN'S POLICY RESEARCH

The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) conducts rigorous research and disseminates its findings to address the needs of women, promote public dialogue, and strengthen families, communities, and societies. IWPR works with policymakers, scholars, and public interest groups to design, execute, and disseminate research that illuminates economic and social policy issues affecting women and their families, and to build a network of individuals and organizations that conduct and use women-oriented policy research. The Institute's work is supported by foundation grants, government grants and contracts, donations from individuals, and contributions from organizations and corporations. IWPR is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization that also works in affiliation with the women's studies and public policy and public administration programs at The George Washington University.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community colleges are a critical resource for women seeking to achieve economic security and stability, yet many women who are community college students face challenges that make it difficult to persist in their education and complete their degrees. To understand the circumstances and experiences of female community college students in Mississippi, the challenges to their academic progress, and the resources that enable them to persist and succeed, the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) conducted an online survey of women who are students in the state's community colleges,¹ commissioned by the Women's Foundation of Mississippi (WFM).

Nearly 550 students from 13 of the state's 15 community colleges responded to the survey, with the majority of responses (60 percent) coming from two schools. Students answered questions about the factors that inspired them to pursue postsecondary education, their personal and career goals, and which types of student supports they find most helpful and needed. To supplement the findings from students' responses to the survey, IWPR interviewed eight community college administrators about their perceptions of students' greatest unmet needs, the ways their schools strive to meet these needs, additional services they believe would be useful to the students they serve. These interviews and the survey supplement draw on insights from the *Community College Completion Project* conducted by the Social Science Research Center of Mississippi State University, a study that examined the challenges and obstacles women students in Mississippi encounter in fulfilling their community college goals.

KEY FINDINGS

IWPR's report finds that:

- Mississippi's female community college students are a motivated group who invest substantial energy and effort in completing their education. More than four in ten (44 percent) work while in school, and 31 percent are parents who must navigate the complicated demands of balancing work, school, and family responsibilities.
- Female community college students see a college degree as a pathway to economic security and personal fulfillment. The top three reasons respondents have pursued a college education are to support themselves (62 percent), to support their family (56 percent), and to find personal fulfillment (55 percent). Nearly half are motivated by the possibility of a better paying job.
- Half (49 percent) of respondents are majoring in nursing or other health sciences, and more than four in ten (44 percent) say their occupational goal is to become a health care practitioner. Only a small proportion of respondents plan to pursue a career in the traditional male-dominated science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Nearly three in ten, however, are interested in learning more about educational or career opportunities within these fields.
- Respondents have positive experiences with their community colleges and identify many personal, family, and professional benefits of their education. Two-thirds (66 percent) say their college education has increased their self-confidence, and more than half (55 percent) say it has led to new friendships and increased their optimism about their career prospects. Many respondents see this growth as a foundation for furthering their educational attainment and plan to continue their education at some point in time.
- Three in ten respondents have interrupted their college careers. Among those who have taken a break, financial considerations represent the most common reason for doing so (40 percent), followed by the experience of stress or becoming overwhelmed (33 percent), needing to care for family (30 percent), and health issues (28 percent).
- Long commuting times can pose a barrier to completion for students juggling multiple roles and responsibilities. More than one in five students (22 percent) spend more than one hour commuting to and from school (round trip).

¹ Mississippi's community colleges include one public, two-year junior college.

- Child care access and affordability is a major challenge for mothers in Mississippi's community colleges. Forty-seven percent of respondents with children aged 10 and under say they cannot get the quality child care they want because it is too expensive, and 53 percent report that paying for child care or afterschool care is somewhat or very difficult for them. Fifty-nine percent of respondents with children aged 10 and under who have taken time off from school or dropped out say that having more stable or affordable child care would have helped them stay in college.
- Fewer than six in ten respondents have health insurance coverage. White students are considerably more likely than African American students to have health insurance coverage or a health plan, and students with low household incomes are much less likely to have health insurance than students with higher household incomes.
- Financial aid is a critical resource for many students, yet even with this assistance students often struggle to cover the costs of their college education. Sixty percent of students say it has been somewhat or very difficult to pay for living expenses such as transportation, utilities, groceries, gas, and other bills. Nearly four in ten (39 percent) report that it has been somewhat or very difficult to cover the costs of books and school supplies.
- Respondents are generally satisfied with the supports and services their colleges offer, although their levels of satisfaction vary among specific offices and services. Twenty-seven percent said they were dissatisfied with their financial aid office, compared with 15 percent who were dissatisfied with their school's campus security and 14 percent who were dissatisfied with their college's remedial classes. Only six percent of respondents say they are dissatisfied with their college institution as a whole.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The survey findings highlight many ways that community colleges in Mississippi are effectively serving their female students and suggest areas where changes to programs, policies, and supports could enhance female students' educational experiences and promote their persistence and success. On the one hand, students have positive experiences with their institutions and are excited about the personal and professional opportunities their education will provide. Many feel their education has improved their self-confidence, helped them establish new friendships, and increased their prospects for the future. In addition, students are generally satisfied with many of the supports and services at their schools. On the other hand, students face specific barriers that often make it difficult to succeed. The challenge of finding time to complete schoolwork while keeping up with work and family responsibilities, long commuting times, limited access to high-quality and affordable child care, and financial struggles represent just some of the challenges women students at Mississippi's community colleges encounter. Recommended changes to address these challenges include the following.

ENHANCE CAREER COUNSELING AND REMEDIAL EDUCATION

1. Provide counseling and career guidance that encourages women, including women of color, to pursue education for high paying jobs where women and minorities are typically underrepresented. This would include jobs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields.
2. Ensure that students receive information early in their programs about the average salaries of different in-demand occupations. Train career counselors and educators in techniques to help students think more broadly about potential careers and to consider high-paying, but potentially unfamiliar, careers.
3. Improve the relevance and quality of remedial courses. Ensuring that these courses adequately prepare students for their future academic work and that students receive credit for remedial courses can help students persist in their degree programs and transition from remedial to college-level courses.

EXPAND AND IMPROVE STUDENT SUPPORTS AND SERVICES

- 1.** Improve knowledge of existing services to encourage women on campus to seek available support.
- 2.** Increase access to child care:
 - a. Help student parents locate affordable, convenient, and quality child care, through coordination with resource and referral agencies or local child care and head start providers.
 - b. Help student parents apply for financial assistance in paying for child care.
 - c. Where campus child care is available, make these services more affordable for low-income students through child care subsidies or a sliding scale.
 - d. Ensure that existing campus child care centers receive continuing funding.
- 3.** Improve access to health care:
 - a. Establish connections with community health centers that can provide students with affordable health care services, including access to preventive, mental health, and family planning services.
 - b. At the state level, broaden access to public health programs to help students find and pay for health insurance.
 - c. Maintain adequate funding for existing campus health care centers.
- 4.** Help students meet their transportation needs and improve safety for students traveling to and from campus facilities:
 - a. Coordinate with community organizations that might help students purchase used vehicles or finance vehicle repairs.
 - b. Improve security and lighting in parking lots, and educate campus security officers about issues surrounding stalking and sexual assault.

INCREASE ACCESS TO FINANCIAL AID AND OTHER FINANCIAL SUPPORTS

- 1.** Help students access public benefits, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, welfare cash assistance, and food stamps:
 - a. Help students determine their eligibility and apply for public benefits.
 - b. Study and replicate existing programs that help low-income students access public benefits, including Single Stop, the Centers for Working Families in Community College, and Benefits Access for College Completion.
- 2.** Ensure that financial aid offices have adequate resources and effective systems to help more low-income students navigate the financial aid application process and to access additional financial supports.
- 3.** Expand access to need-based state grants for higher education by allowing part-time students, nontraditional students, and students who receive a full Pell grant to receive support from all state grant programs.