



NEW MOMS COLLEGE SUCCESS PROGRAM PILOT

Final Evaluation Report

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Disclaimer

The opinions, findings, and recommendations expressed in this publication are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of New Moms, ECMC Foundation, or Chapin Hall.

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of New Moms' College Success Program is to increase degree attainment for young mothers in Chicago.

The New Moms' College Success Program is a pilot project created to increase degree attainment for young mothers in Chicago. Its strategies include individual and group coaching, transportation support, and a \$500 monthly stipend to young mothers pursuing an Associate's degree or long-term certificate. The program was created to counter the systemic racism that keeps young Black and Hispanic mothers from postsecondary education and higher-wage jobs. Chapin Hall partnered with New Moms to evaluate the pilot project, relying primarily on qualitative methodology to understand how the program was implemented and how participants experience the program.

Program Structure

The New Moms' College Success Program aims to affirm participant strengths, address barriers to college success, and support parenting students as they seek to attain their higher education goals. Through its interventions and supports, the program tries to foster individual-level outcomes including persistence in school, passing grades, beneficial skills (such as executive functioning skills which reinforce persistence in school), and reciprocal, positive peer support. The program uses three primary strategies:



1. **Individual coaching:** Program participants meet with an individual coach a minimum of two times a month. One of the coaching sessions must be in person.
2. **Peer workshops:** Participants attend one workshop per month to learn about various topics (for example, college, career, finances, parenting, self-care). The same workshops are offered twice each month so that participants can choose between the two based on their schedule.
3. **Financial support:** Each month, participants receive a \$500 stipend and a \$100 gas or public transportation card.

To be eligible to participate, young mothers must be between the ages of 18 and 24, reside in the Chicago area, and be pursuing an Associate's degree from an accredited college or a long-term academic certificate program. Participants may remain in the program for up to 3 years or until their degree or certificate is completed. The pilot project is funded primarily by the ECMC Foundation, a national foundation that funds efforts to improve postsecondary outcomes for marginalized students.¹

This Report

This is the final evaluation report after 2 years of data collection. We wrote a Year One report that highlighted the experiences of program participants, pointing to the range of benefits they gained from coaching, workshops, financial assistance, and peer support (Gitlow & Garcia, 2023). This second, and final, report explains our study methodology and provides context for our findings from other research. It then presents our evaluation findings in a number of areas: program participation, program implementation, benefits for participants, program challenges and opportunities, and a discussion and set of recommendations for the program moving forward.

¹ <https://www.ecmcfoundation.org/>

PROGRAM CONTEXT

There are an estimated 3.1 million college students who are raising children in the U.S., representing 18% of undergraduate students. The majority of these parenting students are women (74%) and 55% are students of color (ACE, 2023). Students with children face huge economic barriers; it is estimated that 89% of single-mother students are low income and 63% are living in poverty (IWPR, 2017). Additionally, 73% of single mothers in college report high levels of stress; the sources of that stress include finances (53%), balancing school, life, and work (50%), and school (34%; Goodman et al., 2023). Only 18% of parenting students received a Bachelor's or Associate's degree within 6 years of college participation, compared to 54% of traditionally aged, non-parenting students (Cruse et al., 2021).

These numbers all point to the structural challenges faced by parenting students, especially single mothers. To put our evaluation findings in context, we reviewed other research that highlights the strengths parenting students bring with them to the educational system, the unique challenges they face, and existing programs that address these barriers. This information provides helpful background for the New Moms' College Success Program and the young mothers, primarily mothers of color, they serve.

Parenting Student Strengths

Although parenting students face unique challenges to attaining a college degree, researchers have identified a range of strengths they bring to higher education. We focus on two of these assets: cultural wealth and aspirational capital.

Cultural Wealth

Dr. Tara Yosso (2005) defined the concept of cultural wealth as "the array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). "Cultural wealth" helps explain the assets and resources individuals from marginalized backgrounds possess beyond those traditionally valued by higher education or career settings. Yosso defined six types of cultural capital that work together to empower students:

- Aspirational capital: Students' hopes and dreams for the future in the face of barriers
- Linguistic capital: Language and communication skills due to multilingual and multicultural experiences
- Familial capital: Cultural knowledge nurtured by kin and extended family; commitment to community well-being
- Social capital: Networks of people and community resources that provide instrumental and emotional support
- Navigational capital: Students' skills in navigating institutions, including hostile environments
- Resistance capital: Experiences with securing rights for themselves and their communities

Students, including parenting students, bring these assets to their postsecondary settings, supporting their efforts to successfully reach their educational goals.

Aspirational Capital

Another strength of parenting students researchers have identified is an extension of the concept of aspirational capital, which is the strong desire to succeed academically and improve their family's circumstances. Student parents' goals and aspirations are not solely for personal advancement, but also for their children's future; this drive can result in higher levels of motivation and perseverance when facing challenges (Scrivener et al., 2015). Numerous studies highlight the motivation of student parents, particularly single mothers, who view higher education as a pathway to financial stability and career advancement (James, 2018). This motivation is not only a source of persistence but also contributes to a deeper commitment to learning (Butler et al., 2004). This commitment tends to manifest in the development of strong time management skills out of necessity and in balancing coursework, employment, and family obligations. The persistent dedication to achieving their aspirations reflects resilience as a hallmark of student parent strengths, who must navigate systemic obstacles (such as racism, poverty, lack of appropriate high-quality child care, etc.) and personal obstacles (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Goodman & Reddy, 2019).

Parenting Student Challenges

Despite the assets parenting students bring to the educational setting, they face serious challenges, typically without sufficient support from educational institutions. These obstacles often intersect, compounding their challenges. We focus here on four common barriers: financial challenges, time poverty, child care demands, and the need for flexibility.

Financial Challenges

Financial challenges are perhaps the most pervasive barrier faced by student parents, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. Many struggle to cover basic needs, such as food, housing, and child care. Research from the Real College Survey indicates that the majority of student parents experience significant financial stress, which is often exacerbated by the lack of sufficient financial aid (Baker-Smith et al., 2020).

Time Poverty

Another major challenge is time poverty—student parents often have limited time to devote to their studies due to parenting responsibilities, work commitments, and household management tasks. Lacking time to focus on academics can lead to higher dropout rates and slower academic progress (Cruse et al, 2020). According to a report from the Student Parent Recovery Project, time poverty is a critical issue that can be addressed by offering flexible course schedules and support services (White & Cruse, 2021).

Child Care

Access to affordable and reliable child care is another of the most cited barriers student parents face. Without adequate child care, student parents frequently have to decide between attending class or taking care of their children. Many institutions do not offer on-campus child care services, further limiting student parents' ability to participate in academic life (Dickson & Tennant, 2018). A report on single mothers in postsecondary education emphasizes the importance of expanding child care services to reduce attrition among student parents (Butler et al., 2004).

Flexibility

The need for flexibility in course offerings, scheduling, and academic policies is another pressing issue. Student parents often need additional time for assignments and exams due to unforeseen parenting emergencies or work obligations. Institutions that provide online courses, flexible deadlines, and evening classes are better positioned to support student parents (Goodman & Reddy, 2019; White & Cruse, 2021).

Successful Supports and Interventions

Student parent success in higher education requires multifaceted interventions that address their unique challenges.

Supporting student parents in higher education requires multifaceted interventions that address their unique challenges, such as time constraints and financial burdens. Various studies highlight the effectiveness of specific interventions, including case management, peer groups, community building, flexible course structures, stress reduction strategies, and faculty support (see, for example, Evans et al., 2017; Scrivener et al., 2015; Cruse et al., 2020; Goodman et al., 2023; Gault et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, these interventions and supports are often not readily accessible to parenting students because they are unaware of them or cannot access them due to having incompatible schedules (Goodman et al., 2023). In this section, we focus on four strategies that have been shown to improve parenting student outcomes.

Case Management

Case management has been widely recognized as a crucial support mechanism for student parents. Programs like Tarrant County College's "Stay the Course" have demonstrated that providing personalized, one-on-one support through navigators (social workers) can significantly improve academic outcomes. These navigators offer mentoring, coaching, referrals to essential services, and personal support, which in turn increases persistence and degree completion rates among student parents, especially women (Evans et al., 2017). Qualitative findings from the program showed that participants attributed their motivation and eventual success to the continuous and personalized support they received, which helped them navigate both academic and personal challenges. Similarly, the City University of New York (CUNY) College ASAP program integrates case management and academic advising, ensuring that student parents receive tailored guidance and regular check-ins, which have proven to reduce dropout rates and enhance academic achievement (Scrivener et al., 2015). Research by Cruse et al. (2020) also emphasizes the importance of these interventions, as they help students overcome financial, logistical, and academic barriers.

Peer Groups and Building Community

Peer support networks are equally important in student parents' success. A recent study by Goodman and colleagues found that 41% of parenting students "never" interact with their parenting peers, and study participants expressed that, even with their complicated schedules, they desire connection with other parenting students (2023). Creating a community where students can share their experiences and challenges has been shown to reduce isolation and improve mental health. Virtual peer support groups, especially those implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, provided emotional and social support to student parents, allowing them to connect with others who understood their unique struggles (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). These groups foster a

sense of belonging and accountability, which positively impacts academic persistence (Gault et al., 2020). Programs like CUNY ASAP also encourage community building through peer cohorts, where students form support networks and study groups that help them stay on track with their studies (Scrivener et al, 2015). Student parents in these programs report having a higher sense of connection to their peers, reducing feelings of isolation (Gault et al., 2020).

Flexible Course Structures

One of the needs student parents most consistently cited is flexibility in course structure. Findings from the Real College Survey emphasize that online classes and flexible scheduling are essential for students juggling work, child care, and academics (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). Policies that offer evening and weekend classes, as well as asynchronous online learning options, allow parenting students to manage their time more effectively (Cruse et al., 2018). These flexible options reduce stress and enhance student parents' ability to complete their degrees without having to compromise on their familial responsibilities.

Faculty Support and Policies

Faculty support plays a significant role in the success of student parents. Instructors who are responsive to the unique needs of student parents, such as by offering deadline flexibility or excusing absences due to child care emergencies, contribute to significantly reducing student stress (Lindsay, 2018). Policies that institutionalize flexible deadlines, child care provisions, and emergency financial assistance further support student parents to continue their studies (James, 2018).

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

Our evaluation relied on participant interviews, staff interviews, workshop observations, and program data analysis to answer two research questions:

1. How does the academic coaching program support young mothers who are enrolled in a postsecondary education program?
2. What role does each of the program's components play in helping young mothers who are enrolled in a postsecondary education program persist in the program?

Evaluation activities are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Evaluation Activities

Activity	Number	Dates	Mode
Participant interviews	Time 1: 21 Time 2: 10	Time 1: August to December 2022 Time 2: January to June 2024	Zoom or phone
Staff interviews	Time 1: 2 Time 2: 2	Time 1: April to May 2022 Time 2: September 2023	Zoom or phone
College faculty interviews	1	October 2022	Zoom
Workshop observations	6	April 2022 to June 2024	In person
Program data analysis	N/A	October to November 2024	N/A

Interviews

We conducted interviews with program staff and participants. We interviewed young mothers who were currently engaged in the program as well as individuals who had exited the program for various reasons. To recruit participants, New Moms staff emailed program participants a Chapin Hall REDCap² form they could complete if they wanted to be part of the evaluation. We then followed up with those who expressed interest.

We conducted all interviews over Zoom or phone and recorded them. We sent the de-identified recordings out for verbatim transcription. After the transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy, we used Atlas.ti, a qualitative software package, to analyze the data. We used open and descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2015), meeting regularly to discuss and compare the coding, create additional codes, and resolve discrepancies. Once the interviews were coded, we conducted a thematic analysis, which is “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79).

² REDCap (Research Electronic Data Capture) is a secure, web-based software platform designed to support data capture for research studies.

Workshop Observations

Members of the research team observed six in-person workshops during the evaluation period. Topics included finances, goal setting, parenting, self-care, health, and careers. During the observation, we took detailed notes about the activities; we used these notes to write a summary for each observation. We then identified themes across our observations.

Program Data Analysis

We imported an Excel file containing New Moms program data into SPSS, a statistical software package, and analyzed the data using descriptive statistics.

Limitations

We designed our evaluation to center the voices of program participants to understand their thoughts on the benefits of participating in the program. Although this design is a critically important strategy for elevating participant voice, it did not incorporate independent measures of program activities or outcomes. For example, we did not directly measure program inputs (such as number of in-person or virtual coaching sessions attended, number of workshops attended) and we did not measure participant outcomes (such as semesters completed, grades earned, degree attainment, stress levels, executive functioning skills). In addition, we were unable to reach 11 study participants despite repeated attempts to reach them via phone, text, and email.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

Program Participation

As of October 31, 2024, 45 young mothers had participated in the College Success Program. We report the results of program data analysis below.

Program Status

As of October 31, 2024, 10 participants were active, 22 had chosen to exit the program, and 13 had been dismissed. Participants were dismissed due to noncompliance (54%) or because staff were unable to reach the participant (46%). The three main reasons participants exited the program were successful program completion (32%), school or work conflict (23%), and relocation (14%). One-third of the participants who exited the program did so for a variety of other reasons. The 35 participants who have exited the program were in the program between approximately 6 weeks to 27 months. Their average length of stay in the program was 10.5 months.

Participant Information

The average age at program enrollment was 20.6 years, with participants ranging in age from 18 to 24 years old. Participants had between one and four children at enrollment, with the vast majority having only one child. The program recorded whether a participant was in their family's first generation to attend college for 33 participants; of those, 70% were the first to go to college. Participants sought degrees in a variety of disciplines, including nursing or other health-related areas, child development/early childhood, general studies, cosmetology, and other fields.

Program Implementation

In this section, we describe evaluation findings related to implementing the College Success Program in the areas of staffing, recruitment, engagement, and communication with educational institutions.

Program Staffing

Our first evaluation report highlighted perceived challenges with the coaching component because of the turnover in coaching staff (Gitlow & Garcia, 2023), including participant hesitancy to open up and a lack of trust in new staff. Those challenges ended once the current coach was hired in 2023; she has remained with the program and stabilized relationships with program participants. We share additional findings related to the coaching component later in this report.


Recruitment

Participants were recruited through other New Moms programs, referrals from City Colleges of Chicago or other postsecondary institutions, word of mouth, and social media. Interview respondents explained that the program looks for young mothers between 18 and 24 who have clarity around their educational goals and who are ready to work closely with the program to work toward those goals. The program has been less successful with young mothers who were facing, or at imminent risk of, crisis situations with housing or family relationships. Consequently, homeless young mothers involved with other New Moms programs were not recruited. Interview

respondents explained that mothers in crisis situations need time to stabilize and, until stabilized, are rarely able to focus on educational goals.

Participant Engagement and Responsibility

Interview respondents explained that participants are required to fulfill program requirements to remain in the program; a critical strategy for success in the program and in school is engaging with the coach. Almost all respondents explained that the program's engagement requirements are firm, but how those requirements are met is flexible, especially when participants communicate about challenges in a transparent and timely way. For example, the coach will make every effort to meet students in a convenient location for the in-person monthly session to minimize transportation or time obstacles. Lack of engagement is one of the reasons why participants drop out or are asked to leave the program. As one respondent explained,

 **It's crucial to have a participant, and for this to be effective, to have them engaged in the program, and that comes by way of meeting with [the coach] twice a month and maintaining a 2.0 [GPA] and participating in our coach session every other Friday. If [the program] is constantly reaching out or they're not constantly engaged in meeting appointments, not communicating with [the coach], and [the coach] is constantly reaching out, then that shows that they're not engaged in the program, and this cannot be a benefit for them right now. This may not be a perfect time for them right now.**

When a participant leaves the program, New Moms staff offer continued support, as needed. This support could look like, for example, connecting the individual with additional resources or emotional support.

Communication with Educational Institutions

During the first round of interviews, staff and participants explained that there was little to no communication between the program coach and participants' academic advisors. In fact, many participants explained they would be uncomfortable with the coach interacting with academic staff. By contrast, the second round of interviews revealed that the College Success coach often partners with program participants to support their communicating with staff at educational institutions. The coach may attend advisory meetings in person or on the phone to help the participants with "asking the right questions and getting the right information so that they can continue pursuing that degree." Participants are often hesitant or anxious about meeting with their school-based advisor, and the coach walks them through how and why it can be helpful in gathering accurate facts and preventing or eradicating roadblocks.

Beneficial Strategies

Interview respondents reported that their participation in the College Success Program was beneficial to their persistence in postsecondary education and to their lives more generally. They explained the three main strategies that were beneficial to them: the coaching relationship, financial supports, and peer workshops.


Individual Coaching

Program participants meet with a coach twice a month (once in person) to focus on goal setting, problem solving, developing stronger executive functioning skills, and overall support. The coach typically spends some time first checking in with the participant about how things are going in general, asking "what's on your mind,"


and giving the participant space and time to vent and express how their lives are going overall. Then the conversation turns to the challenges and successes with school, as well as executive functioning skills. The coach helps participants better understand how their strengths can be used to solve problems and reach their goals.

Interview respondents often described the individual coaching they receive through the College Success Program coach as incredibly positive, supportive, and helpful to their school, personal, parenting, and program-related goals. Recurring one-on-one meetings with their coach provided participants the space to set goals and be held accountable to those goals. When asked about what was helpful about the coaching, one participant said, “. . . they give us, like, motivation to meet those goals.”


Respondents explained that the coach directly helped them confront roadblocks to their goals. She provided participants with resources (for example,, websites, additional programs), discussed and researched potential educational or career options, and consistently brought problem-solving and solution-oriented responses to participant needs. The coach has understanding and empathy for the participants’ difficult situations while also motivating them to persevere. For example, a participant described an interaction at which she told her coach,

 . . . **“Miss [coach’s name], I don't think I can do this. I don't know if I can, I don't know if I want to.” She's like. . . “you got this, just continue if you can't do it, just let me know but I highly encourage you to do it,” or like every time something goes wrong, “I'll be like, “Miss [coach’s name], I'm just going to drop out.” She was like, “Okay, no, you're not. No, no, we're going to find a solution to the problem, before you leave out this room, or before you leave me, we're going to figure out a solution. . . ”**

Several participants expressed a deep gratitude and admiration for the hands-on advocacy the coach provided. They appreciated that the coach showed up to participants’ institutions or contacted their institution’s representatives when they felt they were being neglected and ignored by their schools. Many participants felt they benefitted from the coach’s hands-on approach, active listening, understanding, and accountability and saw her as a “mother figure” who “doesn’t sugarcoat things.”


 . . . **[Coach’s name] is like my academic coach mom, she's like my academic mother. So our, our bond, our relationship, it was, it was great, because you know, I, I really never had anybody to support me like that. . .**

Participants attributed gains in patience, resilience, and confidence to the active listening and support of their coach. Their coach also taught them how to apply what they had learned in different areas of their life.

 . . . **I just finished. . .my CNA program and it took me almost two semesters to get into solely because one of the. . . directors of the program, she does not answer email at all. So. . . I was getting frustrated really bad to the point where I didn't want to do it no more. So, [Coach’s name] basically was just telling me, you know, it's okay, just be patient. . .**

Participants cited the coach’s flexibility regarding timing and location when scheduling coaching sessions, and the open and clear communication between them, as significant benefits of the coaching relationship. Interview respondents described the coach’s flexibility as a catalyst for their ability to meet program requirements and receive program benefits. A few respondents described the coach’s willingness to meet them at their institutions or other locations convenient to participants. Participants often expressed appreciation for how available their coach was via text, phone, or email for any given emergency or crisis, explaining that they felt very comfortable reaching out to their coach as a result of these communication practices. One participant said, “I feel like her schedules are always open. She’s available for the most part when you want to meet, and she is very lenient with rescheduling stuff. . . .”

Respondents reported that meeting twice a month is an appropriate program requirement—it is not too burdensome for participants and it often prevents students from falling behind in school. As one respondent said,

 **So it's just a way of being able to stay on track and making sure we're meeting those deadlines. And even if there aren't deadlines but looking at being in class in general. and they're having complications in class 2 weeks. . . and you're still behind, and you haven't put anything in place as far as tutorials or some extra help. And now you're playing catch up and playing catch up can cause stress. . . and now you've added stress on because we've gotten behind the 8-ball. So it's a good way to stay in touch and make sure we're on track with everything.**

Through the investment of time and open communication on behalf of both the coach and participant, participants also learn how to ask for help, build trust, and express vulnerability. One participant said, “I knew [the coach] like wouldn't put me in any bad position or anything and I just opened up and I trusted her with my, with my information. . . .”

In building a relationship founded in honesty, empathy, and action, participants experienced direct academic and personal benefits from the individual coaching provided by the College Success program.

Financial Support

Given the many expenses that single mothering students face, it is not surprising that the majority of participants regard both the monthly stipend and transportation support provided by the program as important factors for remaining in the program. This subsequently allows them to reap the benefits of other program strategies (such as coaching or workshops). While the financial support is not the main motivator for joining and remaining in the program, the program’s accessibility and ability to provide “extra” funds to draw from for a myriad of necessities consistently remained at the top of participants’ lists of program benefits. For example, one participant stated the stipend is “extra money to help with whatever comes up.”

The money participants received from the program was used primarily for their children’s needs (for example, clothes, school supplies, formula, etc.), savings for future endeavors (such as home/car purchases) or emergencies (for example, hospital visits, automobile breakdowns, unexpected expenses), and household needs (such as rent, cleaning supplies, food, etc.).

So, with those \$500, it kind of helps me with a lot for food, trying to pay off anything for school. She gets her trips or they do a lot of activities and if I don't have a few bucks here and there, I kind of use that to help me. . . . I feel like those \$500 kind of help out a lot with just her. If I need something for her like an emergency. But for the most part, I try to use that as savings as well. I think just—yeah, and anything like books, school wise I kind of use it for. . .

The “extra income” provided by the stipend and transportation funds also allow young mothers to invest in their personal needs and wants. Because of the time, energy, and money that mothers spend investing in their children’s lives, they tend to neglect these needs and wants. Another participant said,

. . . it also just helps me have a little extra pocket change and if I need to get my kids anything [or] when I want to get anything because a lot of the times I neglect my own wants and needs. So I feel like it just allows me to have the little extra room to get certain things that I might want or need.


Finally, due to rising gas prices, participants who received the gas card frequently used up these funds before the end of the month. For these participants, the stipend helped pay additional gas expenses. Some participants relied on rideshare services for transportation due to not having their own vehicle, the price of gas, or convenience. For instance, one participant explained, “I used to take Ubers, that was money to help me get around.”

Additionally, while the financial assistance provided by the program did not affect participants’ decision to persist in school, it did motivate participants to consistently meet the program’s requirements. Interview respondents explained that it is rare for a participant not to receive the stipend or transportation support due to noncompliance with program requirements—some months everyone receives them. Most months, no more than one person misses out on them.


Monthly Workshops

As part of the College Success program requirements, participants are expected to attend one monthly workshop. The workshops are offered twice a month for flexibility and to increase attendance. These workshops focus on a specific topic related to the program’s core principles to address young mothers’ needs. Participants perceived the workshops as having two main benefits: being able to spend time with peers in similar life circumstances and learning about specific topics with than can be applied to real life.

When asked what they liked most about the workshops, all of the young mothers referred to the sense of community and peer support that the workshop space provided. This space allowed young mothers to convene and connect. They highly valued the opportunity to learn from other young mothers and share what they have learned about parenting styles or birthing and child rearing experiences. They also checked in with each other, touching base on their general well-being, and following-up about personal issues they were going through. We observed these interactions before, during, and after workshops. The workshops also helped combat the isolating experience of being a “nontraditional” student, with children to care for and the responsibilities of childrearing. One participant elaborated:


 I think it's just a great way just to get a lot of us young moms together. Sometimes we'll have discussions like what's going on within our life, just express what's been going on or what struggles are we going through. Maybe something that we could help each other out [with] or maybe we're in the same boat. That's kind of nice. You get along with other young moms. They're facing the same struggles.

Participants valued the social support and sense of belonging they gained from being in community with other parenting students with whom they could empathize.

 You get great help, not only from the coach, but you also get help from other single parents that are doing this all year on their own. You get that confidence of where it's like, if she can do it, then I can do it. It just gives you that sense of relief, like okay, I'm not the only one.

Having the workshops as a communal space allowed participants to learn from each other's plans, parenting styles, experiences, and perspectives. This deeply valued peer support was fortified by the text-based group chats created by the coach to facilitate communication and interaction among the young mothers outside of formal programming. Additionally, though some participants expressed frustration with the lack of virtual options for workshops, more participants appreciated the in-person format and attributed the format with giving them the ability to foster meaningful connections and engagement. We observed participants actively listening and responding to guest speakers, asking questions, and staying engaged in conversation or activities not only during breaks but also after the session had formally ended.

Most participants felt they benefitted more from workshops that had real-life applicability. Several cited the workshops that focused on credit building and savings accounts as the workshops they enjoyed the most. One participant said, "

 I didn't know my credit score at first and they helped me raise my credit score, savings, and budgeting. I'm still working on it, but you know, I have a start of how much to save and where—what bank accounts I can use to at least put it in my savings. They just give. . . real life solutions to real life problems.

All participants also expressed that they had variable schedules, so they benefited from the option to choose between the two Friday workshops. This was also helpful due to the possibility of unexpected issues causing them to miss the first Friday of the month.


Program and Participant Challenges

Although participants benefitted from the College Success Program, participants shared three main challenges to pursuing postsecondary education while participating in the College Success Program. First, participants experience time poverty as a result of having numerous responsibilities—employment, school, parenting—that leave little time to dedicate to studies. Second, when participants experience personal or familial losses, or challenges with interpersonal or familial relationships, they describe these events as compounding their existing


responsibilities and barriers. These events make it difficult to persist in school. Third, participant respondents encountered many educational barriers, such as particularly difficult courses they struggled to pass, inaccessible faculty or staff who would not respond to multiple attempts to contact them, or being confused about their respective degree requirements. In addition to these personal challenges, interview respondents described four programmatic challenges: program requirements, workshop content, the College Success Program app, and the limits of the financial support.

Meeting Program Requirements


Several participants discussed the logistical difficulties of getting to and from the New Moms site for workshops and meetings due to competing work, school, and parenting responsibilities. For example, one participant shared,

 I actually attend once monthly just because of work reasons and school-wise as well. I had to kind of. . . use my PTO. . . So, I could attend [the workshops]. At first it was hard because school and then work, I prefer taking classes in the morning. So, by then in the afternoon I'm at home. I'm able to be there with my kid. I didn't really like taking the night classes and then work wise, a lot of these jobs they're—it's hard to find part time. . .


In addition to finding it difficult to attend in-person coaching sessions and workshops, some participants questioned whether the value of attending was outweighed by the cost of attendance—that is, the time, effort, and resources required to attend. Although participants appreciated and described the range of topics that workshops provided, only a few interview participants said they found value in time spent decompressing during workshops and learning about self-care and therapy techniques. One young mother highlighted a workshop on meditation that others did not think was valuable, saying:

 . . . the last meeting that I attended to, we did something. It [had] something to do with meditation. . . Like, we had, went outside, got some fresh air, enjoyed the weather and we had did like a meditation exercise for our mind and our brain and ever since. . . we've done that, I've been doing it at home.


A few participants argued that online coaching sessions and workshops would be more convenient given their busy schedules. One said,

 I feel like if you can't make it in person to the group then you could join Zoom and to be in with the group as well, it's not like you didn't want to be there, but I feel like it should have the other ways that they could go around it.

Program participants are required to be enrolled in at least one course in order to receive the monthly stipend and transportation support. A couple of participants found this requirement too rigid and poorly communicated, especially when their schools did not offer summer courses or were unavailable to students.

 I think one [challenge] is just the fact that you kind of have. . . to be enrolled in a class, like a semester, even during the summer to actually receive the stipend. So, unfortunately, this semester during the summer I'm not taking a course. I decided to dedicate myself to actually studying [for exams]. . . . [And the coach said], unfortunately you won't get the stipend just because you're not meeting one of the requirements, which is having attending the class or a class for the summer.


The College Success Program requires that young mothers enroll only in approved certificate programs in order to participate in the program. Some interview respondents mentioned that this requirement is sometimes poorly communicated and left unclear, leading to confusion about eligibility. One participant highlighted this issue, saying,

 They called me and told me like I just can't be in the program, because um, the reason that first they were saying was because, it was because my program wasn't, no one agreed for me to do the [redacted certificate program], but then I'm like that's not true. . . they did agree for me to do it, like I would never switch, I would never start going to [another certificate program] just to stop my income completely just for anything if they didn't agree to that. . .


Finally, a few of the young students who were mothers found the inability to participate in other New Moms programs or conflicting expectations of different New Moms programs to be a source of frustration.

Workshop Content

One challenge for New Moms staff was offering workshops that would be of interest to most or all participants. A few interview respondents expressed appreciation for the workshops focused on self-care, meditation, and similar topics; some participants thought that those were a “waste of time” given the other priorities and responsibilities they were facing. New Moms staff try to balance these differing preferences for content by covering a wide range of topics, while also realizing that one of the primary goals of the workshops is to build community. As one respondent said,

 I don't want it to be like, “Oh, gotta go to workshop.” I want them to walk away with, “Yes, that was so much fun. I ate well, we had a good time. We had good talk. We talked about everything.” That's what I want for them. I want them to be able to have that community and have a takeaway.

Some participants cited another challenge related to the content of the workshops: lack of continuity. In some cases, workshops left participants with more questions than answers. One participant gave the example of a workshop focused on building credit. The workshop was very helpful, but the speaker did not return to finish the workshop as promised. One participant stated,


 . . . one lady came in to talk to us about credit and it was like, I really felt like that she was gonna help us in the future. She really did help us that day. And then she told us that, oh, we're gonna set up another day where I'm gonna come in in like a couple more weeks and we could finish this. Like, she just started us off with something and never came back.

College Success Program App

Participants reported challenges with using the New Moms app. These included being constantly logged out of the app, difficult navigation, and a lack of interactive features and notifications. Most interview respondents stated that they often forgot about the app until their coach prompted them to use and update it. One participant found the app redundant because she had her own method of goal tracking. In general, few respondents found it to be a helpful tool.

Limitations of Financial Assistance

While participants appreciated, valued, and benefited from the stipend and transportation assistance provided by the College Success Program, some noted its limitations. The financial assistance they received tended to run out before the end of the month. Attempting to avoid sounding ungrateful, one participant explained,

 Well, \$500 goes quick in general given the economics standing right now and inflation and stuff. So, it really doesn't go that far within a month. . . . It just varies depending on family size. So. . . I don't know if I can really say anything bad other than it's not enough, but at the same time it's something and it's more than I would have had if I didn't have anything. So, I don't know.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Personalized coaching, financial support, and peer support are key drivers of New Moms College Success Program participant success, highlighting the need for tailored, flexible interventions.

Our evaluation sought to answer two questions: 1) How does that College Success Program support young mothers who are enrolled in a postsecondary education program? 2) What role does each of the program's components play in helping young mothers who are enrolled in a postsecondary education program persist? Based on the observations and interviews with participants and staff, the program supports young mothers through biweekly positive, motivational, flexible coaching; reducing economic barriers through financial support; facilitating peer support via monthly workshops; and increasing concrete knowledge through workshop presentations. Positive outcomes for student parents in higher education are notable when adequate support structures are in place. In the case of the New Moms' College Success program, coaching, workshops, and financial support were highly valued by participants and were viewed as supportive of their persistence in postsecondary education. These benefits reflect other research on programming and aid for this population of students. For example, comprehensive case management and

financial aid programs have been found to increase degree completion among student parents (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). Programs like the CUNY College ASAP Initiative significantly improved academic persistence and graduation rates by addressing financial and support needs (Scrivener et al., 2015). Since financial instability is one of the most pervasive contributors to lower graduation rates for student parents (Evans et al., 2017; Baker-Smith et al., 2020), the College Success Program's financial assistance is a direct intervention with this particular barrier for young student mothers.

Although the College Success Program uses a coach rather than a case manager, the role she plays in the lives of participants has many similarities (for example, problem solving, identifying additional resources, advocacy). Case management has been widely recognized as a crucial support mechanism for student parents, reflected in participant interviews that discussed the benefits and appreciation of their coaching experiences. Similarly, programs like Tarrant County College's "Stay the Course" have demonstrated that providing personalized, one-on-one support through navigators (social workers) can significantly improve academic outcomes. These navigators offer mentoring, coaching, referrals to essential services, and personal support, which in turn increases persistence and degree completion rates among student parents, especially women (Evans et al., 2017). Qualitative findings from the STC program show that participants attributed their motivation and eventual success to the continuous and personalized support they received, which helped them navigate both academic and personal challenges, similar to the young mothering students in the College Success program. Likewise, the CUNY College ASAP program integrates case management and academic advising, ensuring that student parents receive tailored guidance and regular check-ins, which has proven to reduce dropout rates and enhance academic achievement (Scrivener et al., 2015). Research by Cruse et al. (2020) echoes the importance of these interventions, as they help students overcome financial, logistical, and academic barriers.

Peer support is equally important to the success of student parents, according to both the participants in our interviews as well as in existing research. Creating a community where students can share their experiences and challenges has been shown to reduce isolation and improve mental health. Virtual peer support groups, especially those implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, provided emotional and social support to student parents, allowing them to connect with others who understood their unique struggles (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). These groups foster a sense of belonging and accountability, which positively impacts academic persistence (Gault et al., 2020). Programs like CUNY ASAP also encourage community building through peer cohorts, where students form support networks and study groups that help them stay on track with their studies (Scrivener et al., 2015). Student parents in these programs report a higher sense of connection to their peers, reducing feelings of isolation (Gault et al., 2020). A common theme from the interviews and observations of workshops was the peer support provided by the opportunity to build community in and outside of workshops.

Recommendations

Drawing on our interviews with participants and our observations, we would like to offer the following recommendations.



- The program should consider the individual coaching element as the most critical program strategy and continue to ensure the role is filled by a highly skilled individual. The program would simply not produce positive outcomes in the absence of a strong, empathetic, communicative, flexible, and thoughtful coach who builds authentic and beneficial relationships with participants. It should be New Moms highest programming priority.
- The current program components (that is, coaching, workshops, financial support) all contribute to participants' perception of positive outcomes and should be continued.

- It is difficult to predict which workshop topics will resonate with individual participants, but it was clear that not all topics were beneficial to all participants. In our interviews, the majority of respondents requested workshop topics that focus on applicable life skills and knowledge such as finances, savings, credit, homeowning, academic standards, degree requirements, schooling, and career options, with sequential follow-up workshops for more in-depth learning. We recommend focusing on those topics and exploring mechanisms to solicit ideas and feedback from participants about the content—both ideas for future workshops and feedback on completed workshops.
- We recommend continuing to monitor the personal costs and benefits to workshop participation to ensure that participants gain peer support, topical knowledge, and practical skills to justify the in-person requirement. It is clear that going to the workshops on Friday mornings poses a barrier for many participants due to work, school, and parenting responsibilities; on the other hand, our interviews highlighted that participants benefit from the peer support gained via the workshops. New Moms might consider offering other days or times or some type of hybrid (virtual and in-person) option when Friday morning participation is a substantial or even insurmountable barrier.
- New Moms should look for ways to communicate eligibility requirements clearly to program participants, including which types of degree or certificate programs are eligible, what factors will affect stipend receipt, and any case-by-case eligibility requirements.
- The financial support provided through the College Success Program was clearly appreciated by program participants and should be continued. New Moms should continue to seek feedback from program participants and other experts to determine the amount of financial support needed to remove barriers to program engagement, maintain employment, and persist with their educational goals. The stipend and transportation support were not the driving force behind participants' decision to persist in college. However, the support did relieve pressure on mothers as they provided for their families while trying to reach their educational and career goals.

Our final recommendation is to consider exploring additional evaluation activities that continue to highlight the voice and perspective of College Success Program participants, as we've done in this pilot evaluation. In addition, future evaluations should examine program outcomes (for example, degree attainment, length of time to degree attainment, future earnings, self-confidence, career satisfaction, etc.) and the strategies that contribute to those outcomes (such as, coaching, specific skill development, peer support, financial assistance, faculty support, college-sponsored programming, child care, etc.). Any future research should consider incorporating former program participants into the research team at its inception to guarantee the study design reflects participants' priorities and interests and remains grounded in their experiences.

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