

The Invisible Half

How State Data Systems Overlook 875,000 Student Fathers

Last year, College Promise spoke with student fathers across the United States. Brian*, a senior at a large public university, described his journey bluntly: *"It's been a lonely experience, and that's part of the game. That's something that we should be honest about."*

Despite a campus of 35,000 undergraduate students, Brian knows just one other student father. His isolation reflects a deeper institutional blind spot. At a campus event, the university president greeted Brian and his wife, then turned to his wife – who was not enrolled – and asked what she was studying. People don't expect to see a dad here in school," Brian noted.

Brian's isolation is a national pattern. While parenting students make up one in five undergraduates nationwide – including more than 875,000 fathers – they remain largely invisible, leading [Inside Higher Ed](#) to describe them as the "invisible of the invisible" on campus. Supporting these students begins by making them visible. Yet, most state higher education data systems still fail to track them.

Improving outcomes for students like Brian begins with making them visible. That requires a fundamental change in how higher education identifies and understands student fathers. Despite representing more than three-quarters of a million undergraduates, most state higher education data systems cannot answer even the most basic questions: How many student fathers are enrolled? Where are they studying? How are they progressing? What barriers do they face? And what are the long-term educational and economic costs of failing to support them?

We don't know because those data largely do not exist.

Student fathers are present in our classrooms, yet they remain largely invisible in state higher education data systems. In some state systems, where parenting data do exist, they may not be reported by gender so fathers disappear a second time. Once we begin collecting and disaggregating these data, we can track their educational journeys, identify patterns hiding in plain sight, and, most importantly, use what we learn to design interventions and deliver improved outcomes.

This focuses on student fathers, not because other parenting populations do not matter, but because the data on student fathers in higher education remain particularly limited, the supports particularly scarce, and the audience for this group is well positioned to act. While there has been progress in recent years in accommodations for expecting and recent mothers, these supports are different than meeting the immediate needs of student fathers.

* Brian is a pseudonym for a College Promise parenting student interviewee.

Discover, Design, Deliver

At [College Promise](#), our work is guided by three principles: *discover* challenges facing students, *design* effective solutions, and *deliver* improved outcomes.

Discovery: Understanding the Challenges of Student Fathers. According to the [National Postsecondary Student Aid Study](#), more than 875,000 men — about a quarter of all parenting undergraduates — are raising children while pursuing a degree. Compared to their

nonparenting peers, student fathers are more likely to be adult learners, first-generation students, and veterans. Student fathers are also more likely to have a higher GPA, work while enrolled, and hold jobs related to their academic program.

While many colleges and universities have established services and outreach efforts for student mothers — who are more likely to disclose their parenting status when seeking childcare, pregnancy-related accommodations, or family support services — student fathers often remain invisible on campus. But the deeper problem extends to both parenting mothers and fathers: in the majority of states, neither student fathers nor student mothers are systematically identified, leaving parenting students largely invisible in the data.

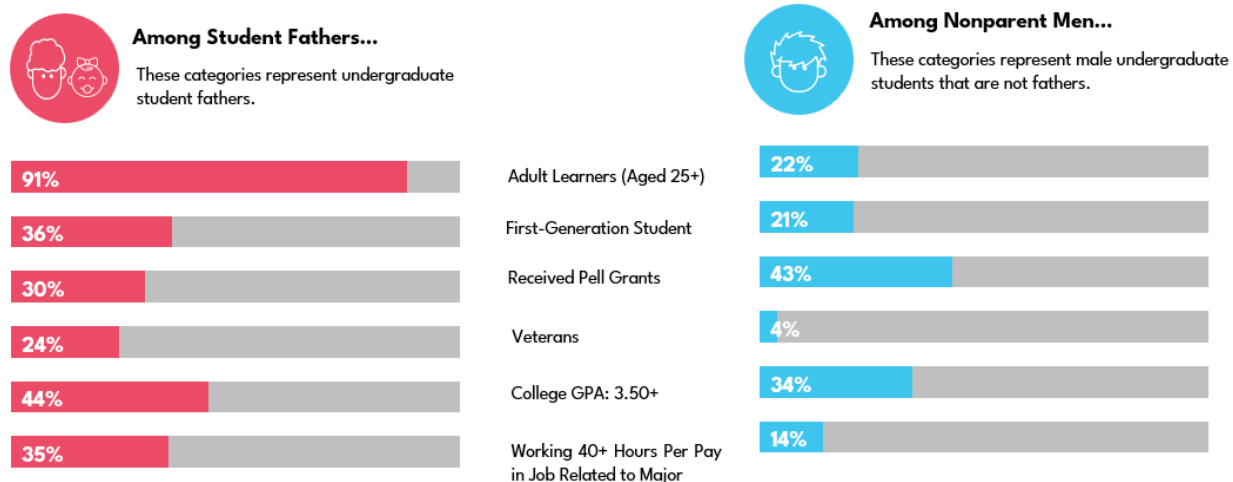


Figure 1 - What Sets Student Fathers Apart from Nonparent Men, United States, 2020

Source: [National Postsecondary Student Aid Study](#), United States Department of Education, 2026.

Design Statewide Solutions for Student Fathers. While a national portrait can illuminate a population, it cannot guide a state's actions. National data cannot tell California how many student fathers are enrolled in community colleges this semester, whether they persist at the same rate as their peers, or where and why they leave college. It cannot tell Illinois which campuses enroll the highest concentrations of student fathers or where support services are most needed.

National data provides scale. State data provides context.

State data enables leaders to advance broader goals related to access, completion, workforce preparation, and economic mobility. Yet in most states, those data simply do not exist.

That is beginning to change — but slowly. Last year, when [College Promise mapped the landscape of student fathers and parenting student data systems](#), only six states required the collection of parenting student data. This year, Virginia and Maryland have since joined that group, and New Jersey, New Mexico, and Washington proposed exploring or adding a parenting student variable to their state data systems. In Illinois, a state that has passed parenting student data collection, Promise programs like [Hope Chicago](#) are aiding parenting students across generations with their focus on helping grandparents, parents, and their children succeed, in order to promote intergenerational educational and economic opportunity.

That momentum is not accidental. It reflects a growing recognition that the man running the math in his head — the one our systems were never designed to see — is not an isolated case. He is across the higher education landscape. Unfortunately, most states currently have no way to prove it.

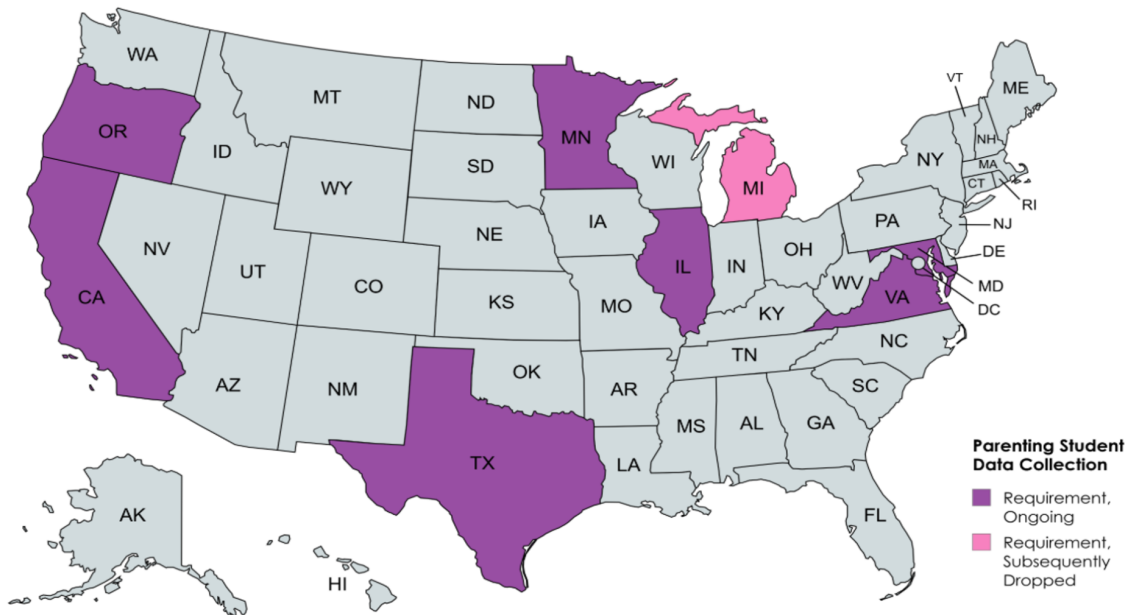


Figure 2 - States with Statutory Parenting Student Data Collection Requirements, 2026

What early-adopter states are discovering is that once you build the infrastructure to identify and count student fathers, you can design policies and supports that help them access higher education, persist through completion, and connect to career-accelerating opportunities.

California offers one potential model for the nation through its Cradle-to-Career system. By collecting data on gender and parenting status and integrating education, social service, and workforce data, the Golden State can examine student characteristics, service utilization, experiences, and outcomes in ways that would not be possible without including student parent data.

As a result of improved data collection, enrollment patterns emerge. Persistence gaps become visible. Moments in the academic calendar where student fathers disappear come into focus.

States that have not yet acted are not simply missing data points. They are missing an opportunity to understand and support a significant population of learners.

Design Elements: The Data Funnel and the Journey Map. What happens once those data exist?

The answer is not a report that is filed away and forgotten. The answer is a new way of seeing — one that operates at every level of the system and supports action at each level.

The Data Funnel. At the national level, data provides a broad portrait of who student fathers are, how they compare with their peers, and where the largest disparities exist.

As the funnel narrows — from national to state, from state to institution, from institution to department, and ultimately to the faculty member who notices a student has stopped attending class — the data shift from context to inquiry.

- Why are student fathers concentrated in evening programs?
- Why do they persist through the first year but disappear during the second?
- Why does completion decline during semesters that include final examinations and childcare disruptions?

Data make it possible to begin to better understand parenting students in higher education.

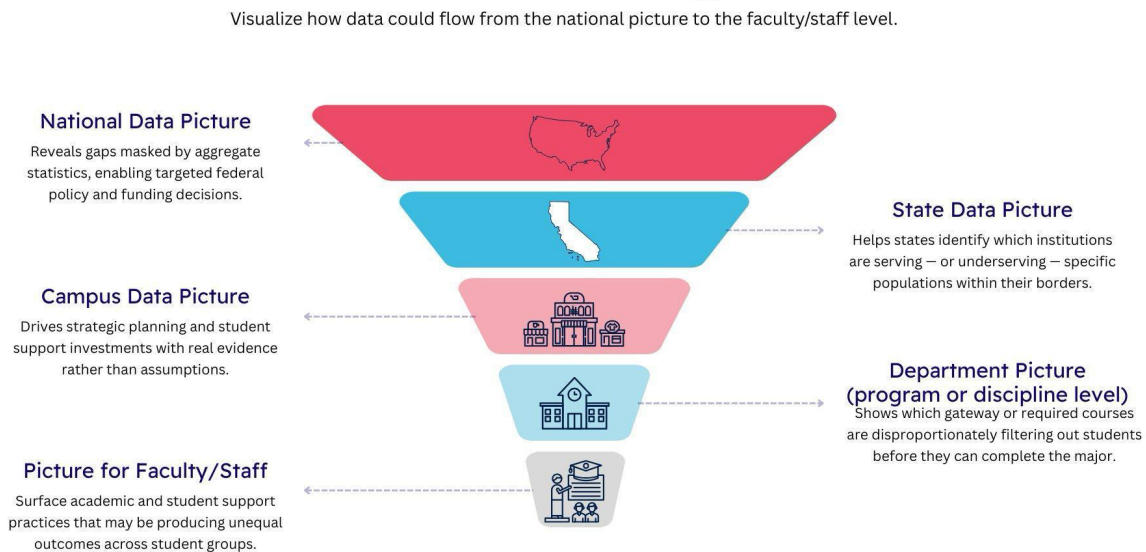


Figure 3 - Data Funnel Stages: How parenting student data flows from national to faculty/staff level, enabling targeted action at each level of the system.

The Journey Map. The journey map complements the data funnel by tracing a pathway rather than providing a snapshot.

From the moment a man considers returning to school — evaluating costs, logistics, and risk — through enrollment, persistence, completion, and (re)entry into the workforce, data can illuminate where student fathers gain momentum and where they lose it.

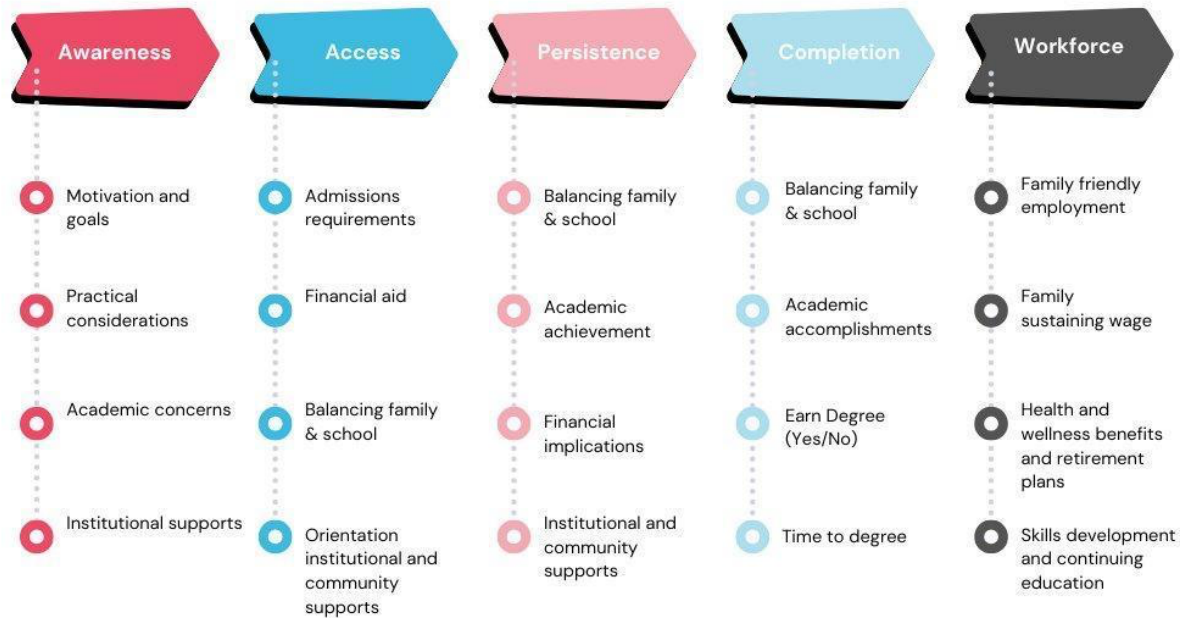


Figure 4. Student Father Journey Map: Key data elements across five stages from awareness through workforce outcomes.

Delivery: Providing Results for States and Student Fathers. State policymakers are where the contextual policy solutions begin. States that have already acted have done more than improve their own understanding. They have made it harder for everyone else to look away.

If a state has the authority to add this variable to your state's data system, there is little reason to delay.

In Texas, the Higher Education Coordinating Board has begun tracking parenting learners and aligning parent liaisons to help student fathers navigate college. In Minnesota, lawmakers established statewide data collection requirements, funded parenting coordinators, and provided grants to institutions to design supports for those with the greatest need. California has paired statewide data efforts with priority registration policies that help parenting students secure the courses they need when they need them — often making the difference between persistence and departure.

Campus leaders do not need to wait for a statewide mandate.

Student fathers are enrolled on your campus today.

Do you know how many there are? How are they performing? Where are you losing them?

Those answers may arrive shortly after you decide to begin collecting the data.

Employers may have the greatest opportunity of all. A worker pursuing a degree while raising children is not a liability. He is making an extraordinary investment in his future and in yours. Employers that support that journey — with flexible scheduling, tuition assistance, and a commitment to understanding what works — will not simply retain talent. They will gain insights into their workforce that competitors lack.

For advocates and philanthropists, governments often move slowly. You do not have to. A single demonstration project — one campus, real data, real dimensionality, documented honestly — can become the proof of concept that moves a skeptical state off the sidelines. Fund the model. Make it impossible to ignore.

For researchers, practitioners, and policy advocates — keep advocating for state changes that improve the calculation for student fathers, whether that be enhanced statutory data collection priority registration, attendance relief, or childcare and broader support to positively change the calculus for parenting men.

—Rosye Cloud serves as Interim CEO for College Promise. She is the CEO of BrightonOne, a nonprofit social enterprise serving veterans and military-connected families through healthcare, housing, and coordinated support. A proven advocate and public policy expert on national and domestic policy, government performance, adult education, disruptive innovation and economic opportunity, Cloud previously served as the White House Director of Policy for Veterans, Wounded, and Military Families and the Office of Management and Budget as the Executive Director of the Performance Improvement Council. She has graduate degrees and post graduate certificates from the National Defense University, Harvard Business School, MIT Sloan, Darden, and University of Oklahoma.

About College Promise

[College Promise](#) is a non-partisan non-profit organization dedicated to strengthening educational and career pathways that expand opportunity for all learners.

About HEMAC

This resource was written for the Higher Education Male Achievement Collaborative (HEMAC). HEMAC is the first nationwide network of colleges and universities working together to keep higher education a viable path to economic mobility for men. Learn more at menincollege.org.