A
S INSTITUTIONS around the globe contend with the debilitating consequences of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), institutions of higher education (IHE) in the United States have swiftly moved to virtual teaching and learning. For parenting students (students raising children while in college), particularly those who are single mothers, this sudden change might be the end of the road of their academic pursuits.

Over the past decade, increasing numbers of parenting students have enrolled in IHE, representing 22% of all undergraduates, as of the 2015-2016 school year.1,2 Of these, mothers account for more than half (70%) of the parenting student population.3 While a higher proportion of student mothers are single parents (62%), the majority of fathers are married (61%).2 Interestingly, however, despite their growing numbers, only a small percentage (28%) of students who are single mothers manage to earn a degree within 6 years of enrollment, and over 55% leave school and do not complete their degree.3 Importantly, these students are still underrepresented in IHE, with 68% of single mothers versus 36% of married mothers having only a high school degree in the United States.4

Although simultaneously being a student and parent comes with its peculiar challenges, single motherhood aggravates the challenges they encounter. For example, issues including but not limited to time demands, shouldering the burden of parenting single-handedly, balancing work and school demands, childcare access, and financial constraints exacerbate the difficulties they encounter in earning a degree, which significantly put them at higher risk of poverty and unemployment.3-6 Beyond these issues is the indirect intergenerational effect a postsecondary education has on the future career and educational aspirations of children. Studies have shown that higher educational attainment for single mothers is associated with increased parental involvement with their children, higher levels of children’s motivation and aspiration to earn a college degree, more books in the home, and increased time for nonacademic family activities.4 Indeed, securing the socioeconomic and financial security of children of students who are single mothers inadvertently means closing existing social and health inequalities among this population.1,5,6

IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON SINGLE MOTHERS IN IHE

If students who are single mothers in IHE faced more challenges than their partnered parenting student counterparts pre-COVID-19, what then becomes their fate as a result of the disruptions caused by the pandemic? Whereas to the best of our knowledge, no studies exist investigating this narrative, scholars assert that “single parents will face the greatest challenge [from the pandemic].”7 Although 19 million children in the United States live with a single parent, 70% of single parents are single mothers—thus suggesting that single mothers bear a disproportionate burden of the pandemic.

It is plausible to deduce therefore that vulnerable student populations such as student single mothers will experience a magnified negative effect of the pandemic on their degree attainment compared with their partnered counterparts. Issues highlighted earlier, compounded by those peculiar to the pandemic such as homeschooling burdens, potential job losses, increased parenting stress, possibly dealing with personal loss (eg, death of a family member and/or suffering from the virus), housing insecurity, sparse social support systems, decrease in the educational prospect of their children, and challenges that arise from remote learning (eg, poor internet and personal electronic device access), exacerbate the educational and societal inequalities they face. This is a serious public health concern with immediate and long-term health care and policy implications. The direct long-term effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational pursuits of students who are single parents and their children remains to be

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seen. These effects will likely transcend health care and become matters of social equity.

**WHAT BARRIERS IMPEDE THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF SINGLE MOTHERS IN IHE?**

Several barriers compound the challenges student single mothers face and can be categorized broadly as structural and or individual-level factors. First, the work-first policies implemented by key federal and state aid programs act as structural barriers to academic success. The Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), for instance, requires single mothers with children older than 6 years to work for 30 hours per week to qualify for federal assistance. Although innocuous, the work-first ideologies might inhibit the academic goals of student single mothers who juggle conflicting roles and set them back socioeconomically. In their Editorial, *The Lancet Public Health* avers, “education is the key to lifting people out of poverty and reducing socioeconomic and political inequalities” — indicating the need to prioritize the delivery of equitable educational opportunities for female student parents. Another barrier is the limited resources available to mitigate the financial constraints parenting students encounter. For example, only one federal childcare program—the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIs)—exists to target the needs of student parents. The CCAMPIs is a competitive grant housed under the US Department of Education that supports on-campus childcare services for low-income students. Due in part to resource constraints, the program only serves about 1% of its target population, and considering the growing number of parenting students in IHE, fewer needs can be met leaving these vulnerable student populations to chance. Other notable barriers reported by scholars include, but are not limited to, unaffordable and limited on-campus daycare centers, lack of family-friendly policies, poor social network and relationships, and feelings of isolation. Considering the disruptions of COVID-19 on childcare access, enrollment rates, and learning outcomes for parents and their children, it is important to consider how colleges and universities can leverage existing and other additional resources to support their students’ success.

**WHAT IS THE WAY FORWARD?**

IHE, policymakers, and other relevant stakeholders play a critical role in developing strategies to enhance their campus environment to support single female students with children during and beyond the pandemic. They must prioritize the heightened educational, familial, and psychosocial needs of single mothers in the context of teaching, learning, and caregiving. They must also identify appropriate coping strategies to improve the resilience of student single mothers and retain the quality and rigor of their remote education.

First, IHE should leverage existing funding opportunities to support this vulnerable student population. In addition to the CCAMPIs, the CARES Act, a bill enacted in response to the adverse economic impact of COVID-19, infused $3.5 million to existing federal programs to support childcare through the Child Care Development and Block Grant. Although eligibility requirements and constraints vary from state to state, these funds create opportunities for institutions to develop innovative programs and services for student parents. Such programs may include affordable or subsidized on-campus daycare centers, scholarships, housing subsidies, free internet particularly for those in rural areas, and learning equipment (e.g., computers and tablets) to reduce the financial burdens these students face.

Second, IHE should create internal pathways to mitigate the adverse effect of COVID-19 on single parent students’ learning. These include, but are not limited to, recording and providing downloadable course contents, implementing flexible course schedules and deadlines, facilitating online and off-line communication with faculty and staff, and proactively advocate the use of university services (e.g., counseling and disability services) for these students. To achieve this, IHE should build a campus climate that fosters a healthy teacher-student relationship such as on-campus parenting student programs and centers implemented in some IHE.

Developing robust family-friendly policies that center on mitigating the disproportionate economic effect the pandemic has on student single mothers is equally important. IHE should provide paid sick leave, and comprehensive health insurance plans to student single mothers who work on-campus; else these students might forgo necessary preventive and routine health care checks for themselves and children when health care access is limited. Furthermore, local organizations such as food banks, faith-based organizations, Women Infant and Children (WIC), and on-campus services (e.g., student services departments and student-led organizations) should work collaboratively to help single mothers navigate these turbulent times.

**CONCLUSION**

As the world adjusts to the “new normal,” and as IHE continue hybrid (face-to-face, remote, and online) learning in the spring of 2021, without an imminent end in sight, it is our collective responsibility...
to protect the academic, mental, and economic prosperity of vulnerable student populations and their children. Moreover, doing so has the potential of yielding multigenerational and societal benefits across the life course.

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