

ACTION RESEARCH BRIEF

Increasing Mid-State single parents' student success

September 2021

Introduction

Mid-State Technical College (Mid-State) established an Equity & Inclusion Taskforce in July 2020. The Research & Development (R&D) is a sub-committee that provides support to understand equity gaps using data-informed practices. To inform grant strategies, the R&D group focused on single parents.

Compared to the 16-WTCS college average, Mid-State ranked the **highest in headcount** for single parent students. Mid-State single parent students **experienced lower than WTCS average** in successful course completion, retention, and 6-year completion (see Table 1).

Table 1. FY2020-2021

Single-Parent Metric ¹		Mid-State Rank/Average	WTCS Average
Enr.	Unduplicated headcount	Ranked #1 at 13%	5%
	Percentage FTE	Ranked #3 at 15%	7%
Student Success	Completing courses with C grade or better	Ranked #13 at 68%	75%
	Fall to spring retention	Ranked #12 at 73%	76%
	Fall to fall retention	Ranked #11 at 59%	61%
	Graduating in 6 years	Ranked #13 at 25%	34%

Research Aim

This action research brief further explores research and data within the Mid-State district to better understand the impact of single parent status on students' student success. Research and data consisted of internal to Mid-State and External to Mid-State factors including Social, Technological, Environmental, Economic, and Political (STEEP) factors. The results will inform grant projects and retention committee actions related to single-parent student initiatives.

Method

Mid-State's Research & Development (R&D) sub-committee of the Equity & Inclusion Taskforce piloted environmental scanning to systematically gather information through a collective intelligence system. The evidence-based method was chosen to minimize bias and to strategically include Mid-State staff with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge to collect information from multiple viewpoints and angles. R&D members were trained to collect relevant, timely, and accurate information. Each scanner provided a summary and a copy of the research. Eight R&D members conducted 18 research scans (see Appendix A). Mid-State's research specialist coded and themed the findings. The findings were presented to the Retention committee for further analysis.

¹ WTCS (2021). WTCS portal.

Results and Discussion

Mid-State single parent students are predominately part-time enrolled, economically-disadvantaged, and female (Table 2). These characteristics are on par with the scanning research (see Appendix A) that indicated single parent students are mostly female and employed to meet financial expenditures; therefore, more likely to take on multiple roles and enroll at part-time status.

Single-Parent Group ²	Enr.	Representation	Metrics of Interest ³
Part-time enrollment	403	84% of single parents were part-time enrolled	59% retained to 2 nd year 65% successfully completed courses 22% graduated in 3 years
Economically-disadvantaged	404	83% of single parents are economically-disadvantaged	58% part-time enr. retained to 2 nd year 70% successfully completed courses 24% graduated in 3 years
Female	383	79% of single parents are female	89% economically-disadv. 58% part-time enr. retained to 2 nd year 71% successfully completed courses 24% graduated in 3 years
Full-time enrollment (*)	77	16% of single parents were full-time enrolled	77% retained to 2 nd year 85% successfully completed courses 47% graduated in 3 years
Educational attainment	171	36% of single parents had a H.S. diploma or equiv. or less	For information only
	188	39% of single parents had some college prior to enr.	
	113	28% had technical diploma or higher	
<p><i>Notes.</i> FY2020 Data: 2nd year retention and 3rd year graduation (FY2021 not final). FY2021 Data: Enrollment/representation and course completion (*) For comparison to part-time enrollment to inform strategy 3 (page 3).</p>			

Table 2. Summary

By representation, 84% (403) of single parents were part-time enrolled, 83% (404) were economically-disadvantaged, 89% (340) of *female* single parents were economically-disadvantaged, and 79% (383) of single parents were female. The data revealed that 36% (171) were new to college. Additionally, in comparison to Table 1, the following metrics were noteworthy.

- **Part-time enr., econ.-disadvantaged, and female single parents** lagged WTCS averages in course completion, retention, graduation (Tables 1, 2).
- **Part-time enr. fell below** the overall Mid-State single-parent average in course completion by 3% and 3rd year graduation by 3%.
- **Single parents that were female surpassed** Mid-State single-parent averages in course completion by 3%; however, still lags WTCS by 4%.

² WTCS (2021). Tableau [Mid-State single parent dataset-FY20-21]

³ WTCS (2021). Tableau [Mid-State single parent dataset-FY20-21]

Mid-State's research specialist facilitated an implications analysis with the retention committee in July 2021. The group was provided with the themed research findings and related research snapshots (Appendix A). The group was asked the following questions:

- What findings would likely impact Mid-State's single parent student success?
- What are the provocative implications (less likely to happen but if it does would strongly impact Mid-State's single-parent success)?

Potential Solutions

Three key strategies emerged from the retention committee implications analysis session.

1. *Supporting the whole family (i.e., childcare, flexible options)*

The analysis of the research reveals a heightened need for strategies to support the whole family including childcare access (Mahon & Wise, 2021; Kruvelis et al., 2020). Scanning research showed that proper intentional holistic supports increase student success and break the cycle of dropping out (Kruvelis et al., 2020; Zeisler et al., n.d.). Broadly, the scanning research defined connected support as access to resources that can support an individual's financial, emotional, social, and academic needs. An observation shared by the group was single parent students may not utilize off-site supports. Research shows that single parent students benefit from having a range of support such as access to childcare, time management help, social-emotional support, and financial resources (Spaudling et al., 2016; Hoover, 2021).

2. *Building a single-parent social network*

Based on research, single parent students often balance multiple roles (i.e., parent + student + worker) paired with high mental load that leaves less time and motivation to build social relationships (Synder, 2010, Kensinger & Minnick, 2017). Scanning research additionally indicated that some single-parent students do not feel like they belong on campus, feel isolated, lack time for socialization, and lack self-care (Hoover, 2021; Kensinger & Minnick, 2017). Retention committee participants shared that a social network may destigmatize single parent perception, increase empathy, and create belonging.

3. *Strategies related to enrollment (e.g., part-time, full-time status), inclusive to all Mid-State students*

Like other Mid-State student populations, there is a high representation of part-time single parent course takers. In FY2021, 84% (403) of Mid-State single parent students were part-time enrolled and lagged in course completion and 3-year graduation. Scanning research indicated that single parents in addition to caring for children are often employed to offset financial crises and/or to sustain an income (Kruvelis et al., 2020; Spaudling et al., 2016). Due to multiple roles and obligations, single parents are more likely to require flexibility (Zeisler et al., n.d.) Retention committee participants shared potential strategies. For example, one strategy was investigating flexibility (i.e., mode, course/program length) to meet needs (i.e., child is sick and parent misses class). Another strategy suggested was to intentionally help students reach short-term accomplishments (i.e., job, technical diploma).

Resources for more information

1. Mid-State activities supporting single parent success

- WTCS completion grant (single parent group focus area)
- Retention committee (single parent group focus area)
- Equity & Inclusion taskforce (single parent group focus area)

2. Best practices research supporting single-parent student strategies

- Achieving the Dream publication: Increasing success for student mothers at community colleges <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED606165.pdf> (Hatch & Toner, 2020)
- 2021 Leah Meyer Austin Award - Northeast Wisconsin Technical College 2021lma_northeastwisconsincollege.pdf (Achieving the Dream, 2021)

3. Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Accreditation & Quality

- Provide access to full research articles
- Data request:
<https://thesource.mywilm.com/InstitutionalResearch/SitePages/Data%20Request%20Form.aspx>

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Appendix A

• Scanning findings

- *Note: These are snapshots of all the research gathered by theme.*

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Appendix Scanning Key Findings

Characteristics Key Findings	
Low completion rates	Scan: Only 8% complete within 6 years.
	Scan: # of single parents doubled between 1999 and 2012
	Mid-State v. WTCS Colleges: In 2020-2021 - Mid-State ranked 3rd of WTCS colleges w/% of FTE that are single parents (15.3%) (1-WITC @ 17.6%; 2-LTC @16.5%) compared to WTCS avg. 6.6%
	Mid-State v. WTCS Colleges: 2020-2021 - Mid-State ranked highest at 12.7% in unduplicated headcount that are single parents - WTCS avg is 5.2% .
	Mid-State v. WTCS Colleges: 2020-2021 - Mid-State ranked 13th of 16 WTCS colleges in single-parents successfully completing courses (Mid-State-67.7% v. 74.9% WTCS avg)
	Mid-State v. WTCS Colleges: 2020-2021 - Mid-State ranked 12th of 16 WTCS colleges in single-parents successfully being retained from fall to spring (Mid-State-72.8% v. 75.5% WTCS avg)
	Mid-State v. WTCS Colleges: 2020-2021 - Mid-State ranked 11th of 16 WTCS colleges in single-parents successfully being retained from fall to fall (Mid-State- 58.2% v. 60.7% WTCS avg)
	Mid-State v. WTCS Colleges: 2020-2021 - Mid-State ranked 13th of 16 WTCS colleges in single parents successfully completing courses in 6 years (Mid-State 24.9% vs. 33.5% WTCS avg)
Fathers are sometimes overlooked for this population	Scan: Resources focused on parenting tend to target “mothers” first, “parents” only sometimes, and “fathers” almost never. It’s easy for single fathers to feel excluded from these resources.
	Scan: Roles as father and student sometimes converge. Fathers reported leaning into a role as “leader” or “role model” both at home and in the college setting. Similarly, they reported experiencing a role as “teacher” with their children, which may support their roles as learner in the college setting.
	Scan: The fathers in the study reported experiencing stigma and negative stereotyping. Society assumes that fathers are at best a “poor substitute” for mothers, with less capacity for nurturing and emotional availability, and at worst inevitably a danger to their own children. One father in the study reported being accused of molestation when changing his two-month-old’s diaper in a public restroom.
	Scan: Fathers in the study expressed a desire for their campus to offer the following services: flexible daycare options, legal advice (e.g. for custody cases), robust veteran’s services, and social activities for single fathers, either with the children included or with childcare provided.
	Mid-State Male + Single Parent: 75 program enrolled students were male, single parents (FY2020) – represented 21% of students identified as single parents. Retention for male/single parent: 55% (75) – part-time (51%-63); full-time (75%-12)
Single parents are predominately female	Scan: Single-parent students are predominantly female, identified as a marginalized group, and a growing population on community college campuses which poignantly suggests an opportunity for change. Single-parent students(n= 12) described angst as they balanced their roles and responsibilities between single-parent and student. Friends are not a priority.
	Scan: Single mothers (89%) have low incomes.
	Scan: The descriptors of stress were specific to females being explained with “anger”, “tears”, unpredictable “sleep” patterns, and the overwhelming feeling of being your child’s sole support.
	Mid-State Gender + Economic Status: 79% (383) program enrolled single parents are female (FY2020). 100% (404) of single-parent female enrolled program students were economically-disadvantaged. Retention (FY2020 cohort): 60% single-parent female enrolled program students – economically-disadvantaged. Same population by enrollment status (part-time – 58% (216)) and (full-time – 77% (34)). (WTCS benchmark: 63%)
More likely to be students of color	Scan: Student parents are more likely to be students of color than they are to be white.
	Scan: 4 in 10 black female students are single mothers.
	Mid-State: 87 program enrolled students of color are single parents (FY2020); represented 18% of students identified as single parents. 11 program enrolled single parent students are black females. Retention: 71% (Part-time – 67%; Full-time 100%).
	Scan: They’re usually older than nonparents, and their average GPA is actually higher than other students.

Appendix

Scanning Key Findings

Usually older than non-parents	Scan: Case study: When going back into school, Drayton had been worried that he'd be the oldest person in the room and nobody would care about his experience. At times, he'd walk into class and his classmates would assume he was the professor.
	Scan: Being removed from school for over 15 years and then coming back made it difficult to learn new computer programming such as Blackboard. Jackson was recommended a program that helped him navigate these new things.
	Scan: Mid-State: 273 program enrolled students are 25 or older were single parents (FY2020); represented 56% of students identified as single parents.
Single parent populations may be higher	Scan: 1 in 5 takes its name from the one in five college students in the United States who are parents. But only 25% of community colleges survey their students to identify those with dependent children. That means parents - who face disproportionate barriers to education, from the application process to course scheduling - aren't being tracked through the system. And you can't support students that you can't see.

Appendix Scanning Key Findings

Multiple Obligations & Need for Support Key Findings	
Single parents are working	Scan: 54% work 20 or more hours per week and 43% work 30 or more hours per week + going to school and caring for children.
	Scan: About 30% of respondents worked jobs that had irregular hours or rotating shifts.
	Scan: The number of respondents working full-time versus part-time were about equal (46% and 45% respectively), with about 9% of respondents reporting that their hours varied so much week-to-week that they sometimes but not always worked full-time hours.
	Scan: The college he attended didn't have night classes that went past three o'clock, so he fought for this because being a working parent and trying to finish a degree took him 5 years to get a 2 year degree because of the time constraints. Having a 5 o'clock class wasn't even thought about at other college.
	Scan: Not enough time: Recognizing the challenges related to balancing time for children and self, while academic demands were present.
	Scan: About 68% of respondents report that their work schedule is determined entirely by the job requirements, rather than developed with input on their part that would allow for scheduling around school and parenting responsibilities.
	Mid-State Educational Attainment: 36% (171) program enrolled single parents had a high school diploma or equiv. or less; 39% (188) had some college; 28% (113) had technical diploma or higher.
	Mid-State Enrollment Status: Single parents enrolled in programs: FY21 84% (403 students); Full-time 16% (77 students); Retention by same population: FY21: Part-time 40% (304 students); Full-time 63% (78 students); FY20: Part-time 59% (307 students); Full-time 77% (47 students).
	Single parents are often in crisis
	Scan: Lack of financial resources was the chief barrier for educational pursuits
Scan: Rural household's income gap widened during pandemic	
Scan: No income of their own or from their families to cover college-related expenses	
Scan: Higher unmet need (\$1,700 higher than non-parenting women)	
Scan: Welfare to Work: Negative effects of receiving funding: long-term financial insecurity, mental health challenges, stigmatized	
Scan: Single parents enrolled in funded programs may feel stigmatized or have increased challenges	
Scan: Child tax credits 2021 monthly payments began in July	
Scan: Single Parent Penalty Elimination Act which would change the tax code to make it so taxpayers who file as heads of household, the filing status single parents typically use, would have the same status as those who are married filing jointly.	
Scan: About 30% of respondents reported that they were not receiving financial assistance for their educational program	
Scan: Often in a state of a crisis (bill overdue)	
Scan: Rural households have poor outcomes due to underinsured, less access to services	
Scan: Need access to childcare; more likely to drop out due to lack of child-care	
Scan: Federal government proposed re-defining infrastructure to include child-care access	
Scan: About half of respondents with children age 5 or younger relied exclusively on family members for childcare.	
Mid-State Economic Status: 83% (404) program enrolled single parents are economically-disadvantaged (FY2020). Retention: Of this population: FY19 retention: 46% (Part-time 41% - 244 students & Full-time 64% - 63 students) & FY20 retention: 61% (Part-time 58% - 262 students & Full-time 74% - 42 students)	

Appendix

Scanning Key Findings

Factors affecting single parents' motivation	Scan: Children were motivating factor and top priority.
	Scan: Some reported increased confidence due to employment.
	Scan: Value of college in rural areas is low.
	Scan: Perfectionism was prominent.
	Scan: Feeling overwhelmed can negatively affect efficacy.
	Scan: Mothers of color and those who are pregnant are more likely to drop out.
	Mid-State Educational Attainment: 36% (171) program enrolled single parents had a high school diploma or equiv. or less; 39% (188) had some college; 28% (113) had technical diploma or higher (FY2020).
	Mid-State Economic Status: 83% (404) program enrolled single parents are economically-disadvantaged (FY2020). Retention: Of this population: FY20 retention: 46% (Part-time 41% - 244 students & Full-time 64% - 63 students) & FY20 retention: 61% (Part-time 58% - 262 students & Full-time 74% - 42 students)
Single parents lack social support	Scan: "And I don't think what people look at when you're going through this is, we don't have study time between work. I mean, working all day and being exhausted with there, if it wasn't for my hour ferry ride, that's where I got most of my study time in."
	Scan: Face similar challenges like other students
	Scan: Student parents need to know that they belong on campus
	Scan: Isolation: Participants described not having time for socialization with friends to the extent of "...no social life" and "Facebook" was noted as socialization.
	Scan: Self-care: Participants described no time for self-care or being one's self
Single parents need connected support	Scan: Student parents need to be connected to resources that support the whole person (financial, emotional, social, academic).
	Scan: Family Futures Downeast (FFD) is a program in Maine that helps low-income mothers go back to school. They help in whatever ways parents tell them will help – providing flexible, quality childcare; covering costs of gas and car repair; and offering financial planning assistance.
	Scan: Participants described "guilt" with attempts to balance responsibilities and roles with feelings of being, "overwhelmed", "hardships", and "constant"
	Scan: Single parents need support + encouragement at the same time.
	Scan: Need help with time management
	Scan: High self-efficacy linked to student success. Efficacy can be raised by praise
	Scan: Proper intentional holistic supports increase student success and break cycle
	Scan: Single parent student - structure is necessary; daily routines to improve stability and reduce chaos.
	Scan: Mid-State students - Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) support
	Scan: Rural households' challenges with broadband internet impact success (impacted during COVID); Mid-State had laptops available
	Scan: "One of the greatest times I ever had being a student parent was when my son was accepted into the daycare center that was on school grounds. And I was able to go, you know, in the midst of changing class and go wave at him and talk to him through the fence and see how his day was doing. So I think that space is allowing for a two generational approach, a parent and student to be in the same space in higher education."
	Scan: Social/emotional support was a major contributor to student mothers' success in college
	Scan: Fathers in the study expressed a desire for their campus to offer the following services: flexible daycare options, legal advice (e.g. for custody cases), robust veteran's services, and social activities for single fathers, either with the children included or with childcare provided.