Golden West College Student Parent Experience Focus Group –

Key Findings & Implications

In December 2025, Institutional Effectiveness staff conducted a focus group with five student parents at Golden West College (GWC). The GWC researcher designed the one-hour focus group to answer questions about what it is like being a student parent, challenges they faced in realizing their academic goals, and how the college could better support student parents. The report provides a summary of the focus group major themes and direct quotes from the participants that highlight the findings.

Purpose of the Assessment

This summative assessment synthesizes findings from a recorded focus group with student parents, the majority of whom identify as single parents, currently enrolled at the college. The purpose of the focus group was to understand lived experiences, barriers, supports, and institutional opportunities to better serve parenting students and improve persistence, completion, and equity outcomes.

Participant Profile (High-Level)

- Predominantly single parents

- Children ranging from infant to school-aged

- Many participants:

    o Receive CalWORKs, EOPS, CARE, and/or public assistance

    o Are first-generation college students

    o Are enrolled full-time or near full-time

    o Are balancing academic, caregiving, financial, and mental health demands

Key Findings

1. Student Parents Demonstrate High Motivation and Academic Commitment

Participants consistently described parenthood as a source of motivation, focus, and persistence. Many contrasted their current academic engagement with prior enrollment experiences before becoming parents. Parent responses suggest:

- Strong sense of responsibility to children as motivation to complete degrees

- Increased academic seriousness, time management, and goal orientation

- Desire to model educational attainment for children

Student parents represent a highly motivated population whose success is constrained more by structural barriers than by academic ability or engagement. Focus group participants said:

> "When I was here 10 years ago and not a parent, I honestly didn't care... now I'm like, no, I need to do this. It's not just me, it's my kids too."

> "They're more of a motivation to be a student... I'm taking time from them now to give them way more later."

> "Being a parent is a big motivation. I feel empowered, like nobody could tell me anything."

> "If my mom did it with two kids, why can't I do it? I want them to see that."

> "I want my kids to be decent human beings and see that their mom didn't give up."

2. Time, Childcare, and Financial Instability Are the Primary Barriers to Persistence

Across participants, childcare access, affordability, and scheduling emerged as the most significant barriers, followed closely by financial precarity. Key challenges identified include:

- Limited access to affordable, flexible childcare

- Long waitlists for on campus or subsidized childcare

- Incompatibility between class schedules and childcare availability

- Financial tradeoffs between attending school and meeting basic needs

- Risk of losing public assistance when attempting to work part-time

Without addressing childcare and financial barriers, student parents remain at high risk for stop-outs, delayed completion, or withdrawal despite strong motivation. Students said:

"Just juggling everything—your time, childcare, school, homework. It's like managing multiple full-time jobs."

"If someone gets sick, you can't take them to daycare. You don't have a backup. Everything falls apart."

"There's a facility on campus, but there's a four-year waitlist. That doesn't help parents when they need it now."

"Sometimes I'm close to dropping because I'm like, do I buy my kid shoes or do I stay in school?"

"If I work more, my cash aid gets cut. So it's like, is it even worth it?"

3. Campus Support Programs Are Highly Valued but Not Universally Known or Accessible

Programs such as CalWORKs, EOPS, CARE, counseling, gas cards, food resources, and emergency supports were consistently cited as impactful and, in some cases, essential to enrollment continuity. Key observations include:

- Students often learned about programs by chance, through: Individual staff outreach, faculty announcements, and peer referrals

- Entry into programs often occurred late in their academic journey

- Personalized staff support was described as transformative

Support programs are effective, but early, proactive, and systematic outreach is needed to maximize impact and equity. Expanded flexible learning options would directly support retention and completion for parenting students. Respondents said:

"EOPS and CARE have been huge. The gas cards alone—that's the difference between getting to school or not."

"They make sure I'm on track with my classes, my schedule, next semester… I don't feel lost."

"It's not just resources, it's that they care. They check in. They ask what you need."

"I didn't even know about these programs until I was almost done with school."

4. Lack of Institutional Flexibility Creates Academic Risk

Participants reported that rigid academic policies disproportionately affect student parents, particularly in moments of family or health crisis. Respondents raised these key issues:

- Limited flexibility around: Assignment deadlines, attendance policies, and late submissions due to childcare or medical emergencies

- Inconsistent faculty understanding of parenting responsibilities

- Perception that parental status is not institutionally recognized as a legitimate barrier

There is a gap between policy intent and lived experience, indicating a need for clearer guidance, training, and culturally responsive practices for faculty and staff. Students reported:

"Being a parent isn't a disability, but we still need accommodations."

"I'm not asking for special treatment—I'm asking for understanding."

"My kid had an asthma attack. I was in the hospital. I wasn't thinking about an essay."

"Why can't you give me five minutes grace when I'm communicating with you?"

"Kids come first. I'm not going to stop being a parent because you want my assignment at 8 p.m."

5. Desire for Parent Centered Modalities and Scheduling

Students strongly advocated for instructional flexibility that acknowledges caregiving responsibilities. They specifically reported that online instruction and support are critical to their success.

- Students advocated for increased availability of:

  - Online and hybrid courses

  - Evening and asynchronous courses

  - Virtual access to workshops, support services, and counseling and advising

- Clear alignment between published course modality and actual delivery

Students reported:

- "I signed up because it said hybrid, but it ended up being fully in person. That flexibility matters."
- "Zoom workshops would help a lot. Commute time makes everything harder."
- "I can't drag four kids to a workshop. On Zoom, I can mute myself and still participate."

6. Strong Need for Community, Connection, and Belonging

Student parents expressed a desire for peer connection and community, noting that parenting students often feel isolated on campus. Specifically, students asked for:

- Parent focused spaces or centers

- Parent only or parent friendly events

- Digital communities (apps, group chats, Canvas spaces)

- Opportunities for mutual support, resource sharing, and social connection

Building community among student parents can improve sense of belonging, reduce isolation, and enhance persistence. Parents reported:

> "It's comforting knowing other parents are doing the same thing. It makes you feel less alone."

> "We hold each other accountable—did you turn in your assignment? Did you remember the early day?"

> "It turned into a family outside of school, not just classmates."

> "I wish there was a group chat or something where parents could connect and share resources."

7. Additional Needs for Parents of Children with Disabilities or Special Needs

Participants with children who have disabilities reported compounded barriers, including time, emotional strain, and system navigation challenges. Respondents identified gaps:

- Limited campus awareness of external resources (e.g., Regional Centers)

- Lack of targeted support for parents of children with special needs

- Increased vulnerability to stress and academic disruption

Student parents are not a monolithic group; intersectional supports are needed to address varying levels of need.

"My two oldest kids are autistic. That adds a whole other layer to everything."

"Helping our kids helps us. If they're supported, we can stay in school."

"I haven't heard anyone mention the Regional Center on campus, and that's huge for parents like us."

Conclusion

The focus group findings underscore that student parents are highly motivated and deeply invested in their education, yet face systemic barriers that threaten persistence and completion. Strategic investments in childcare, flexibility, awareness, and community can significantly improve outcomes for this population and advance institutional student success goals.

Based on the findings, the following areas warrant institutional attention:

1. Childcare access and partnerships;

2. Faculty and staff training about student parent realities;

3. Expanded flexible learning modalities;

4. Early identification and outreach to student parents;

5. Centralized, visible student parent resources;

6. Community Building- infrastructure; and,

7. Targeted support for parents of children with disabilities.