

Salma Elakbawy
Institute for Women's Policy Research
1101 15th St NW
Washington, DC 20005
elakbawy@iwpr.org

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Delegate Ben Barnes
Appropriations Committee
Maryland State Legislature
House Office Building
Room 121
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Subject: Testimony in Support of SB 420 Reconciliation – Maryland Higher Education Commission – Demographic Data Collection – Parental Status

Dear Delegate Ben Barnes and Members of the Appropriations Committee:

As a Senior Policy Analyst at the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR), I am writing to express my **strong support for Senate Bill 420 (SB 420) other than striking language that changes annual data collection to a one-time effort**. This bill builds on the progress made by House Bill 0840, the Pregnant and Parenting Student Support Act, by strengthening implementation and accountability across Maryland's public higher education system.

IWPR has an established track record of research on student parents and why policymakers must address the hurdles they encounter. IWPR's analysis of the latest available data (NPSAS 20) shows that nearly one in five college students are parents, meaning over 3 million students are raising children while pursuing a postsecondary degree. Out of this vast student-parent population, about three-quarters are mothers.

The latest available national data also show that the percentage of students raising children differs across racial and ethnic groups: 36 percent of American Indian or Alaska Native college students, 30 percent of Black college students, 18 percent of Latinx students, and 17 percent of white students are parents. In Maryland, student parents represent a significant but often invisible population.

Student parents are enrolled in all types of institutions. According to IWPR research, 51 percent of student parents attend community and technical colleges, compared with 15 percent who attend public four-year institutions, 13 percent who are enrolled in private non-profit institutions, and 20 percent who attend private for-profit institutions. Better and consistent data collection would mean the availability of student parent data by institution type, which would enable examining different outcomes, including college retention and completion rates for student parents. Without comprehensive and ongoing data collection on this vital student population,

policymakers and institutional leaders struggle to truly understand student parents' experiences and dismantle the barriers impeding their academic and professional success.

Supporting student parents has implications for gender and racial equity. The unique challenges faced by student parents are not only due to their parental status but also due to the many intersecting identities that impact their journeys to and through higher education. Yet, state, national, and private data on student parents are limited, siloed, or non-existent. The lack of comprehensive data on student parents can lead institutions and policymakers to underestimate the prevalence of student parents and hence their needs invisible. Data collection is important to create a complete picture of a student-parent's experiences to inform better policies. IWPR research finds, for instance, that demographic data collection covering student parents might enable states to better understand the magnitude of their student parent population and help policymakers better understand how student parents interact with various support systems and safety net programs.

While HB 0840 established important requirements for public senior higher education institutions to adopt plans supporting pregnant and parenting students, SB 420 crucially takes the next critical step by expanding these requirements to all public institutions of higher education and by requiring the Maryland Higher Education Commission to collect consistent data on the parental status of enrolled students.

As the evidence shows, we cannot effectively support student parents if we do not know who they are. SB 420 provides the structure needed to identify parenting students and connect them to the support already required under Maryland law. Without comprehensive and uniform data collection, institutions and policymakers are limited in their ability to reach these students, assess whether supports are working, or ensure equitable access to services such as childcare, health care, housing stability, and academic accommodations

The 2023 Maryland Higher Education Commission Report on Advising Systems and Wrap-around Services revealed that few institutions collect comprehensive data on student parents. However, as a one-time report, it also underscores the need for ongoing, annual data collection to track changes, evaluate progress, and ensure that policies continue to meet the evolving needs of student parents.

Without sustained data collection, it is impossible to fully understand student parent needs or implement policies that promote their success over time like The Pregnant and Parenting Support Act. **To ensure this effort is meaningful and sustainable, I strongly urge the Committee to ensure the reconciled bill includes required annual data collection and reporting.**

Passing SB 420 as reconciled will ensure Maryland has the tools to support its estimated 70,000 student parents, empowering them to thrive in higher education and beyond. By addressing their unique challenges, Maryland can be a leader in fostering student success and equity in higher education.

I respectfully urge the House Appropriations Committee to support reconciliation of the changes made by the Senate while ensuring this critically needed data collection and reporting continues

on an annual basis. This will be a vital step toward creating a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for student parents in Maryland.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Salma Elakbawy