



THE CHRONICLE
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Vulnerable Students

**Creating the
Covid-Era
Safety Net**

Before the novel coronavirus struck, shuttering her college and her sons' schools, Vanessa Nuñez would study before or after her job at the Family Resource Center at Los Angeles Valley College, or during her lunch break. Her days, like those of many working parents, were a balancing act, filled with drop-offs, pickups, and after-school activities.

But when everything shut down in mid-March, Nuñez's carefully crafted routine was upended. Suddenly she was stuck in her duplex all day with four boys, ages 5 to 12. She squeezed in her own classes among her sons' daily lessons on Zoom. Some days she'd stay up until after midnight finishing assignments, then rise again at dawn, just as her husband was returning from the night shift working construction.

"It's hard, because I try to focus first on them, and by the end of the day I'm so exhausted, it doesn't sink in as easily," she said in an interview in late May. She was trying to complete the prerequisites so that she could continue her studies in child development at California State University at Northridge.



COURTESY OF VANESSA NUNEZ

Vanessa Nuñez with her four sons

Still, Nuñez knew she was among the lucky ones. Both she and her husband were still employed, and the school district had given each of her sons a laptop, so they didn't have to fight over technology. Many of the student parents she helps at the Family Resource Center had lost their jobs and were struggling to meet their basic needs. They were missing the free

diapers and wipes that they'd normally collect from the college every week or two — not to mention the tutoring, counseling, and camaraderie the center provided.

Student parents, who account for more than one in five undergraduates today, faced multiple stressors even before the pandemic hit. In a 2019 survey by the Hope Center for Col-

lege, Community, and Justice, more than half reported that they had been food-insecure in the prior 30 days, and close to 70 percent said they'd been housing-insecure in the previous year. More than 60 percent said they found child care unaffordable, and large numbers reported feeling anxious or depressed.

Given those statistics, it is perhaps unsurprising that student parents graduate at much lower rates than do their peers without kids. Only 37 percent complete a degree or certificate within six years, compared with 59 percent of students without children, according to unpublished estimates by the Institute for Women's Policy Research.

The coronavirus has compounded the financial and time-management challenges facing parenting students, making an already steep climb to graduation even steeper. Along with a sometimes difficult transition to remote learning — for themselves and their children — student parents are coping with the loss of income and child care that made attending college possible for many.

"Student parents sit at the intersection of so many vulnerabilities," says Lindsey Reichlin Cruse, study direc-

tor at the Institute for Women's Policy Research. "All the things that make it difficult for parents to study in normal times are even sharper now."

Los Angeles Valley College's Family Resource Center has done more for them than most. The center, which provides wraparound support for more than 500 parents and grandparents, had raised almost \$28,000 in emergency aid by late May, award-

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ing small-dollar grants to 45 students struggling to pay for food and housing. "We realized that money is really what our students need right now," says Marni Roosevelt, who expanded the center from a parent-support group she started in 2000. "They need to be able to keep their lives going."

But the center, which employs both a resource counselor and a marriage-and-family therapist, is also trying to meet student parents' emotion-

al needs. In May the two counselors started holding online "cafes," where students could come for support.

Monroe Community College, in New York, holds weekly online meetings where student parents can get information about available resources and "talk about what's going on in their lives," says Mary Ann DeMario, an institutional researcher who is helping build a program for single moms at the college. "We want to make sure they feel connected, so they don't feel they're going it alone," she said.

Still, both Roosevelt and DeMario say they expect that some of the student parents at their colleges will need to take time off from classes, to recover their financial and emotional footing. The goal, each one says, is to get those students re-enrolled as quickly as possible. "They are always walking on this precipice, and this maybe knocked some of them off," says Roosevelt. "For some students, it's just too much — they can't handle everything. And that's real life."

Nuñez, meanwhile, is trying to emulate her sons, who rarely grumble, she says. Their resilience and adaptability "help me motivate myself." In that sense, maybe being a parent is an advantage.