

Parenting Adult Learners' Experiences in Higher Education

Vanessa Coca, Sara Mitchell, and Christina LiCalsi
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Introduction

Pursuing postsecondary education is complicated for adult learners with children, also known as parenting adult learners (PALs).¹ PALs must consider family expenses in addition to college expenses² and make tough decisions about how to spend their time across their academic, work, and family responsibilities.³ Nonetheless, PALs are highly motivated, are resilient, and feel that earning a credential will improve the economic outlook for their family.⁴

Despite the fact that PALs make up a sizable proportion of the postsecondary student population, their circumstances are often overlooked in postsecondary policies, programs, and practices. About one in three undergraduates in the United States are adult learners (i.e., 25 years old or older), and nearly half of these students have at least one dependent child.⁵ At public 2-year colleges, four in 10 students are adult learners, and 46.5% of students have a dependent child. Yet adult learners and parenting students do not receive adequate support. This was especially evident during the pandemic,⁶ when many parents lost access to childcare, making it difficult for them to keep their jobs and attend their classes, particularly for mothers who were often the main, if not only, caretakers in the family.⁷ It is worth noting, however, that access to affordable, quality childcare and family-friendly spaces on campus was challenging prior to the pandemic and continues to be an obstacle for many.⁸ Even when childcare is available, its costs are not always accounted for in financial aid packages of adult learners.⁹

There is reason for policymakers and practitioners to take note of PALs' postsecondary enrollment and attainment. Between spring 2021 and spring 2023, overall undergraduate enrollment among adult learners dropped by 14%; the drop at public 2-year colleges was even greater at 17%.¹⁰ Although we do not yet have information specifically on PALs' enrollment before and after the pandemic, it is likely that their drop in enrollment was the same if not

¹ Because this brief focuses on undergraduate and graduate students ages 25 years or older with at least one dependent (child) younger than 18 years in the household, we describe this population of students using the term "parenting adult learners." Results from this study often align with the broader literature on "student parents" or "parenting students," which may or may not include adult learners. However, we think that this intersecting identity of the student population may offer additional insight into the broader parenting student profile.

² Huerta et al. (2022a); Williams et al. (2022); Wladis et al. (2018).

³ Huerta et al. (2022a); [Jed Foundation](#) (2021); Williams et al. (2022); Wladis et al. (2018).

⁴ Huerta et al. (2022a); [Jed Foundation](#) (2021).

⁵ Author's calculation using National Center for Education Statistics PowerStats with National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2020) data on August 1, 2023.

⁶ Huerta et al. (2022b); [Institute for Women's Policy Research](#) (2020); [Jed Foundation](#) (2021); Kienzl et al. (2022).

⁷ Sun (2021).

⁸ Huerta et al. (2022b); Ryberg et al. (2021).

⁹ Conroy (2022); Long (2017).

¹⁰ These drops reflect the changes in undergraduate enrollment of students ages 25 to 29 years. See [National Student Clearinghouse](#) (2023).

worse. During the pandemic, parenting students were more likely than their nonparenting peers to report considering stopping their classes.¹¹ This consideration appears to frequently be acted upon. Slightly more than one third of first-time postsecondary students with dependents who started in the 2011–2012 academic year attained a credential within 6 years of starting their program, whereas nearly six in 10 without dependents did.¹²

Postsecondary administrators interested in serving PALs need to know more about PALs and the supports they need in their pursuit and completion of postsecondary credentials. This brief leverages new data from AIR’s recent survey of PALs ($n = 155$) and non-PALs ($n = 202$) and one-on-one interviews with a subset of PAL survey respondents ($n = 12$) to answer three key questions (see [Appendix](#) for details on this data and sample):

1. What factors contribute to PALs’ decisions to enroll in college?
2. What do the academic experiences of PALs look like?
3. What supports and resources do PALs use and want?

Building on a broad research base on the experiences of parenting students, our results shed light on the particular experiences of adult learners with children and point to three main ways in which practitioners and policymakers can better align programs and resources to support PALs.

1. **Adopt practices that encourage a family-friendly environment.** This could include allowing adult learners to bring their children on campus, as many postsecondary institutions do not allow children on campus. Institutions could also create child-friendly spaces for PALs in libraries and/or student centers. This would allow PALs to study on campus, meet with their study groups, or attend events for student affinity groups. Institutions could also offer affordable and quality on-campus childcare services for PALs who take classes in the evenings or weekends or who may benefit from childcare for only a couple of hours to take a mid-term or final exam. Institutions could allow pregnant PALs to take a leave of absence so that they do not need to reapply for admission.
2. **Commit to direct outreach to PALs.** This could include tailoring outreach to PALs by sharing information about relevant college events, resources, and supports. This could also mean creating a liaison who connects PALs to supports and streamlines applications to resources so that they do not have to spend their limited time navigating these processes.

The survey used in this brief came from AIR’s broader *Supporting Postsecondary Enrollment for Adult Learners of Color* project. This survey informed the report entitled “*Can I Make This Work with My Life?*” *Exploring the College (Re)Enrollment Decisions of Adult Learners of Color*. For more information on this project and the report go to: www.air.org/postsec-adultlearners.

¹¹ Jed Foundation (2021); Rothwell (2021).

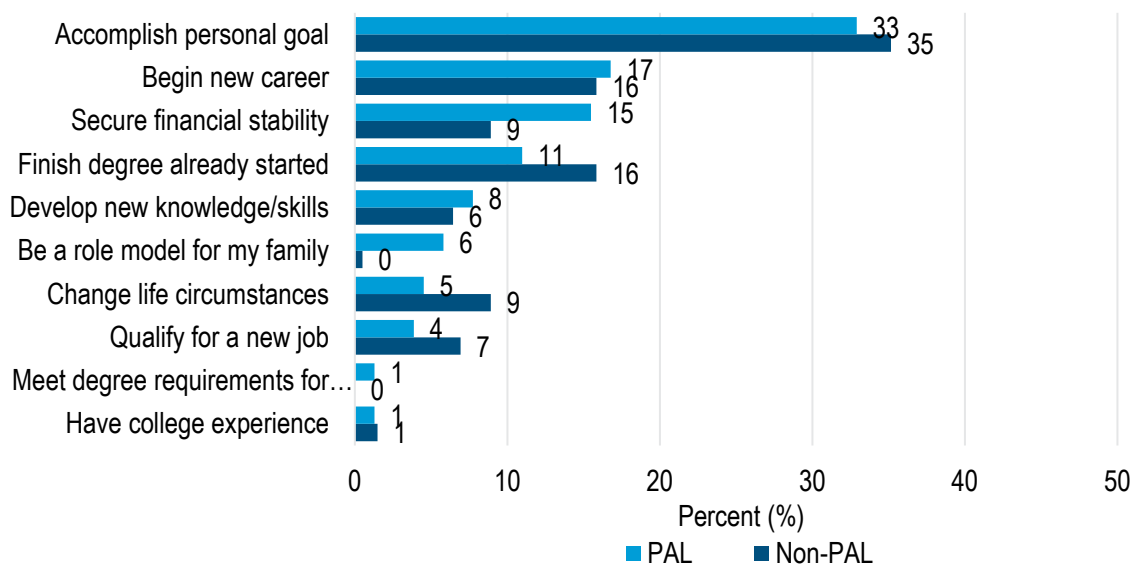
¹² Author’s calculation using National Center for Education Statistics PowerStats with Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:2012/2017) data on September 14, 2023.

3. **Collect and report on information on parenting students.** This could include adding parent/guardian status to basic demographic data collection and providing reporting of academic outcomes to include disaggregation by parenting status (see the [Data-to-Action Campaign for Parenting Students](#) as an example of an initiative to support implementation of parenting status data collection).

Research Question 1: What Factors Contribute to PALs’ Decisions to Enroll in College?

A number of factors came into play when PALs were deciding whether and where to enroll in college. The most common reason for enrolling in college was similar for adult learners falling into our PAL and non-PAL categories (see Exhibit 1); both cited wanting to accomplish a personal goal and beginning a new career. However, PALs and non-PALs differed in the third most common reason for enrolling. PALs were more likely than non-PALs to cite securing financial stability as the third most common reason (15% vs. 9%, respectively), whereas non-PALs were more likely than PALs to report wanting to finish their degree (16% vs. 11%). PALs were also more likely than non-PALs to cite wanting to be a role model for their family as their top reason for their enrollment (6% vs. < 1%). Similar themes came up in our interviews with PALs.

Exhibit 1. Top Factors for Parenting Adult Learners (PALs) and Non-PALs in Considering Whether to Enroll in College

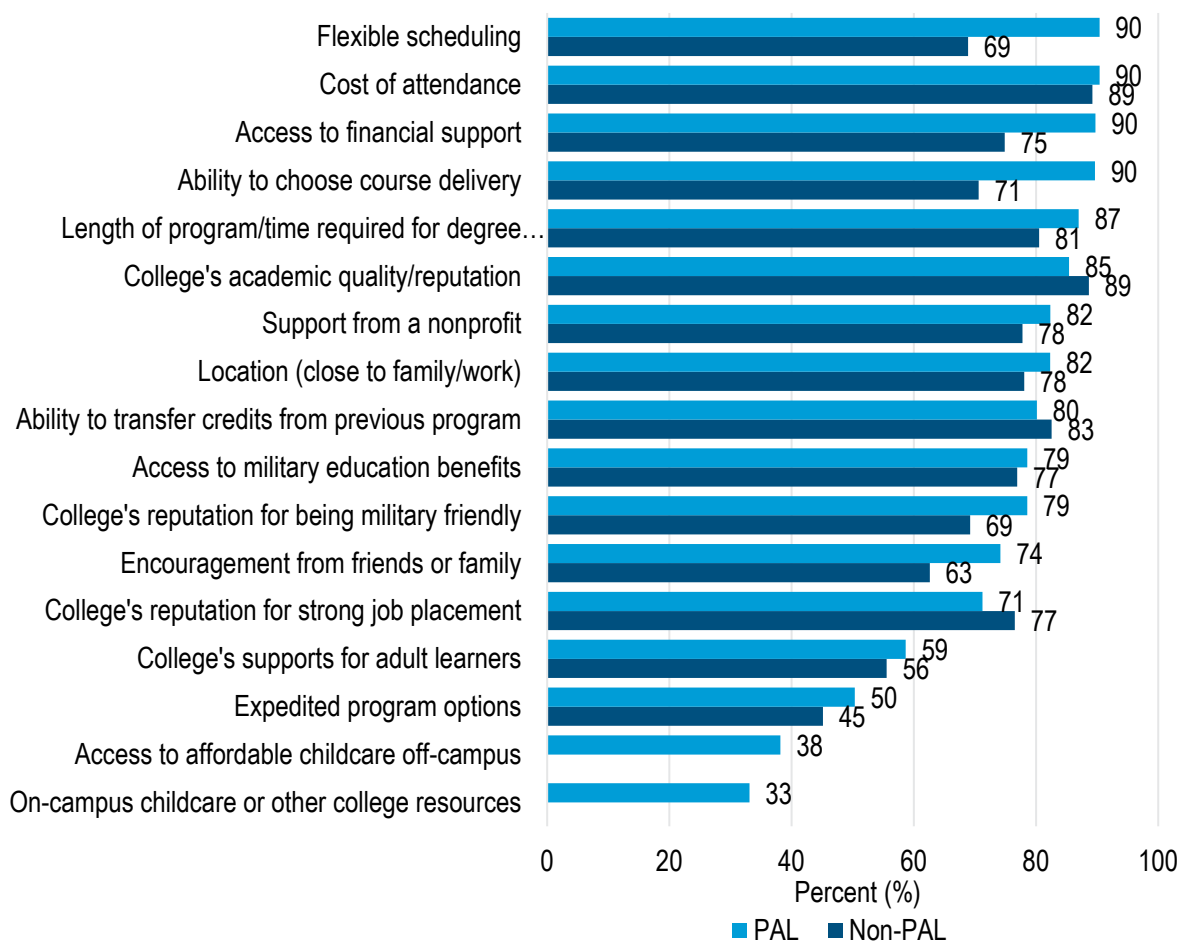


Note. AIR Adult Learner Survey respondents (PAL $n = 155$; non-PAL $n = 202$) could choose up to three reasons for considering enrollment in their program. The exhibit reflects the percentage of adult learners who rated the factor as their *top reason*.

When PALs were deciding where to enroll, the vast majority cited flexible scheduling, cost of attendance, access to financial support, and choice of course delivery (e.g., in-person, virtual synchronous, virtual asynchronous) as their top factors motivating their decision (see Exhibit 2). Moreover, PALs were more likely to cite flexible scheduling (90%), access to financial support (90%), and choice of course delivery (90%) as motivating factors in comparison with non-PALs (69%, 75%, and 71%, respectively). In addition, whereas only 33% of all surveyed PALs cited access to on-campus childcare as an important factor motivating their decision to enroll in college, 66% of PALs with at least one child between the ages of 2 and 3 years cited on-campus childcare as a motivating factor.

“I feel I’m more focused now than I was before, I guess, because I have children. And I feel like the sense of importance of ‘I have to finish [for] my children.’ I have to let my children know that their mom could do things and stuff like that. Versus before, you know, maybe I’ll finish, maybe I won’t. . . . And you know, I just have a different frame of mind than before.”

Exhibit 2. Factors Motivating Parenting Adult Learners’ (PALs’) and non-PALs’ Decision of Where to Enroll in College



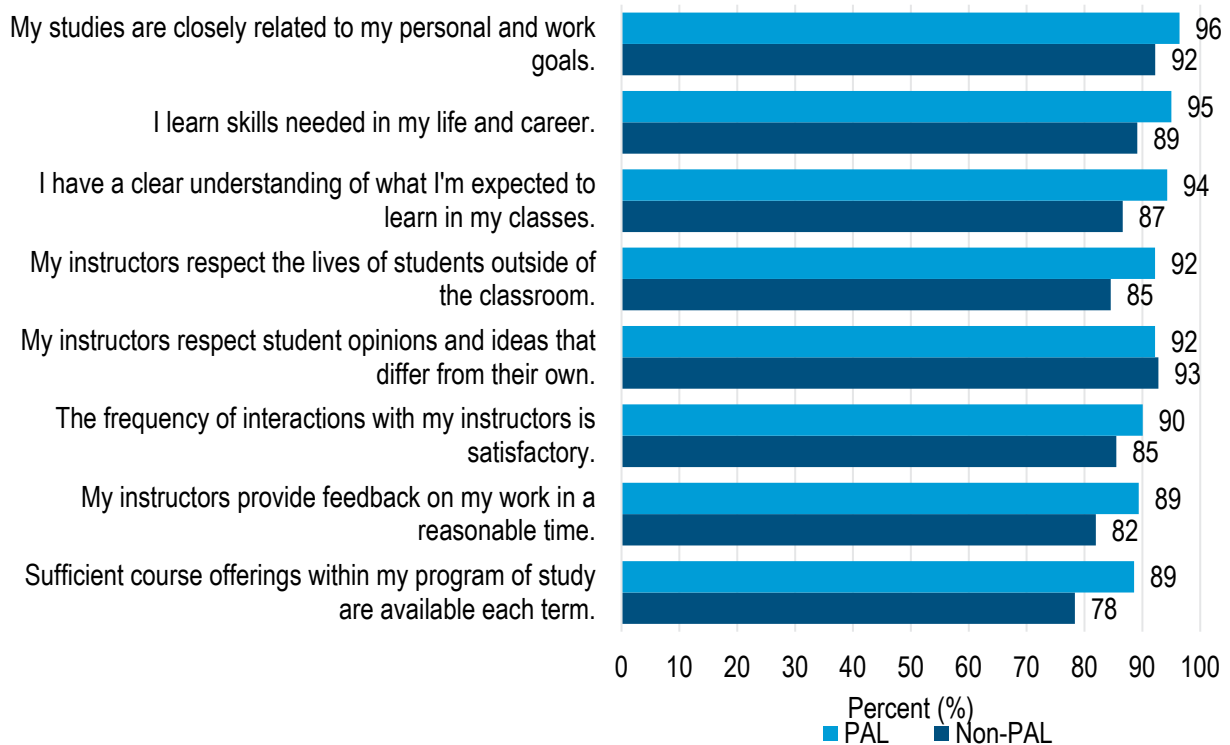
Note. Percentages reflect the proportion of adult learners surveyed who indicated the factor to be *somewhat important* or *very important* to their decision to enroll. Data are from the AIR Adult Learner Survey (PAL *n* = 155 ; non-PAL *n* = 202).

Administrators may want to consider developing or enhancing these institutional characteristics that PALs value. Furthermore, college leaders looking to enroll (or reenroll) and retain PALs may want to tailor their outreach in ways that highlight these valued institutional attributes.

Research Question 2: What Do the Academic Experiences of PALs Look Like?

Most PALs surveyed reported positive academic experiences. In fact, PALs often expressed better academic experiences in their most recent enrollment compared with their nonparenting peers (see Exhibit 3). The vast majority of PALs felt that their current or most recent studies aligned with their personal and work goals, the skills they were learning were necessary, the expectations for learning were clear, their instructors respected their lives outside the classroom and a diversity of opinions, their instructors provided timely feedback, and their program of study provided sufficient course offerings each term.

Exhibit 3. Academic Experiences of Parenting Adult Learners (PALs) and non-PALs



Note. Percentages reflect the proportion of adult learners surveyed who indicated that they *agree* or *strongly agree* with the statement according to their current or most recent enrollment in college. Data are from the AIR Adult Learner Survey (PAL $n = 155$; non-PAL $n = 202$).

For the most part, these positive experiences that PALs reported in the survey were echoed in interviews. Multiple PALs interviewed mentioned that their professors cared about them, enhanced their experiences, were flexible with deadlines, and supported them throughout their time while enrolled. For example, multiple PALs felt encouraged when their instructors shared key information about on-campus and off-campus resources such as tutoring and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits. A few PALs mentioned that these positive interactions with instructors helped them perform better academically and feel more comfortable in the classroom.

For many PALs currently enrolled, this was not their first experience attending college. Some attended college earlier in life but stopped for reasons such as college costs and family responsibilities. Returning to college later in life is often marked by more life experience, motivation, and maturity. One PAL remarked that she enjoyed going to college later in life and felt more confident taking advantage of available resources: “I’ve thoroughly enjoyed my college experience this time around. Last time when I first started, it was really hard for me, and I guess it was hard because I was struggling through that math, but also this time I understood that I had support, and I knew this time that I knew I had to look for it. And that’s the only thing that was hard for me—that I just had to look for that support and figure out where it was and ask those questions. . . . And I know how to research, and you know, look for what I need now a lot better than I did when I was younger.”

Although most PALs interviewed expressed an overall positive outlook on their academic experiences, they were not without their challenges. The top two challenges cited by all adult learners surveyed were having few adult learners in their program and affording college costs (see Exhibit 4). One of the biggest differences between PALs and non-PALs was that half of PALs surveyed cited having too many family obligations as a critical challenge in their experience while enrolled, whereas only one quarter of their peers without children did. In addition to these challenges, three in 10 PALs surveyed cited finding affordable childcare as a challenge to their college experience. This rate was even higher among PALs with children between the ages of 2 and 3 years; 61% of these PALs cited finding affordable childcare as a challenge to their enrollment (not shown).

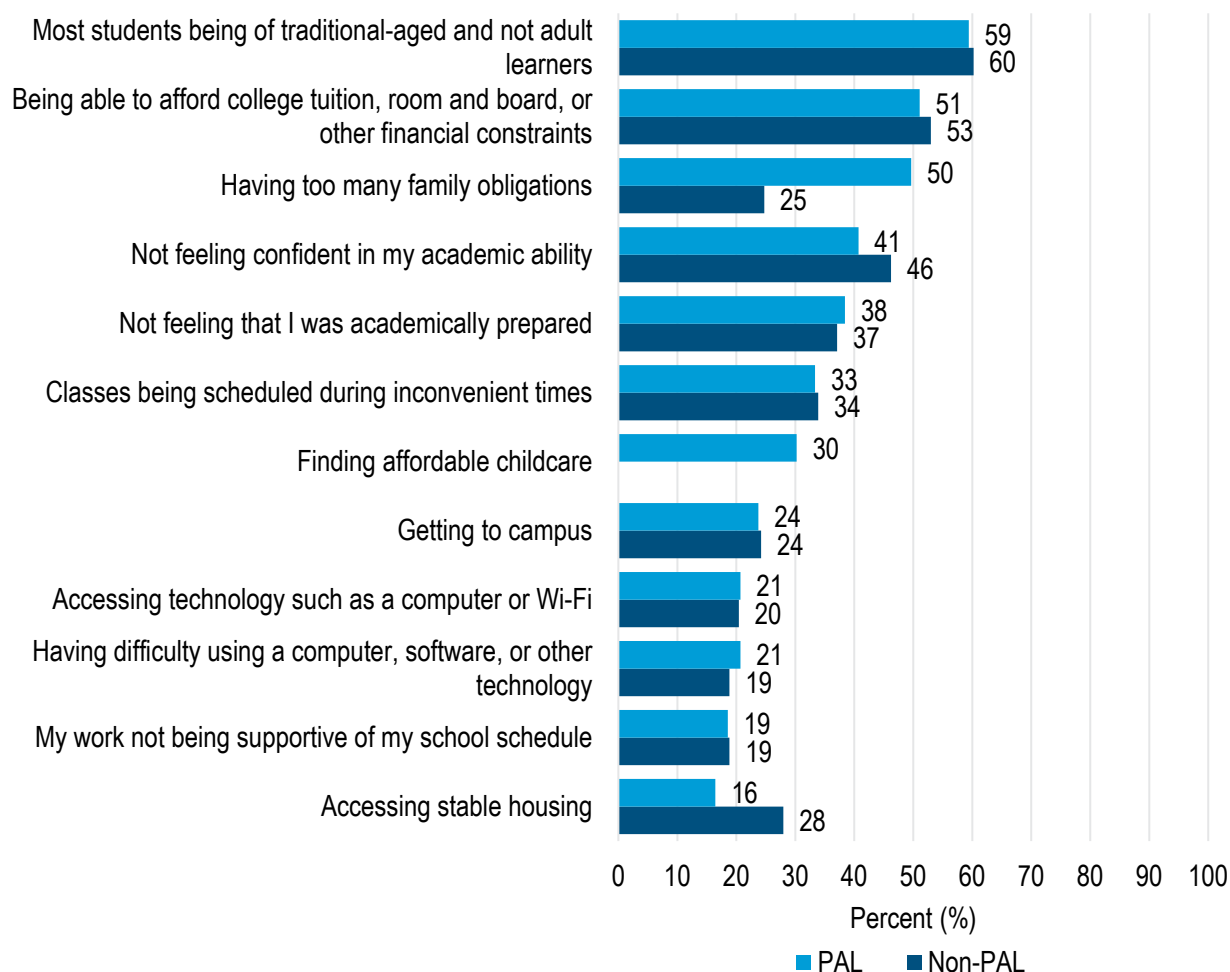
The challenge of balancing work schedules, academic demands, and family obligations was frequently cited among PALs interviewed, especially for those who had younger children or who were single parents. PALs found it especially stressful when unexpected things happened, such as a child getting sick or due dates for assignments

“I think that college, traditional college, is really kind of tailored to young adults and not really older adults or nontraditional students, especially if you have children. Because it’s very like. . . the classes are very limited, and they’re typically during the day. . . . So, I had to, in order to get the class, I had to rearrange my work schedule around the classes. It was challenging to do that and to still be off in time to get the children picked up.”

changing, or when the rest of the family wanted to do something spontaneous together, such as go out on a nice day.

There were some instances in which PALs cited academically demanding and stressful situations. A few PALs interviewed experienced challenging academic loads; some felt overwhelmed when instructors assigned multiple writing assignments in one week or when they had assignments due for different courses on consecutive days. A few PALs noted that they had to take time off from either school or work because they felt so overwhelmed.

Exhibit 4. Challenges While Attending College



Note. Percentages reflect the proportion of adult learners surveyed who indicated the factor to be *somewhat challenging* or *challenging to a great extent* according to their current or most recent enrollment in college. Data are from the AIR Adult Learner Survey (PAL $n = 155$; non-PAL $n = 202$).

Our survey and interview results on PALs were consistent with prior studies that depict parenting students as more academically engaged than nonparenting students. However, it appears that there is a threshold for the type and number of demands put on PALs. In the same way that every parent knows that each child may require a different parenting approach, instructors and administrators could consider the unique circumstances of PALs and how they might tailor the academic experience for PALs.

Research Question 3: What Supports and Resources Do PALs Use and Want?

Most PALs took advantage of academic supports, but few reported taking advantage of nonacademic supports and resources, such as childcare, on-campus meal services, or student groups (see Exhibit 5). The top three resources that PALs used were academic advising (76%), career counseling (26%), and school orientation (23%). Less than 10% of PALs used supports such as mentorship programs, on-campus healthcare, transportation benefits, on-campus housing, or on-campus employment. One might assume that PALs are more likely than non-PALs to take advantage of the variety of academic and nonacademic supports and resources offered to students. However, PALs surveyed were usually less likely than their nonparenting peers to report using a given support or resource. The largest differences in supports used between PALs and non-PALs were school orientation (23% vs. 38%, respectively) and transportation benefits (5% vs. 20%, respectively).

Interviews with PALs revealed numerous reasons that they did or did not use various supports and resources. PALs mentioned hearing about different supports and resources through emails, their college’s website, campus events, or professors, but they wanted better and more consistent advising. For example, some PALs found it difficult to navigate course requirements and registration because their academic advisor changed multiple times throughout their time enrolled. One PAL spoke about their experience with advisor changes: “If [advising] would have been treated more like a one-on-one type of deal where that was my advisor throughout the whole lifetime of the experience, it'd be more effective than going in and sitting with somebody for 20 minutes and then being like, ‘Okay. Well, this is what you can do. This is what’s available,’ you know, ‘Bye.’ And that’s what it kind of felt like. It felt very fast and transactional rather than ‘Hey,’ you know, ‘Let’s talk.’”

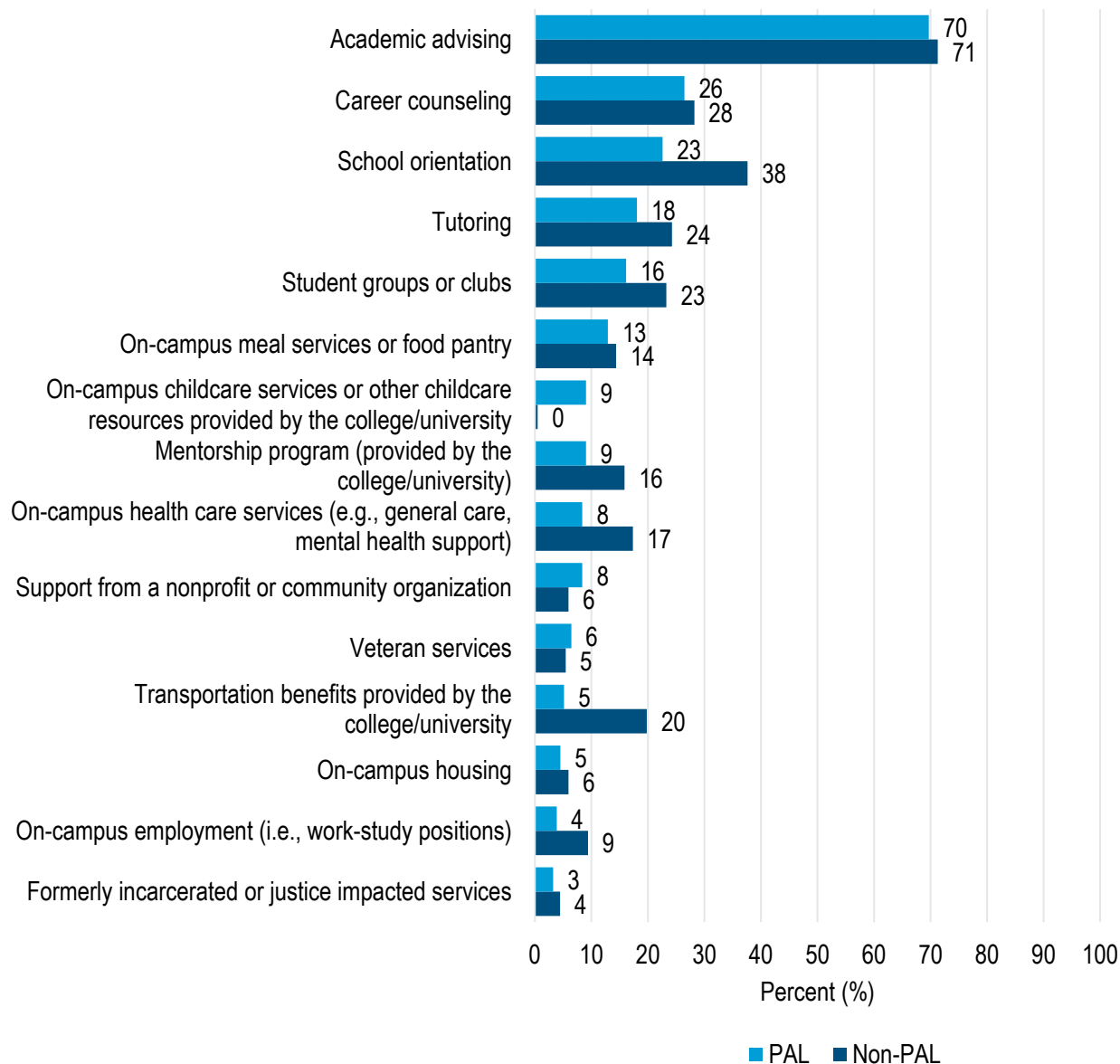
Whereas lack of quality information was a frequent barrier to accessing campus supports, the most common challenge to PALs accessing available supports and resources was time. A few

“Looking back over the last year, I don’t know how I did it. I took four classes and pretty much worked every day, even the half days that I had to go in to take the day class. And you know, like I said, I have a family and just the day to day of life. It was very stressful.”

“It’s kinda like you’re trying to figure out how you’re going to get everything done plus balance like your life. So, I feel like that was very difficult on me because there was one of the weeks where I literally was sitting down in my dining room table crying because I was freaking out. I was stressed out. How am I going to get all this done by Sunday? You know, I couldn’t figure out what to do.”

PALs interviewed mentioned using on-campus meal services and food pantries; accessing free clothes, toiletries, and printing; and using mental health services, but most PALs expressed not having the time to seek out these supports.

Exhibit 5. Campus Supports Used While Attending College



Note. AIR Adult Learner Survey respondents (PAL $n = 155$; non-PAL $n = 202$) could choose more than one support or resource used while attending college. Percentages reflect the proportion of adult learners surveyed who indicated using the support *somewhat* or *to a great extent*.

The timing in which supports were available was another issue that came up in our interviews with PALs. Although some PALs with young children used on-campus childcare services when this resource was available, a few PALs—using or not using childcare—noted that childcare

services were not offered outside of typical working hours or weekends, which made it difficult to accommodate evening and weekend classes. One PAL also mentioned that on-campus childcare services were available only to high-need families, and they did not qualify.

Several PALs indicated that they did not spend a great deal of time on campus, affecting their ability to access supports. If they attended in-person classes, these PALs usually came to campus for those classes and left soon after. Multiple PALs expressed interest in student peer groups that would allow them to network with other older adult learners, but one PAL mentioned that most student-run events were organized by nonparenting students and were often held at times that conflicted with PALs' obligations (e.g., school pick-up times or evenings). Some PALs struggled to fit things in around picking their children up from school or another parent's house.

When PALs were asked about the supports and resources that they want institutions to offer, they suggested that those offerings should be more specific to their circumstances, such as flexible childcare options and additional ways to make attending more affordable. Given their limited time and what may feel like a barrage of information, a few PALs indicated that they would like resources to be more intentionally distributed so that they can easily locate relevant supports.

Our results suggest that childcare access is a critical support for many PALs. However, access to childcare is not the only support that PALs want. Postsecondary administrators interested in serving adult learners with children could consider taking a holistic approach to supporting PALs. For example, it is important that a campus resource not only exists but exists in ways that make sense for the busy lives of PALs.

"A lot of the things that they offered was more so for people that were on campus a lot, or like, you know, they just had a lot of free time, and they're able to just come to the school, and you know, get the support that they need."

"The [student organization] doesn't start till like 6 p.m.–9 p.m. So, it's like I don't want to drive back over there for that, and I would like to, you know, work with them. . . and I would like to do that sometimes. But it's just the drive that keeps me from really mingling."

"Nobody ever reached out to me and said, 'Hey, we know that you're a parent.' Like there should be. . . separate lists of everybody else of everything they know, like they can have, 'Oh, these are our [students who are] parents.'"

Conclusion

The number of PALs attending colleges and universities in the United States is sizable, yet PALs often report feeling invisible.¹³ More could be done to improve their likelihood of academic success. Improving the enrollment and attainment rates for PALs requires postsecondary administrators to consider PALs' particular circumstances and account for their additional costs of attendance in their financial aid packages; expand access to childcare; provide flexibility in course demands, scheduling, and delivery; and increase PALs' awareness and use of academic and nonacademic supports. Yet encouraging institutions to develop or expand practices, programs, and policies that support PALs is not enough. To best support PALs and the institutions seeking to help them, more research is needed to evaluate the efficacy and cost effectiveness of practices, programs, and policies affecting PALs. This would allow postsecondary administrators to make data-informed decisions on where to spend their limited dollars, and successful models could be implemented and scaled across institutions. To do this research and provide evidence to postsecondary administrators, institutions should collect consistent information on the parental status of students because this is not a typical practice.¹⁴

¹³ JED Foundation (2021).

¹⁴ Reichlin Cruse et al. (2021).

Appendix

Data and Sample

This report used survey data and qualitative data from subsequent interviews with parenting adult learners.

The survey data came from AIR's broader [Supporting Postsecondary Enrollment for Adult Learners of Color](#) project. Starting in fall 2022, AIR partnered with multiple 2- and 4-year institutions to recruit adult learners (undergraduate and graduate) to take a survey about their postsecondary decision-making processes and experiences. The convenience sample included 358 learners. AIR oversampled adult learners of color to align with the study goals and to allow for disaggregation by race and ethnicity. Among the respondents, 39% identified as Hispanic or Latinx, 6% identified as Asian, 15% identified as Black, 34% identified as White, and 6% identified as another race or ethnicity. More than half (53%) of respondents were between the ages of 25 and 35 years, about one quarter (27%) were between the ages of 36 and 45 years, and one fifth (20%) were older than 45 years. About 40% had a child or children younger than 18 years at home. This survey informed the report entitled *"Can I Make This Work with My Life?" Exploring the College (Re)Enrollment Decisions of Adult Learners of Color*; we also used the data to conduct analyses specific to parenting adult learners, as described in this brief.

In spring 2023, we reached out to adult learners with children younger than 18 years who took AIR's Adult Learner Survey and expressed interest in a follow-up interview.¹ We conducted one-on-one interviews with 12 adult learners (nine women, three men; five Black, three Latinx, two White, one Asian, one other race; six with a child or children younger than 12 years, five with a child or children age 12 years or older, one with a mix of younger and older children; four self-identified as single parents). At the time of the interview, five respondents were attending a community college, five were attending a 4-year university, and two were not currently enrolled; seven were enrolled part time and three were enrolled full time; and six worked full time, three worked part time, two were between jobs, and one was taking a leave of absence from work but typically worked full time.

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Center for Applied Research in Postsecondary Education

AIR® Headquarters

1400 Crystal Drive, 10th Floor
Arlington, VA 22202-3289
+1.202.403.5000 | [AIR.ORG](https://www.air.org)

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