

Parenting students' experience and challenges at UC

Recent national data show that nearly one in five college undergraduate students in the United States — more than three million individuals — are raising children.¹ Among these student parents, about 62 percent are single mothers.² While the national six-year college completion rate has reached 61 percent,³ only 28 percent of single student mothers complete a degree within six years.⁴ These figures reflect ongoing disparities in educational attainment and the significant challenges faced by parenting students, particularly single mothers, in pursuing higher education.

This brief provides a profile of undergraduate and graduate student parents at the University of California (UC). It examines their financial concerns, academic and social experiences and challenges, as well as their success at UC. These responses were distilled mostly from the University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) and the UC Graduate Student Experience Survey (UCGSES).

Collection of parenting student data at UC

To better understand and support parenting students, including the improvement of processes for collecting data about the challenges and successes of this population, UC started collecting information to identify parenting students via the Cost of Attendance Survey (COAS) in 1996. As a sample survey, COAS could not effectively identify the parenting student population. Beginning in 2012, UCUES included one question to identify parenting students. Since then, UC has included questions to collect parenting students' data in several systemwide undergraduate and graduate surveys (see Appendix) where survey respondents could self-identify as parents. These surveys also elicited information about financial, academic, well-being and basic needs experiences, so their intersectional experiences and challenges in these areas can be better understood.

Table 1 shows the number and proportion of parenting students the most recent UCUES and UCGSES identified. It is important to note, though, that due to the restriction of response rates (around 25 percent), these surveys could not identify all parenting students. However, based on our analysis, respondents are fairly representative of the entire undergraduate and graduate enrollment, and thus, survey data from UCUES and UCGSES are reliable data sources for analysis on parenting student experiences and challenges. The UCOP Institutional Research and Planning (IRAP) survey website provides detailed information about survey instruments, administration, and response rates.⁵

¹ <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/who-are-undergraduates-dependent-children>

² <https://iwpr.org/parents-in-college-by-the-numbers>

³ <https://www.highereddive.com/news/national-college-completion-rises-clearinghouse/734508/>

⁴ <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Raising-Expectations-Student-Parent-Success.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.ucop.edu/institutional-research-academic-planning/services/survey-services/irap-surveys>.

Table 1: Parenting student data in recent surveys

Survey	Year	Questions	With child(ren) Total respondents		%
Undergraduate surveys					
UCUES	2024	Do you have dependent children OR with whom do you live combined	865	48,249	1.8%
UCUES	2022	Do you have dependent children OR with whom do you live combined	1,015	54,069	1.9%
COAS	2023	Do you have children or dependents (excluding your spouse) for whom you provide at least 50% of their financial support?	757	24,413	3.1%
Graduate surveys					
UCGSES	2023	Do you have dependent children OR with whom do you live combined	1,485	13,471	11.0%
UCGSES	2021	Do you have dependent children OR with whom do you live combined	1,352	12,860	10.5%
GCOAS	2022	How many dependent children do you have full or partial financial responsibility of?	714	8,592	8.3%

In recent years, UC also tried different approaches to collect parenting student data. Beginning in fall 2021, UC included a statement, “I have children,” in the undergraduate application for applicants to self-identify their parenting status. However, this method cannot capture undergraduates who become parents later on. Furthermore, applicants may not wish to identify as parents in admissions applications.

In addition, campus student-parent support programs maintain a record of program participants. This information from different programs can be used together to identify parenting students. The challenges with this method are that programs vary in terms of services offered, may use different ways to record participant information, not all student parent participates in those services, and the information may not be consistently accessible to all campus administration or to the support staff members.

Profiles of undergraduate and graduate parenting students

Due to the small size of the parenting student population from each survey administration, the following analysis is based on combined response data to UCUES in the 2020 and 2024 administrations. Results show:

- Overall, about two percent of undergraduate students responded that they are parents. Among parenting undergraduate students, about 38 percent reported being married or in a domestic relationship, compared with about two percent of nonparenting undergraduate students.
- Overall, about 11 percent of graduate respondents to UCGSES self-reported as being parents. Among parenting graduate students, 78 percent reported being married or in a domestic partnership, compared with 17 percent of nonparenting graduate students reporting either status.
- UC Berkeley and UC Riverside have a greater percentage of parenting undergraduate students, while UC San Diego and UC Santa Barbara have the lowest percentage of parenting students. For graduate students, UC Merced and UC San Francisco have a higher percentage compared with eight percent at UC San Diego and UC Santa Barbara (Figure 1).
- By race/ethnicity,⁶ among parenting undergraduate students, 46 percent are members of underrepresented groups (URGs—African American, American Indian, and Chicano/Latina), compared with 32 percent of nonparenting undergraduate students (Figure 2). Among parenting graduate students, 23 percent are students from URGs, compared with 16 percent of nonparenting graduate students.

QUICK FACTS

About 2 percent of undergraduate student respondents in 2022 (1,015) and 2024 (865) reported being parents. About 11 percent of graduate student respondents in 2021 (1,352) and 2023 (1,485) reported being parents.

Figure 1. Percent of parenting student by campus:

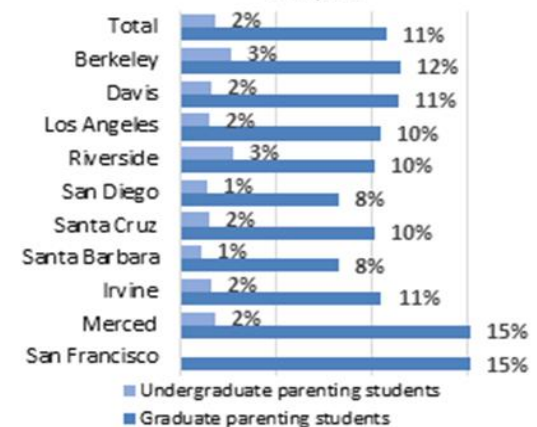
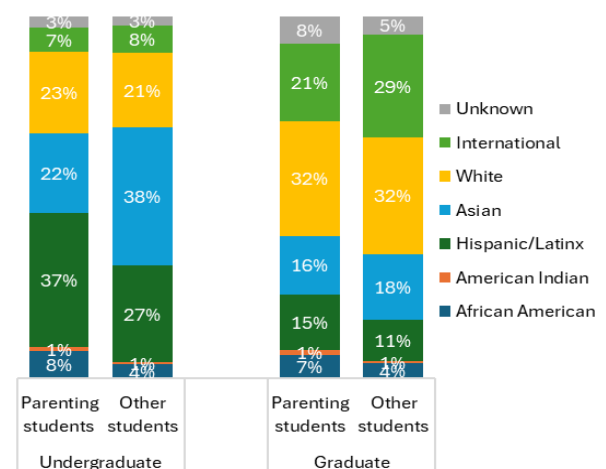


Figure 2. Parenting students by race/ethnicity



⁶ "International" is not a race or ethnicity category. Federal IPEDS guidelines classify international students under "Nonresident Alien" and exclude them from U.S. racial/ethnic subgroup counts. UC reporting often includes international students in the overall race/ethnicity breakdown to provide a more complete picture of the student population.

Parenting students

- By discipline, parenting undergraduate students are most likely to enroll in Social Sciences (33 percent) while nonparenting undergraduate students are most likely to enroll in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) fields (46 percent) (Figure 3). Parenting graduate students are more likely to be enrolled in STEM fields (44 percent) but at a lower rate than that of nonparenting graduate students (59 percent).
- The gender distribution of parenting students is comparable to that of nonparenting students (Figure 4). Among parenting undergraduate students, 60 percent are female compared with 62 percent of nonparenting undergraduate students. For graduate students, 51 percent of parenting students are female, slightly lower than the 55 percent figure for nonparenting graduate students. In terms of male enrollment, 38 percent of parenting undergraduate students and 35 percent of nonparenting undergraduate students identify as male. Among graduate students, 47 percent of parenting students and 43 percent of nonparenting students are male. Students identifying as nonbinary make up 2 percent of both parenting and nonparenting undergraduate populations, while less than 1 percent of parenting and nonparenting graduate students identify as nonbinary.
- Among undergraduates, the share of parenting students by residency is close to the share of nonparenting students by residency. Parenting students are slightly more likely to be California residents at 88 percent compared with 84 percent for nonparenting students (Figure 5). However, parenting graduate students are more likely to be non-California residents than nonparenting graduate students (26 percent versus 16 percent).
- Forty-seven percent of parenting undergraduate students are more than 30 years old, and 52 percent of nonparenting undergraduate students are between 20 and 22 years old (Figure 6). Eighty-four percent of parenting graduate students are age 30 and above, and 34 percent are more than 40 years old (Figure 7). By comparison, about 49 percent of nonparenting graduate students are between 25 and 29 years old.

Figure 3. Parenting students by discipline

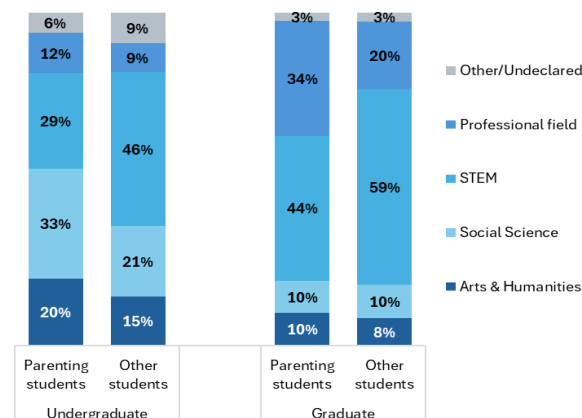


Figure 4. Parenting students by gender

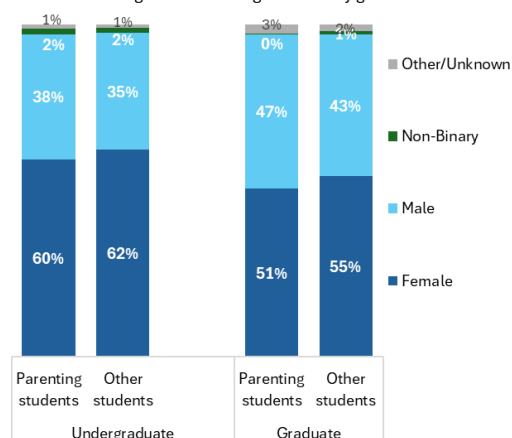
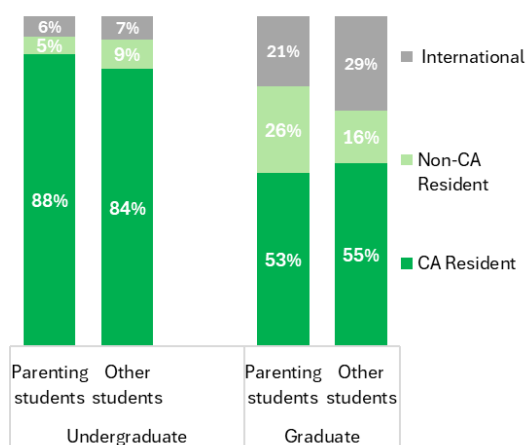
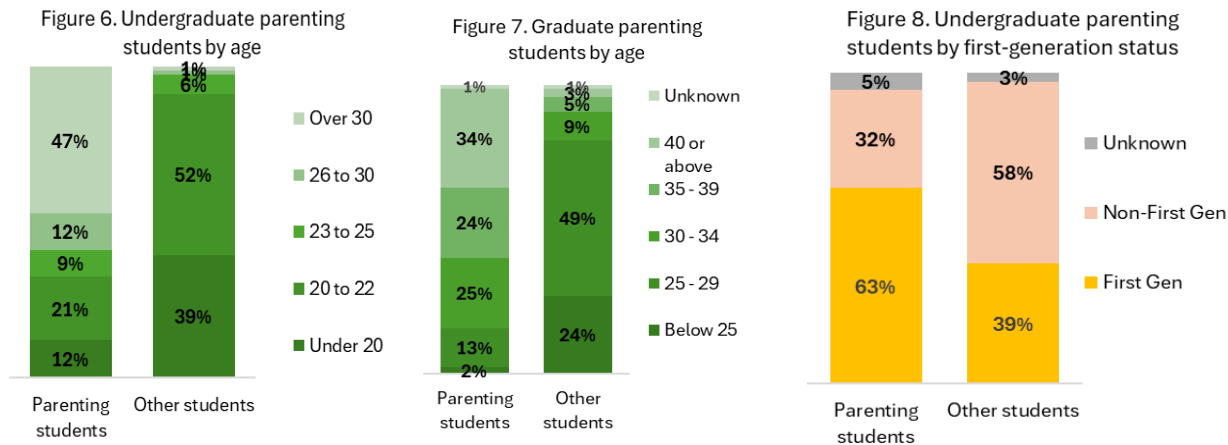


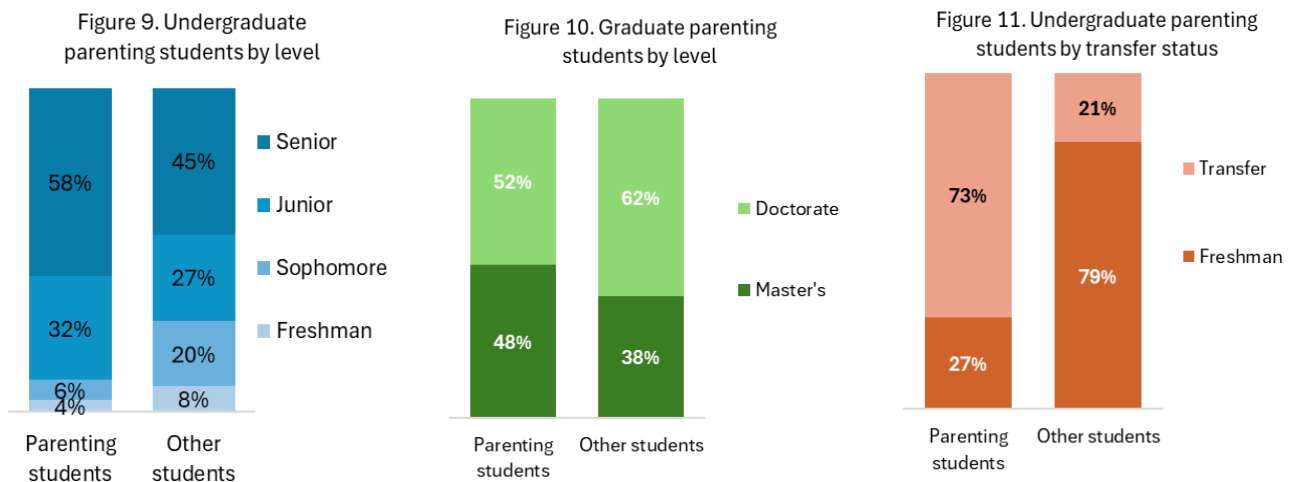
Figure 5. Parenting students by residency



- Figure 8 shows parenting undergraduate students are much more likely to be first-generation students (63 percent) than are nonparenting undergraduate students (39 percent).⁷



- Fifty-eight percent of parenting undergraduate students are in their senior year, compared with 45 percent of nonparenting undergraduates (Figure 9). By graduate student level, master's degree students are more likely to be parenting students than doctoral students (Figure 10).
- By applicant level, seventy-three percent of parenting undergraduate students are transfer students, compared with 21 percent for nonparenting undergraduate students (Figure 11).⁸



Undergraduate parenting students' experiences, challenges and success

Affordability and basic needs

Parenting undergraduate students are very concerned about the affordability of college and have basic needs challenges (Figure 12).

- A large majority of parenting undergraduate students (76 percent) reported being at least somewhat concerned about paying for their education, compared to 73 percent of

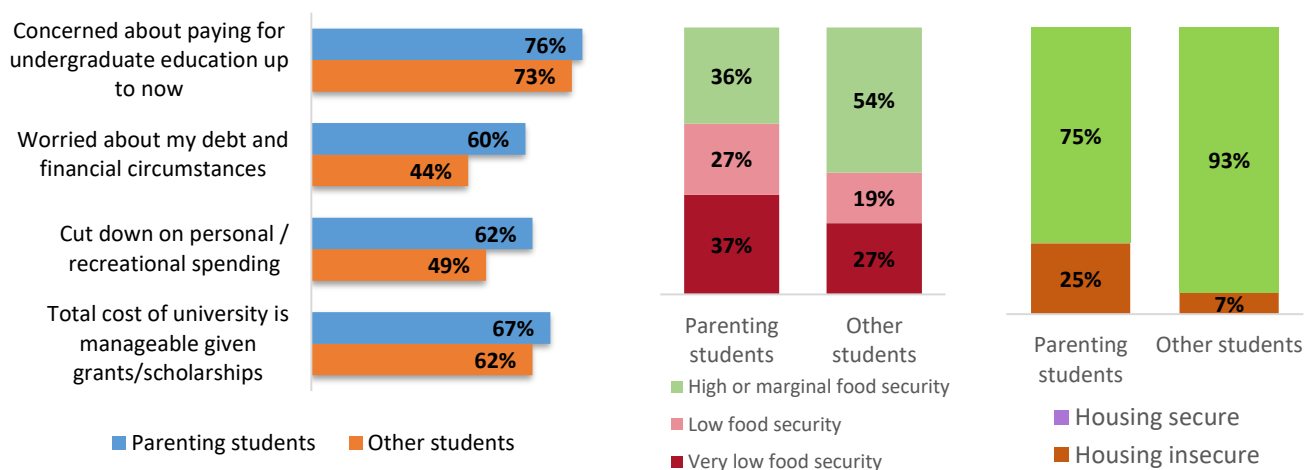
⁷ First-generation status data is not available for graduate students.

⁸ Applicant level is not applicable for graduate students.

nonparenting undergraduate students. Parenting undergraduate students are more worried about their debt and financial circumstances (60 percent) and are more likely to cut down on personal/recreational spending (62 percent) than nonparenting undergraduate students (44 percent and 49 percent, respectively). However, parenting undergraduate students (67 percent) were more likely to at least somewhat agree that the total cost of the university was manageable than nonparenting undergraduate students (62 percent). This may be because parenting students were likely to receive grants and scholarships.

- Parenting undergraduate students are more likely to experience challenges in meeting their basic needs than nonparenting undergraduate students. Close to two-thirds (64 percent) of undergraduate student parents reported having experienced food insecurity, significantly higher than nonparenting undergraduate students (46 percent). Notably, 10 percentage-point more parenting students reported very low food security than did their nonparenting peers. Twenty-five percent of parenting undergraduate students reported being housing insecure within the 12 months before the surveys, compared with 7 percent of nonparenting students.

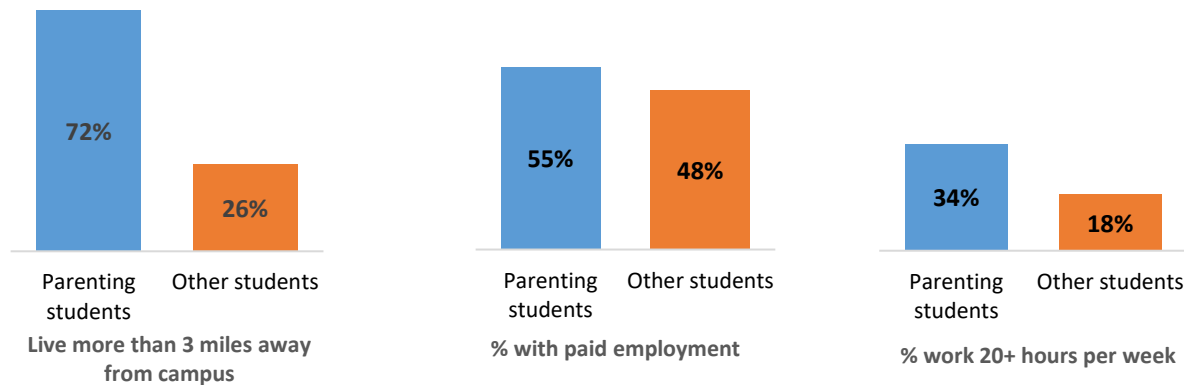
Figure 12: Parenting undergraduate students' financial concerns and basic needs, 2022 and 2024



Parenting undergraduate students generally live farther away from campus and spend more time working (Figure 13).

- A majority of parenting undergraduate students (72 percent) lived more than three miles from campus, while only 26 percent of nonparenting undergraduate students did.
- More than half (55 percent) of the parenting undergraduate student respondents reported having paid employment during the current academic year, compared with 48 percent for nonparenting undergraduate students. Among them, 34 percent worked over 20 hours in a typical week, compared with 18 percent of nonparenting students with paid employment.

Figure 13: Undergraduate parenting students' housing and employment, 2022 and 2024

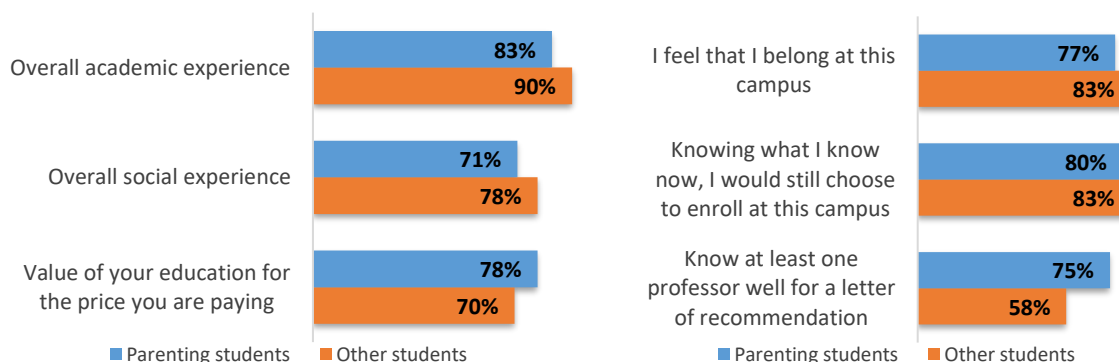


Experience and challenges

Overall, most parenting undergraduate students were at least somewhat satisfied with their experience at UC (Figure 14).

- Eighty-three percent of parenting undergraduate students were at least somewhat satisfied with their overall academic experience, compared with 90 percent for nonparenting undergraduate students, and 71 percent were at least somewhat satisfied with their overall social experience, below the 78 percent share of nonparenting undergraduate students.
- Seventy-eight percent of parenting undergraduate students were at least somewhat satisfied with the value of their education for the price they were paying, compared with 70 percent for nonparenting undergraduate students.
- Seventy-seven percent of parenting undergraduate students said they felt they belonged on the campus where they enrolled, compared with 83 percent for nonparenting undergraduate students.
- Eighty percent of parenting undergraduate students said they would still choose to enroll at the same UC campus, about the same as nonparenting undergraduates (83 percent).
- Parenting undergraduate students are more likely to know their professors well. Three-quarters of them said they can ask at least one professor for a letter of recommendation, 17 percentage points higher than for nonparenting undergraduate students (58 percent).

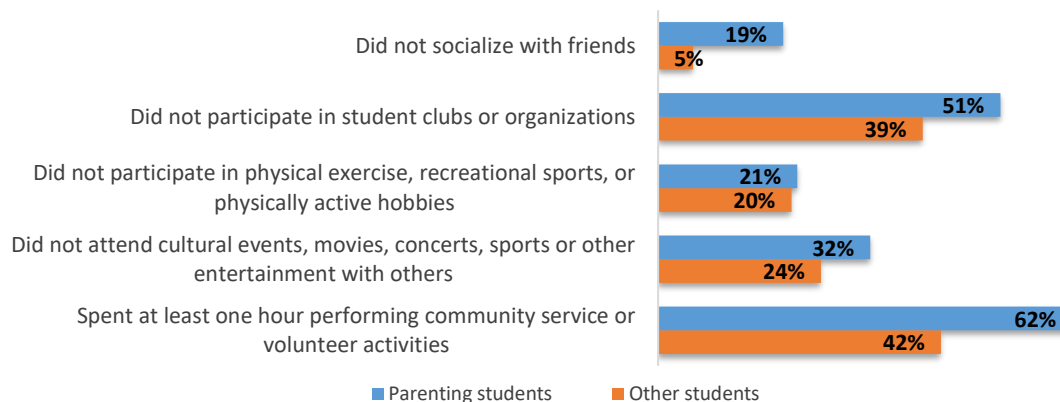
Figure 14: Satisfaction and belonging of undergraduate parenting students, 2022 and 2024



Parenting undergraduate students are less likely to spend time participating in extracurricular activities and student organizations but are significantly more likely to perform community service and engage in volunteer activities (Figure 15).

- In a typical week, 19 percent of parenting undergraduate students reported that they did not spend any time socializing with friends, compared with only 5 percent for nonparenting undergraduate students. Fifty-one percent of parenting undergraduate students said that they did not participate in student organizations, compared with 39 percent for nonparenting students.
- Similar shares of parenting and nonparenting undergraduate students reported that they did not spend any time participating in physical activities (21 percent and 20 percent respectively). In addition, parenting undergraduate students (32 percent) are less likely to spend any time participating in cultural events or other entertainment with others than nonparenting undergraduate students (24 percent).
- Parenting undergraduate students (62 percent) are significantly more likely to spend at least one hour performing community service or engaging in volunteer activities in a typical week than are nonparenting students (42 percent).

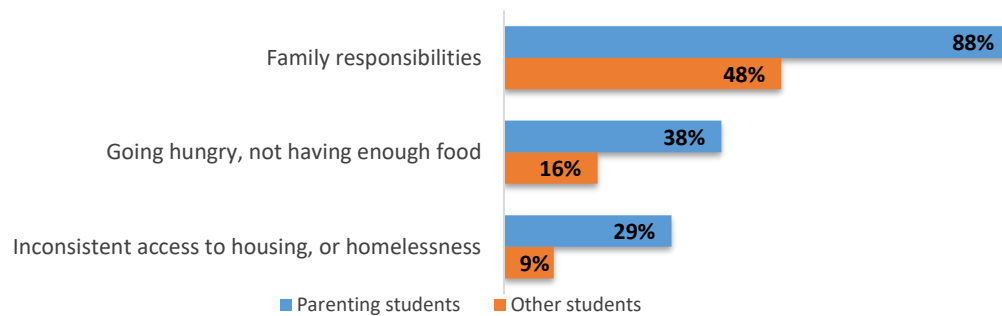
Figure 15: Extracurricular experience of undergraduate parenting students in a typical week, 2022 and 2024



Parenting undergraduate students' obstacles to academic success tend to be related to their family responsibilities (Figure 16).

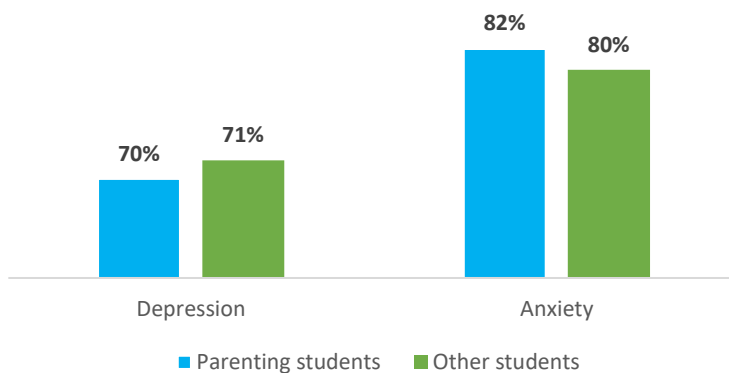
- Eighty-eight percent of parenting undergraduate students reported to at least occasionally having family responsibilities pose an obstacle to their schoolwork or academic success, 40 percentage points higher than that of nonparenting undergraduate students (48 percent).
- Significantly more parenting undergraduate students than nonparenting undergraduate students reported that their food and housing insecurities affected their academic success: 38 percent said that going hungry or not having enough food was an obstacle to their academic success, and 29 percent said that homelessness was an obstacle, compared with 16 percent and 9 percent, respectively, for nonparenting students.

Figure 16: Obstacles to academic success of undergraduate parenting students experienced at least occasionally during the academic year, 2022 and 2024



Parenting undergraduate students share similar depression and anxiety levels as nonparenting students, with parenting students indicating slightly lower rates of depression and slightly higher rates of anxiety (Figure 17).

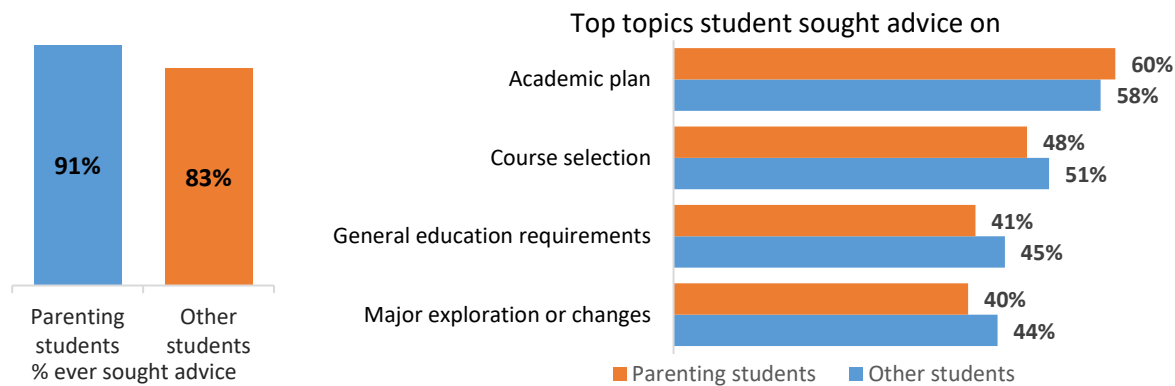
Figure 17: Depression and anxiety of undergraduate parenting students, 2022 and 2024



Advising

Parenting undergraduate students are more likely to seek advice than their peers. Over 90 percent of them reported having sought advice during the academic year, compared with 83 percent of nonparenting students (Figure 18). With regard to common topics about which students seek advice, a slightly higher percentage of parenting students chose academic planning than their peers (60 percent versus 58 percent), whereas slightly lower percentages of them chose course selection (48 percent versus 51 percent), general education requirements (41 percent versus 45 percent) and major evaluation or changes (40 percent versus 44 percent).

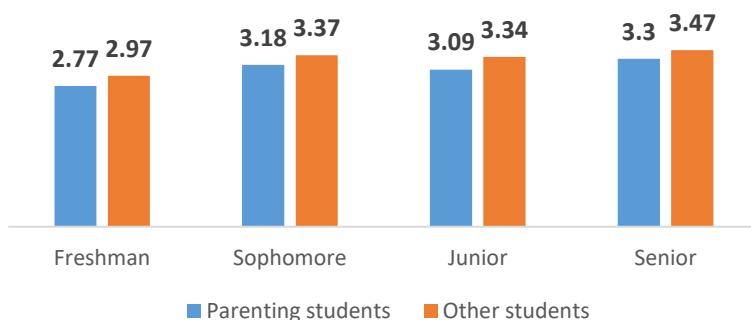
Figure 18: Advising experience of undergraduate parenting, 2022 and 2024



Success and postgraduation plan

Among all parenting students who responded to the UCUES 2022 and 2024 surveys, the cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA) at each student level is slightly lower than that of their nonparenting peers (Figure 19).

Figure 19: UC GPA of undergraduate parenting students



The number of first-year parenting students is too small to reliably calculate graduation rates. Table 2 thus focuses on transfer students' outcomes. Among parenting transfer students who responded to the 2022 UCUES survey, the average first-year cumulative GPA was 3.26, only slightly lower than the 3.30 average for nonparenting students.

For 2021 transfer enrollees, the two-year graduation rate for parenting students was 51 percent — 13 percentage points lower than their nonparenting peers (64 percent).

When outcomes are examined in light of housing and food security status, additional differences emerge (Table 2).

- By housing security, the graduation gap between parenting students who are housing secure and those who are housing insecure is relatively small — 50 percent versus 49 percent. By contrast, the gap is more pronounced among nonparenting students, whose two-year graduation rates are 65 percent (housing secure) and 55 percent (housing insecure).
- Food insecurity was associated with greater differences in graduation rates for parenting students. Parenting students who are food insecure have a lower two-year graduation rate

(44 percent) than those who are food secure (59 percent). Among nonparenting students, those who are food insecure graduate at a rate of 59 percent, compared with 68 percent for those who are food secure.

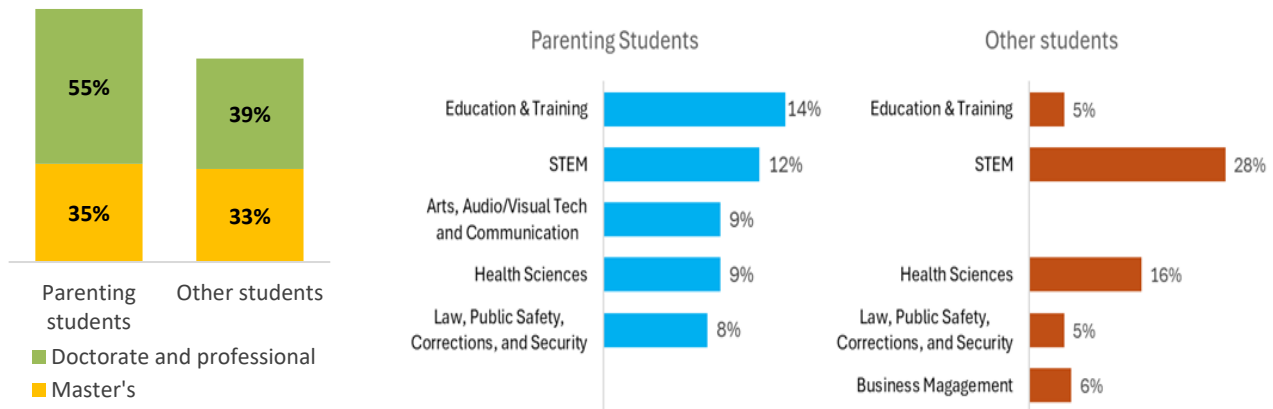
Table 2: Graduation rate and UC GPA of transfer undergraduate parenting students: overall and by basic needs status

		1 st Year UC GPA (all transfer entrants who responded to 2022 survey)		2-Year Graduation Rate (2021 transfer entrants)	
		N	Mean GPA	N	Graduation Rate
Parenting students		540	3.26	200	51%
Nonparenting students		8,321	3.30	4,223	64%
Parenting students	Housing secure	411	3.29	150	50%
Nonparenting students	Housing secure	6,673	3.32	3,432	65%
Parenting students	Housing insecure	71	3.19	29	49%
Nonparenting students	Housing insecure	803	3.16	353	55%
Parenting students	Food secure	231	3.33	93	59%
Nonparenting students	Food secure	3,949	3.38	2,140	68%
Parenting students	Food insecure	298	3.22	101	44%
Nonparenting students	Food insecure	4,269	3.23	2,028	59%

Undergraduate parenting students are more likely to indicate that they plan to earn a graduate degree eventually and prefer working in education and STEM fields (Figure 20).

- Ninety percent of parenting undergraduate students would like to earn at least a master's degree eventually, compared with 72 percent for nonparenting undergraduate students.
- The top careers that parenting undergraduate students plan to pursue include education and training, STEM, health science, arts and law. While 28 percent of nonparenting undergraduate students are likely to choose STEM fields, only 12 percent of parenting undergraduate students are likely to choose STEM.

Figure 20: Highest degree and top careers to have eventually after graduation for undergraduate parenting students, 2022 and 2024



Graduate parenting students' experiences, challenges and successes

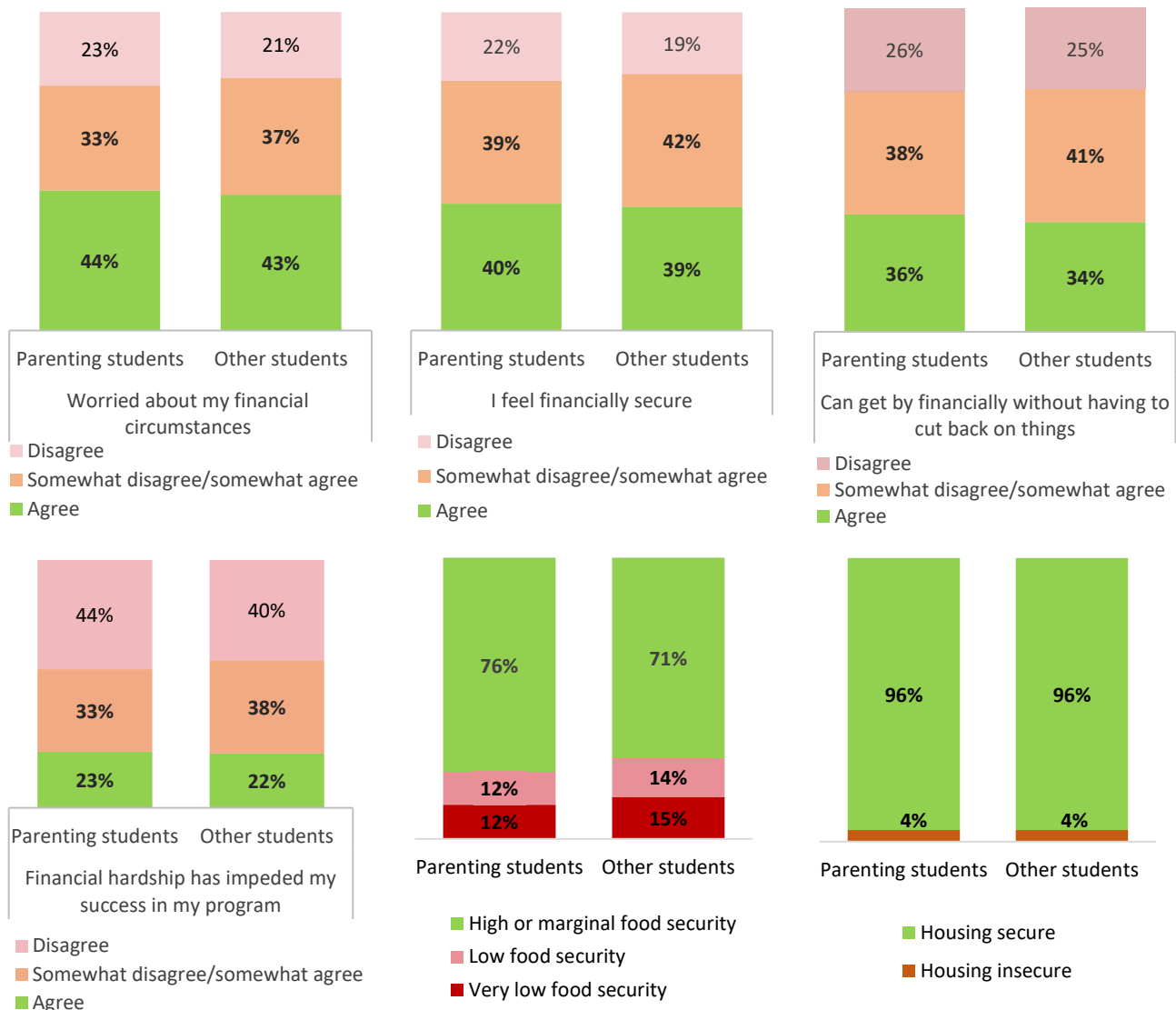
Affordability and basic needs

Graduate parenting students have similar financial and basic needs concerns as nonparenting graduate students (Figure 21).

- Forty-four percent of parenting graduate students reported being worried about their financial circumstances. Forty percent said they felt financially secure, and 36 percent said they could get by financially without having to cut back on things important to them. Nonparenting graduate students responded similarly at 43 percent, 39 percent and 34 percent, respectively.
- Twenty-three percent of parenting graduate students indicated that their financial hardship has impeded their success in their program, at a slightly higher rate than nonparenting graduate students at 22 percent.
- Parenting graduate students reported slightly lower rates of *very low* and *low* food security (both at 12 percent), compared with nonparenting graduate students, who reported rates of 15 percent for *very low* food security and 14 percent for *low* food security.

Both parenting and nonparenting students reported similar rates of housing insecurity, at 4 percent.

Figure 21: Financial situations of graduate parenting students, 2021 and 2023

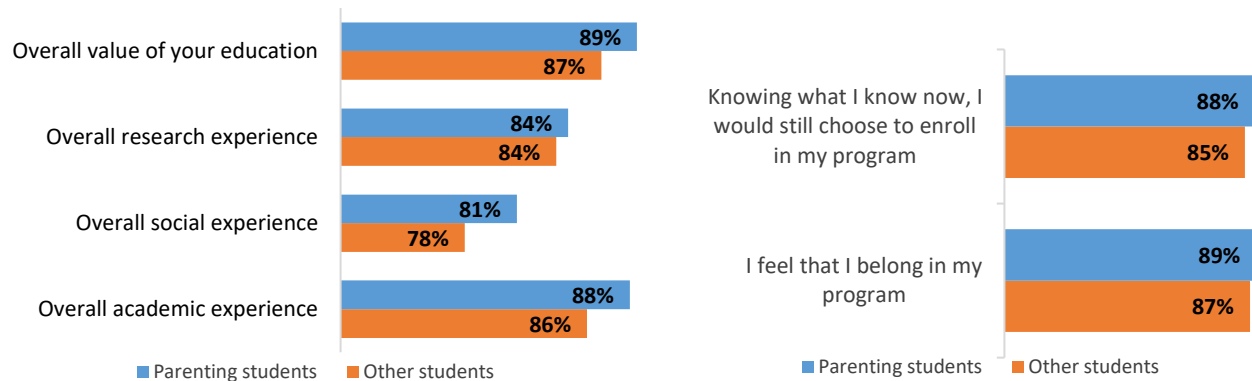


Experience and challenges at UC

A large majority of parenting graduate students are satisfied with their overall experience at UC (Figure 22).

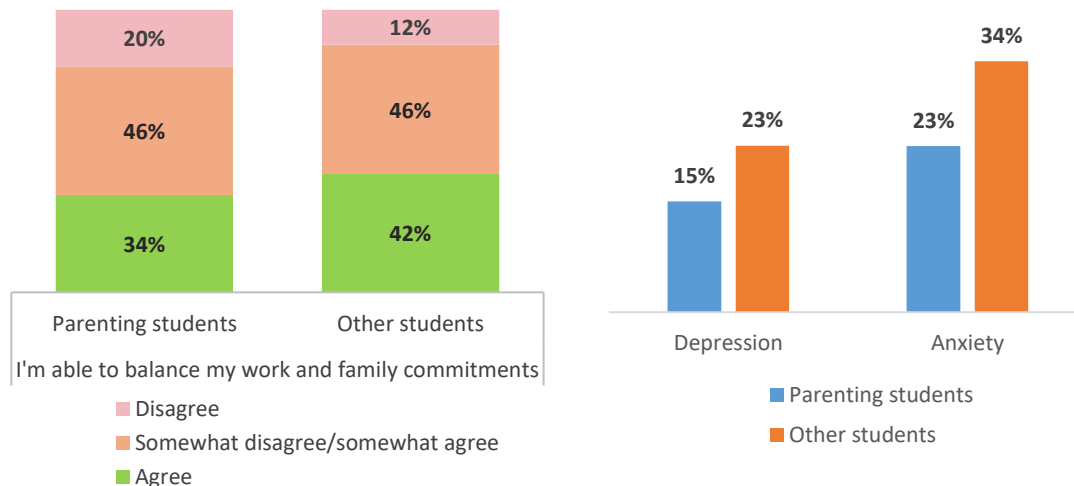
- Parenting graduate students are slightly more likely to be at least somewhat satisfied with the overall value of education at UC (89 percent), research experience (84 percent), social experience (81 percent) and academic experience (88 percent) than nonparenting graduate students at 87 percent, 84 percent, 78 percent and 86 percent respectively. Meanwhile, they also have similar levels of sense-of-belonging (89 percent versus 87 percent) and willingness to enroll in the same program knowing what they know now (88 percent versus 85 percent).

Figure 22: Satisfaction with overall experience of graduate parenting students, 2021 & 2023



Thirty-four percent of parenting graduate students agreed that they were able to balance their work and family commitments, compared with 42 percent of nonparenting graduate students. Parenting graduate students were more likely to disagree about being able to balance their work and family commitments (20 percent) than nonparenting graduate students (12 percent) (Figure 22). Fifteen percent of parenting graduate students reported being depressed and 23 percent reported being anxious, versus 23 and 34 percent for nonparenting graduate students, respectively. (Figure 23).

Figure 23: Balance between work and family, depression and anxiety of graduate parenting students, 2021 and 2023

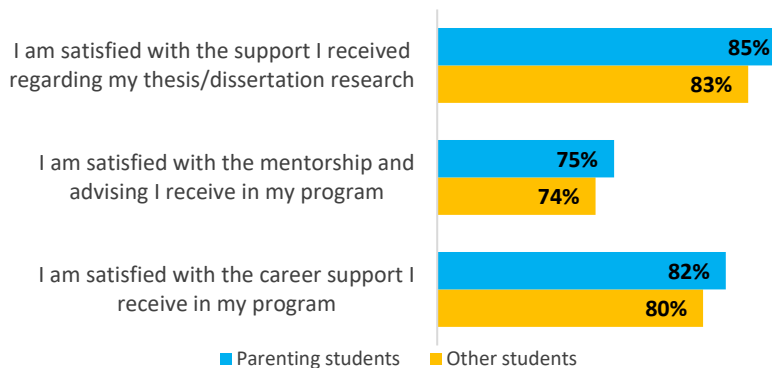


Advising

Parenting graduate students shared similar satisfaction levels with their advisement experiences as their peers (Figure 24).

- Parenting graduate students (85 percent) were about as satisfied with the support they received regarding their thesis/dissertation research as nonparenting graduate students (83 percent). They were also about as satisfied with the mentorship and advising they received from their program (75 percent) as nonparenting graduate students (74 percent). In addition, they were about as satisfied with the career support they received from their program (82 percent) as nonparenting graduate students (80 percent).

Figure 24: Advising experience of graduate parenting students, 2021 and 2023



Success

Parenting graduate students are generally more prepared for their postgraduate career than their peers (Figure 25).

- Fifty-three percent of parenting graduate students felt upbeat about their postgraduation career prospects, compared with 44 percent for nonparenting graduate students.
- Forty-five percent of parenting graduate students said they were prepared for the job search process, compared with 34 percent for nonparenting graduate students.
- Sixty-seven percent of parenting students said their postgraduation career will be in the same or a similar field as their graduate studies, a bit higher than their nonparenting peers at 62 percent.
- Fifty-six percent of parenting graduate students said they had a sense of direction toward their postgraduation career, compared with 47 percent for nonparenting graduate students.
- More parenting graduate students indicated that their graduate program has been preparing them for the career they want postgraduation (50 percent) and that their graduate program offers enough career exploration resources (44 percent), while nonparenting graduate students report such at 43 percent and 39 percent, respectively.

Figure 25: Career prospects of graduate parenting students, 2021 and 2023



Childcare

According to the 2022 Graduate Cost of Attendance Survey, graduate students with children reported spending an average of \$1,150 per month on childcare (Table 3). Those with one child spent an average of \$1,080, while students with two or more children spent \$1,240. Among campuses, Santa Cruz parenting students reported the highest average monthly childcare costs at \$1,500, while those at Merced reported the lowest, at \$780.

Table 3: Monthly childcare average for parenting students⁹

Campus	One Child	Two or more children	Average
Berkeley	\$1,260	\$1,590	\$1,410
Davis	\$1,010	\$1,210	\$1,100
Irvine	\$940	\$1,190	\$1,080
Los Angeles	\$1,190	\$1,190	\$1,190
Merced	\$680	\$940	\$780
Riverside	\$820	\$790	\$810
San Diego	\$1,080	\$1,300	\$1,190
San Francisco	1,250	\$1,110	\$1,190
Santa Barbara	\$930	\$1,010	\$960
Santa Cruz	\$1,360	\$1,740	\$1,500
System	\$1,080	\$1,240	\$1,150

⁹ <https://www.ucop.edu/enrollment-services/data-and-reporting/graduate-student-support/2022-gcoas-report-final.pdf>

Conclusion

- Data from UCUES and UCGSES offer key insights into the educational experiences of student parents across the University of California system.
- Parenting undergraduate students are more likely to be transfer students, over the age of 30 and the first in their families to attend college. They are also more likely to identify as members of underrepresented groups. They are disproportionately enrolled in social science disciplines. Compared with their peers, parenting undergraduate students are more likely to be in their senior year. While they report similar levels of satisfaction with their academic and social experiences, they are less engaged in student organizations, extracurricular activities and campus events. However, they are more likely to volunteer. They live farther from campus and work more hours than their nonparenting peers, as well as managing family responsibilities that often compete with their academic commitments. Although their concerns about paying for education are similar to those of nonparenting undergraduates, they express greater concern about future debt and financial stability. Additionally, they report higher rates of food and housing insecurity. Food security has a greater impact on the two-year graduation rate of parenting transfer students than on that of their nonparenting peers. Despite these challenges, they are as likely as their peers to say they would choose to enroll at UC again if given the choice.
- Parenting graduate students tend to be older — 85 percent are over the age of 30 — and are more likely to be enrolled in STEM fields. They are more likely to come from underrepresented backgrounds, compared with nonparenting graduate students. They report levels of financial stress and basic needs insecurity similar to those of their peers. Parenting graduate students experience greater difficulty balancing academic demands with work and family responsibilities; however, they report lower levels of depression and anxiety. At the same time, they express slightly higher overall satisfaction with their academic programs and campus experience, comparable satisfaction with advising and career support and a greater sense of preparedness and optimism about their postgraduation career prospects.

Appendix

Parenting student questions by survey

Questions with response(s) to identify parenting students	UCUES 2016 /2018	UCUES 2020 /2022 /2024	UCGSES 2021 /2023 /2025	COAS 1996 to 2019	COAS 2021 /2023	GCOAS 2017	GCOAS 2022	GSWBS 2016	Ph.D. Pathways 2018 /2019
Do you have dependent child(ren) who currently reside with you?		X	X						
With whom do you live? (With children)	X	X	X						
How many children or dependents (excluding your spouse) reside with you? (One and above)				X					
Do you have children or dependents (excluding your spouse) for whom you provide at least 50% of their financial support? (Yes)					X				
How many dependent children do you live with? (One and above)						X			
How many dependent children do you have full or partial financial responsibility of? (One and above)							X		
Are you a parent? (Yes)								X	X
Are you a caregiver? (Yes)								X	