



Low-Income Single Mothers at Community College:  
Recommendations for Practices to Improve Completion



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## Introduction

Low-income, single mothers beginning or returning to higher education overwhelmingly choose to pursue their goals at community colleges.<sup>1</sup> These schools often provide the best fit of available institutions because of their relative affordability, variety of offerings, ease of entry, and proximity to the student. Like other higher learning institutions, however, many community colleges struggle to address the challenges low-income, single mothers can face. Colleges often unwittingly place more obstacles in the path of these students.<sup>2</sup> Many colleges are taking action and trying a variety of approaches to improve their institutions and better serve low-income, single mother students. While some interventions have been rigorously studied, most have not. Many promising interventions, though so far lacking empirical support, have shown great success based on student and provider testimony. When taken as a whole, it is clear that community colleges can undertake effective interventions to help student parents complete their programs and meet their goals.

## Barriers to College Completion Faced by Many Low-Income, Single Mothers

Many college students face difficult barriers to graduation, and low-income, single parents often face more barriers than traditional students. In general, single mothers face many challenges that are correlated with decreased rates of college graduation. They are by definition independent students with dependents, and are more likely to be low-income.<sup>3</sup> In addition, they are more likely to be older than 18-22. They are also more likely to be the first in their immediate families to attend college. As a result, they often lack information and knowledge about higher education in areas ranging from what skills colleges expect a student to have upon entry, to the existence of and application processes for the various forms of financial aid, to course scheduling and meeting degree requirements.<sup>4</sup> Single mothers are more likely to have attended inadequate secondary schools whose shortcomings only compound these problems.<sup>5</sup> The results can be anything from relying on loans and wages instead of grants to pay for tuition<sup>6</sup>, to taking unnecessary courses and using up grant money before meeting certificate or degree requirements.<sup>7</sup>

Internal college policies and culture can also create barriers for parenting students.<sup>8</sup> Attendance policies that do not allow for children's emergencies or other realities of parenthood can make it difficult for students to make progress. Students may also interact with professors and students who can create an inhospitable environment through comments and actions that range from ignoring the presence of single mothers to making negative moral judgments about them.<sup>9</sup>

Low-income, single mothers often have to face a novel college environment while balancing other important responsibilities. Many have at least one job while attending school, and these jobs often pay low wages and have inflexible scheduling. These students also have the substantial responsibility of caring for their child or children, and meeting their immediate needs while attending school to provide them with a better future. This tenuous and often unmanageable balancing act is the source of many of the most common barriers to success in higher education. Cost of tuition and expenses, affordable and available childcare, transportation, and affordable housing are each vital, and as such, may be the source of problems. A temporary and seemingly minor issue in any of one of these areas may force a student to fail a course, drop a course, "stop out," or even drop out.

## State of the Research

There is a paucity of rigorous research on what works for single parents and other non-traditional students. Randomized control trials of specific interventions were scarce, at least until recently. Data systems do not track students whose academic careers last longer than six years, and do not follow students who transfer from one school to another. Community colleges, though recently gaining notice on the national stage, are underrepresented in the academic literature, with researchers focusing their attention on four-year institutions and "traditional" students.

Even with these large holes in the research, the available evidence does yield important guidance, if not always conclusions. There have been fairly recent robust investigations into what works at community colleges, and these sometimes include single mothers. There is also a growing body of work bringing the voices of single mother community college students to the public, explaining their experiences, what they face, and what has worked for them. Supplementing this evidence are the successes of dedicated, experienced college staff across the country. When this work is considered alongside the work at four-year institutions, the available evidence does point to some promising directions for community colleges to take. Though more study is needed, and some of it is already underway, there are some immediate steps colleges can implement to improve their schools and make them more conducive for single mothers to complete. The following section includes these recommendations.

## Reduce Time to Degree

Raising children while working and attending school is extremely difficult. As a result, some single mothers take more than ten years to complete a degree.<sup>10</sup> Eliminating unnecessary, time-wasting policies or practices can increase the likelihood low-income single mothers will complete a degree.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

**For lower-skilled students, offer options for acceleration, such as integrating career-related learning into basic skills courses and accelerated developmental (or remedial) courses.**

Too often, adult education or developmental education can be dead-ends for students. Contextualized coursework that integrates basic skills and career skills, compressed

courses, and accelerated developmental education (in which higher-skilled, developmental students are simultaneously enrolled in a credit course and supplemental instruction), have helped students increase their skills levels more quickly and improved student completion.<sup>11</sup> Compressed developmental courses can also help low-income, single mothers avoid common problems arising from recertification with public programs and subsidies.

### **Reevaluate credit requirements and institute credential audits.**

Nationally, students often take excess credits, but may still end up without a credential.<sup>12</sup> To save students time and money, review credit requirements to ensure the prerequisites and number of credits required for graduation are relevant to student educational and career paths. For example, students in many fields need pre-statistics developmental coursework, not algebra or trigonometry. Also, complete regular audits of student credits and alert students when they are near completing the credits needed for a certificate or degree.

**CASE STUDY: Washington State I-BEST** One rigorous experiment showed that students in Washington State community colleges completed at higher rates when participating in courses that integrated basic skills and workforce training. I-BEST students, more likely to be older, female, and low income, take college-level courses jointly designed by basic skills instructors and professional technical faculty.<sup>13</sup>

### **Provide services at times and places accessible to parenting students.**

With so many demands on their time, it can be difficult for single-parent students to carve out time to seek college services. Provide in-home or childcare center tutoring at hours designated by students, or advisor and financial aid office hours after 5 pm or on the weekend. An example is Instituto del Progreso Latino,<sup>14</sup> which runs several successful adult education bridge programs. Their tutors go to the homes of participants at hours the participants choose.

### **Provide domestic violence services and raise awareness across campus.**

A staggering proportion of single mother students are survivors of domestic violence. Not only do single mothers experiencing domestic violence benefit from targeted services, but raising campus awareness creates a supportive environment that benefits other survivors as well. Work with faculty and student services staff members to ensure they understand the signs of domestic violence and know how to help.

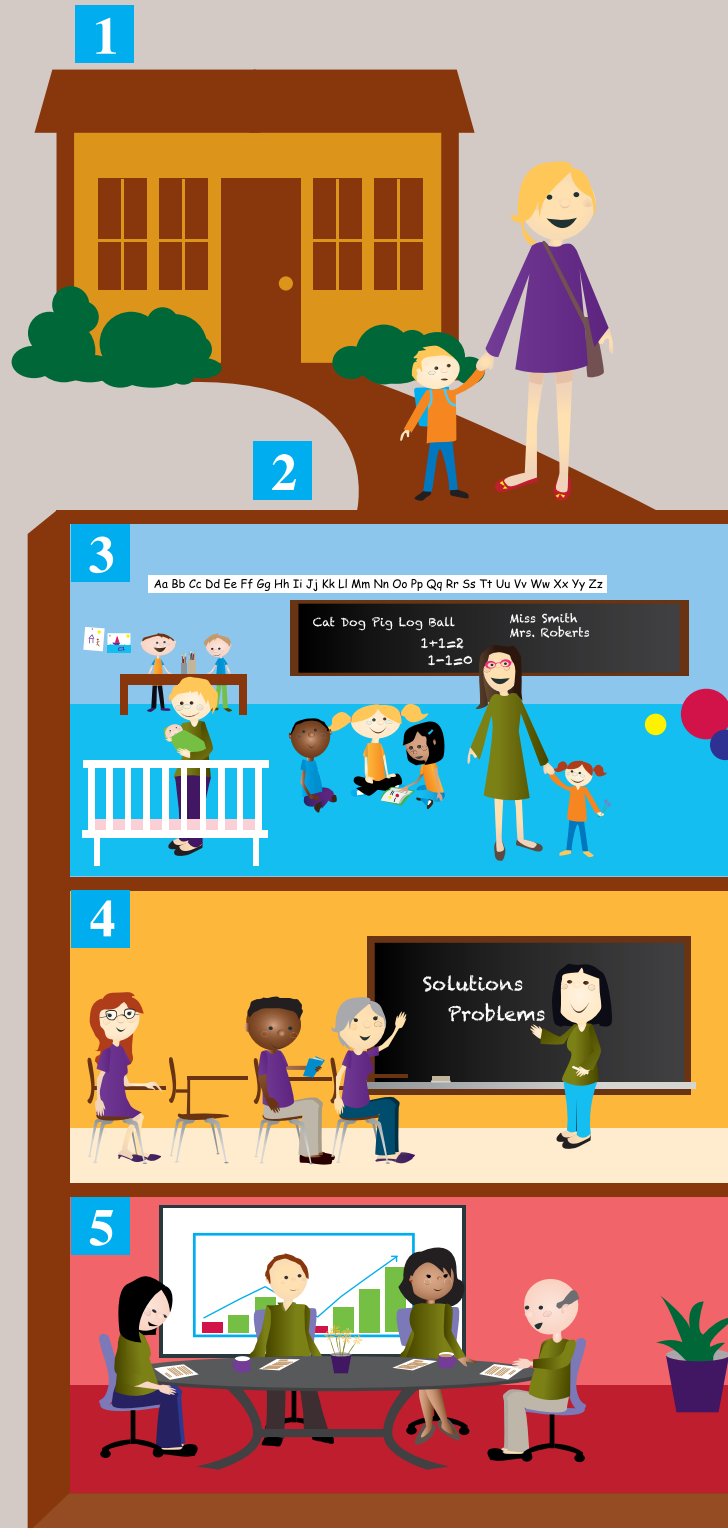
### **Provide holistic student services.**

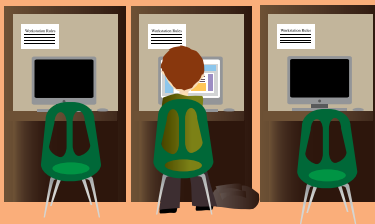
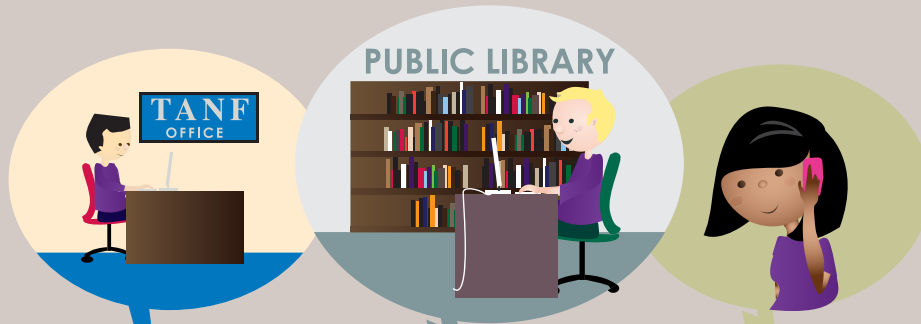
For many low-income students simply living in poverty leads to interruptions in their schooling, due, for example, to financial emergencies or sudden loss of childcare.<sup>15</sup> Non-academic student services can effectively address many of these barriers as they arise<sup>16</sup>, and coordinated support and services can also address other academic issues students may have.<sup>17</sup> Colleges can build on existing TRIO SSS programs or partner with local non-profits to expand services.<sup>18</sup> Non-profits have successfully provided everything from domestic violence services and awareness to computers for distance learning to assistance registering for public benefits, and even student housing.

**CASE STUDY: Harper College Women's Program, Palatine, IL** This holistic program provides personal support, education and career planning, and peer learning communities. It offers a variety of referrals to a range of community organizations for single parents and non-traditional career seekers, including domestic violence services. A partnership with a local non-profit provides students with a computer after building the computer skills needed to re-enter the workforce or begin a college program. Its staff aims to help participants meet their goals, whether they are to earn a certificate or degree, or to find a job quickly. They provide frequent follow-up and engage participants in a variety of college activities. Participants who attend the community college have an average GPA of 2.8 and consistently achieve semester completion rates at or beyond those of the rest of the student body.<sup>19</sup>

# Campus Practices to Improve Certificate and Degree Completion

- 1 Parenting students have assistance finding safe, affordable housing.
- 2 Single parents can access services without neglecting their other responsibilities.
- 3 Students have a reliable, close, safe, and inexpensive place for their children while the student attends courses or studies.
- 4 Basic-skill level students have accelerated paths to a degree, reducing the time needed to graduate.
- 5 Interventions to improve colleges for single mothers are tested and evaluated so effective ideas can be replicated.
- 6 Students can easily find and use an encompassing array of non-academic and academic services to address barriers as they arise.
- 7 Students receive assistance to focus their time on the right coursework to complete their programs quickly, and degree requirements are as streamlined as possible.
- 8 Students unfamiliar with the formal and unwritten expectations of higher education attend informative orientations for credit. Students are part of a learning community of peers who together take courses, experience college life and provide support.
- 9 Students are closely connected with advisors and counselors who help students achieve their academic goals. Survivors of domestic violence can easily access services while pursuing their education in a nurturing, supportive environment.
- 10 Students' financial needs are recognized beyond current formulas, and small unforeseen hardships do not force students to abandon education.





## Reduce Uncertainty

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

**Require first-year seminars, including orientation, for credit.**

This would help overcome many of the information barriers single mothers may face, whether around financial aid, curriculum, or school services, that result from being first-generation college students, from under-resourced education systems, and from being disconnected from education as independent adults.

**Increase guidance and intrusive advising.**

Counselor-to-student ratios have made guidance nearly non-existent in some community colleges.<sup>20</sup> Yet, students often need additional guidance to concentrate on a program early, an indicator of completion.<sup>21</sup> Allowing potential students to designate multiple major interests and providing them with handouts or web resources with details on related careers and income prospects could help students enter the right program earlier and help focus precious staff time. Following up with counseling and advising, especially face-to-face,<sup>22</sup> can help single mothers access needed services, focus on necessary courses, and meet career and life goals through higher education.

**Create structured programs to help students complete more quickly.**

Programs with highly structured course plans and predictable hours can help low-income single parent students complete more quickly. To increase completion rates, programs should be clearly linked to related career or educational objectives, include block scheduling, and require core pre-requisites in the first year of study.<sup>23</sup>

**Offer learning communities and cohorts for single mothers.**

These have proven effective in helping single mothers to advance their education compared with peers who experience similar barriers.<sup>24</sup> The most effective programs start as early as orientation to help engage students earlier.

### CASE STUDY: MDRC's Opening Doors Program, Kingsborough Community College, Brooklyn, NY

While rigorous research rarely focuses on single mothers in community colleges, recently expanded randomized trials at a New York community college are promising. Freshman randomly assigned to one of many small learning communities, where each cohort took three classes together and received counseling and textbooks, had a better college experience, initially earned more credits, and had slightly better persistence than their peers in the control group.<sup>25</sup>

## Reduce Economic Barriers

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

**Provide on-campus childcare, prioritizing spots for students' children.**

Adequate childcare, though a top priority for single mother students, is woefully unavailable and too often prohibitively expensive.<sup>26</sup> By providing on-campus care and emergency care, colleges can eliminate this barrier, and lessen other problems with transportation and finances. At Richland College in Illinois, students who register at the beginning of the semester can drop off their children in the childcare center when babysitters are sick or when other emergencies arise.

**Provide grants to single mothers, including emergency grants.**

### CASE STUDY: MDRC's Opening Doors Scholarship Program, New Orleans, LA

In a robust randomized control trial, MDRC tested the effects of awarding a thousand dollar scholarship each semester for two semesters to low-income, single parents at two New Orleans community colleges. The scholarships increased registration, full-time registration, and credits earned, improved social and psychological outcomes, and increased persistence, with students who received scholarships being 6.5% more likely to be registered through four semesters after the program began.<sup>27</sup>



Balancing meager finances is perhaps the most significant struggle for low-income, single mothers, and providing grants is an intervention that has proven effective.<sup>28</sup> This can be particularly important for single mothers since cost of living estimates for financial aid determination are often based on the needs of single students without children.

### **Offer housing or housing assistance for single parents.**

Though many community colleges do not offer student housing, providing it to single mothers can eliminate the most costly financial burden they have, eliminate transportation problems, and provide a vital resource to women living in abusive relationships.

#### **CASE STUDY: Single Parents Reaching Out for Unlimited Tomorrows, Baldwin-Wallace College, Berea, OH**

This holistic program at a small, four-year college provides year-round, on-campus housing for single parent students, as well as childcare, comprehensive financial aid counseling, and assistance obtaining public benefits, as well as a variety of student services. Program staff stress the importance of having participant-driven services and supporting women as they define themselves, instead of steering students to meet predefined goals. SPROUT is part of a coalition of eight small colleges, the Higher Education Alliance for Residential Single Parent Programs, providing on-campus housing to help single parents succeed.

#### **CASE STUDY: Buckner Family Place, Angelina College, Lufkin, TX**

This partnership between Angelina Community College and the non-profit Buckner Family Services provides on-campus housing and a child development center for students' children, as well as support through financial assistance, counseling, and case-management. Consistently over half of program participants finish the program with a degree or certificate, or earn one within one year of leaving the program. Over time, the effects on the next generation have also been immense, as 10 of 12 college age children of participants so far have enrolled in higher education.

## **Improve Data Collection and Test What Works**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**When implementing a new program or service, build in evaluation.**

This is a vital but all too rare aspect of intervening in higher education. Evaluation allows colleges to quickly and objectively expand or discontinue ineffective programs and invest in programs that work. It also provides information for other colleges contemplating similar interventions.

**Colleges and universities within a state can work to better collect data and track students until national data collection improves.**

Colleges should collect data disaggregated by race and gender, and also track students for at least ten years from first enrollment, as it is not uncommon for single mothers to complete in that time. This will mean tracking specific students across institutions, requiring improved communication among colleges and universities and development of a state longitudinal data system.

## **Conclusion**

As non-traditional students in general, and single mothers in particular, are making up an ever-increasing segment of the community college population, colleges must find ways to improve their services for these motivated students. Although low-income single mothers face a daunting combination of barriers to educational achievement, colleges around the country have shown how a variety of interventions can break down these barriers and allow students to succeed. As research expands to more rigorously examine what works for single mothers at community colleges, effective programs can be scaled up and replicated. By looking to other colleges' experiences, administrators can continue to make the necessary changes and investments these students deserve.

*Prepared by Matthew Graham and Meegan Dugan Bassett, with help from other Women Employed staff. Special thanks to: Julie Candela, Kathleen Canfield, Dr. Davis Jenkins, Dr. Kevin Miller, and Marisa Phillips. © 2012 Women Employed. All Rights Reserved.*

## Helpful Resources

- Achieving the Dream: <http://www.achievingthedream.org/default.html>
- Center for Law and Social Policy's Postsecondary and Economic Success webpage: <http://www.clasp.org/postsecondary/>
- Community College Research Center: <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/>
- Complete College America: [http://www.completecollege.org/resources\\_and\\_reports/](http://www.completecollege.org/resources_and_reports/)
- Institute for Women's Policy Research's Education and Training webpage (including their Student Parent Success Initiative): <http://www.iwpr.org/initiatives/access-to-higher-education>
- Higher Education Alliance of Advocates for Students with Children: <http://www.heaasc.org/>
- Lumina Foundation's Community Colleges webpage: [http://www.luminafoundation.org/newsroom/topics.html?\\_stopic=3](http://www.luminafoundation.org/newsroom/topics.html?_stopic=3)
- MDRC's Higher Education webpage: [http://www.mdrc.org/area\\_index\\_5.html](http://www.mdrc.org/area_index_5.html)

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Profile of Undergraduate Students: 2007-08, National Center for Educational Statistics, NPSAS, U.S. Department of Education (September 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Welfare Recipients Attending College: The Interplay of Oppression and Resistance by Karen Christopher, *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* (September 2005).

<sup>3</sup> 78% of single parent, higher education students were low-income in '07-'08. Profile of Undergraduate Students: 2007-08, National Center for Educational Statistics, NPSAS, U.S. Department of Education (September 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Figure 7 in *Improving Child Care Access to Promote Postsecondary Success Among Low-Income Parents* by Kevin Miller, Ph.D., Barbara Gault, Ph.D., and Abby Thorman, Ph.D., Institute for Women's Policy Research (March 2011); *Unmarried Parents in College* by Sara Goldrick-Rab and Kia Sorensen, *www.futureofchildren.org* (Fall 2010).

<sup>5</sup> *Student Parents Face Significant Challenges to Postsecondary Success* by Kevin Miller, Ph.D. (December 2010).

<sup>6</sup> *Unmarried Parents in College* by Sara Goldrick-Rab and Kia Sorensen, *www.futureofchildren.org* (Fall 2010).

<sup>7</sup> *Improving Child Care Access to Promote Postsecondary Success Among Low-Income Parents* by Kevin Miller, Ph.D., Barbara Gault, Ph.D., and Abby Thorman, Ph.D., Institute for Women's Policy Research (March 2011).

<sup>8</sup> *Welfare Recipients Attending College: The Interplay of Oppression and Resistance* by Karen Christopher, *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* (September 2005).

<sup>9</sup> "Pretty Darned Cold": *Single Mother Students and the Community College Climate in Post-Welfare Reform America* by Jillian M. Duquaine-Watson, *Equity & Excellence in Education* (2007); *Going At It Alone: Single-Mother Undergraduate's Experiences* by Tamara Yakoboski, *De Gruyter Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* (2010).

<sup>10</sup> *Passing the Torch: Does Higher Education for the Disadvantaged Pay Off Across the Generations?* Paul Attewell, David Lavin, Thurston Domina, Tania Levey, *American Sociological Association's Rose Series in Sociology* (March 2009).

<sup>11</sup> *Success Rates for Students Taking Compressed and Regular Length Developmental Courses in the Community College* by Caroline Q. Sheldon and Nathan R. Durdella, *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* (2009); *Accelerating the Academic Achievement of Students Referred to Developmental Education* by Nikki Edgecombe, CCRC Working Paper No. 30, *Assessment of Evidence Series* (February 2011); *Exponential Attrition and the Promise of Acceleration in Developmental English and Math* by Katie Hern with contributions from Myrna Snell (June 2010).

<sup>12</sup> *Time is the Enemy* by Complete College America (2011).

<sup>13</sup> *Educational Outcomes of I-BEST, Washington State Community and Technical College System's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training Program: Findings from a Multivariate Analysis* by Davis Jenkins, Matthew Zeidenberg and Gregory S. Kienzl, CCRC Working Paper No. 16 (2009); *Integrating Basic Skills and Career-Technical Instruction: Findings From a Field Study of Washington State's I-BEST Model* by John Wachen, Davis Jenkins and Michelle Van Noy, *Community College Review* (April 2011).

<sup>14</sup> See IDPL's Adult Education page for more about their bridge program. [www.idpl.org/idpl\\_adult\\_edu.html](http://www.idpl.org/idpl_adult_edu.html)

<sup>15</sup> *Investing in Success: Educational Supports for Illinois Community College Students by Women Employed* (2006).

<sup>16</sup> *Toward a New Understanding of Non-Academic Student Support: Four Mechanisms Encouraging Positive Student Outcomes in the Community College* (CCRC Working Paper No. 28, *Assessment of Evidence Series*) by Melinda Mechur Karp. New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University (February 2011).

<sup>17</sup> *Unmarried Parents in College* by Sara Goldrick-Rab and Kia Sorensen, *www.futureofchildren.org* (Fall 2010).

<sup>18</sup> *Predictors of First-Year Student Retention in the Community College* by David S. Fike and Renea Fike, *Community College Review* (October 2008); *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research, Volume 2* by Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini, Jossey-Bass (February 2005).

<sup>19</sup> *Harper College Women's Program* (Clear Connections Project Promising Practice series) by Women Employed (2011).

<sup>20</sup> *After Admission: From College Access to College Success* by James E. Rosenbaum, Regina Deil-Amen, and Ann E. Person, Russell Sage Foundation (2006).

<sup>21</sup> *Get with the Program: Accelerating Community College Students' Entry into and Completion of Programs of Study* (CCRC Working Paper No. 32) by Davis Jenkins, Community College Research Center (April 2011).

<sup>22</sup> *Defending the Community College Equity Agenda* edited by Dr. Thomas Bailey and Dr. Vanessa Smith Morest, Community College Research Center (2006).

<sup>23</sup> *More Guidance, Better Results? Three-Year Effects of an Enhanced Student Services Program at Two Community Colleges* by Susan Scrivener and Michael J. Weiss, with Jedediah J. Teres, MDRC (August 2009); *Time is the Enemy* by Complete College America (2011).

<sup>24</sup> *Paths to Persistence: An Analysis of Research on Program Effectiveness at Community Colleges* by Thomas R. Bailey and Mariana Alfonso, Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University (January, 2005); *Access Without Support is Not Opportunity* by Cathy Engstrom and Vincent Tinto, *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* (January-February 2008).

<sup>25</sup> *A Good Start: Two-Year Effects of a Freshmen Learning Community Program at Kingsborough Community College* by Susan Scrivener, Dan Bloom, Allen LeBlanc, Christina Paxson, Cecilia Elena Rouse, and Colleen Sommo with Jenny Au, Jedediah J. Teres, and Susan Yeh, MDRC (March 2008).

<sup>26</sup> *Improving Child Care Access to Promote Postsecondary Success Among Low-Income Parents* by Kevin Miller, Ph.D., Barbara Gault, Ph.D., and Abby Thorman, Ph.D., Institute for Women's Policy Research (March 2011).

<sup>27</sup> *Rewarding Persistence: Effects of a Performance-Based Scholarship Program for Low-Income Parents* by Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Thomas Brock, Allen LeBlanc, Christina Paxson, Cecilia Elena Rouse, and Lisa Barrow, MDRC (January 2009).

<sup>28</sup> *On Money and Motivation: A Quasi-Experimental Analysis of Financial Incentives for College Achievement* by Judith Scott-Clayton, *The Journal of Human Resources*, v.46 (3), (Summer 2011).



# It's up to us.

Women Employed's mission is to improve women's economic status and remove barriers to economic equity. We promote fair workplace practices, increase access to training and education, and provide women with innovative tools and information to move into careers paying family-supporting wages.



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