



College Access for the Working Poor: Overcoming Burdens to Succeed in Higher Education

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College Access for the Working Poor: Overcoming Burdens to Succeed in Higher Education, a major report by the **Institute for Higher Education Policy**, examines the precarious position of working poor students in our society. At the prospect of attending postsecondary education, these students realize it requires navigating through a minefield of conflicting work and family demands. The report points out the unique barriers working poor students experience and calls attention to the need for policies and practices to raise expectations, enrollment, and completion rates of the working poor.

Although hard working, people from working poor families earn below or only slightly above the poverty level. The fluidity of these individuals' lives often includes dramatic circumstances such as the loss of a job, increased or decreased work hours, or changes in family matters. Many working poor adults and their children seek higher education opportunities to improve their lives, but often struggle to meet ever-increasing postsecondary expenses and navigate through the world of college. Working poor adults in particular must often make trade-offs between working and attending school that, in many cases, inhibits their ability to successfully complete a degree. These unique barriers must be addressed so that the working poor have the same opportunities to enter and complete college as do other populations.

Working Poor Adults

Working poor adults enrolled in postsecondary education are those who are considered financially independent, for financial aid purposes, and work at least modestly while enrolled. Heavy work responsibilities and financial constraints together make it difficult for these individuals to reach education levels equal to their counterparts. Those who do make their way to college understand that earning a degree helps them to improve their skills and increase their earnings potential. However, given their work and other responsibilities, it is difficult for them to enroll full time, thus making it harder for them to receive financial aid and complete necessary coursework.

- In 2003–04, 43 percent of working poor adults who were enrolled as undergraduates saw themselves primarily as students working to meet their expenses. Yet, only 37 percent were able to enroll exclusively full time.
- The tendency for working poor adults to attend college less than full time likely limits the amount of grants that they receive. Only 54 percent of working poor adults received a grant in 2003–04, with an average amount of nearly \$3,000. For comparison, 67 percent of non-working poor adult students, who are more likely to attend full time, received a grant of slightly more than \$3,500 on average.
- While most working poor adults are unable to cover the price of postsecondary attendance out of pocket, in 2003–04 working poor adults were left with nearly \$4,000 to pay for college after receiving the available financial aid.
- The combination of financial and work constraints coupled with less than full-time attendance often limits working poor adults' ability to successfully earn a postsecondary credential. Six years after beginning college in 1995–96, nearly half of working poor adult students who began in a degree or certificate program had left without attaining a credential, frequently citing financial concerns and changes in family status as reasons for leaving.

Working Poor Youth

The financial stress that characterizes the lives of working poor adults reaches into the lives of their children. Because the educational attainment among working poor adults is generally low, youth from working poor families who enroll in college are frequently the first in their families to do so—in 2003–04, 37 percent of financially dependent students 23 and younger were first-generation college students.

- These youth face multiple barriers gaining information about college and sometimes face a climate of discouragement from community members, high school personnel, and even extended family, which may inhibit otherwise qualified students from enrolling in college.
- Those who do enroll have a limited ability to rely on their parents for financial support. Yet, working poor dependent students and their families were expected to contribute slightly more than \$2,000 on average toward their price of attendance—a large amount considering their low-family incomes. And these families had to come up with an additional \$4,300, on average, to pay postsecondary expenses not met by available financial aid.
- Financial constraints coupled with obstacles associated with being a first-generation college student may keep many working poor youth from completing their degrees. Only 28 percent of working poor dependent students who began a degree or certificate program in 1995–96 attained a bachelor's degree by 2001 compared with 44 percent of higher-income youth earning a bachelor's degree. Working poor students were more likely than the other groups to earn associate's degrees, but they were also more likely to leave school without attaining any degree or certificate.

Recommendations

The public and private sectors can work together to help more people from working poor families reach their educational goals. Recommendations for policies that help the working poor include:

Recommendation 1

Tax relief for working poor students offered through refundable Hope and Lifetime Learning education tax credits; fully tax-free federal, state, and institutional grant aid; and increased exempted amounts that working independent students can earn under the federal need analysis.

Recommendation 2

Additional institutional support for working poor students delivered through evening or weekend hours for financial aid offices, academic advising, and other student services; extended hours for computer labs and libraries; and core academic classes made available during a range of times accessible for adults with work and child care responsibilities.

Recommendation 3

Targeted support for working poor students who are single parents by allowing postsecondary education to meet the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families work requirements and increasing the allowances for child care in determining financial need.

Recommendation 4

Reduce the financial burden on working poor parents under the federal need analysis by increasing the income allowed to qualify for a zero expected family contributions, and allow higher levels of student earnings without reducing aid levels.

Recommendation 5

Provide additional institutional support for first-generation college students by conducting more outreach into low-income communities to teach “college knowledge” and encourage students to pursue higher education as well as offer mentoring and support programs for low-income and first-generation college students on campuses.

For more information about *College Access for the Working Poor: Overcoming Burdens to Succeed in Higher Education*, please contact IHEP’s Research department. If you are a reporter seeking media opportunities, please contact IHEP’s Communications & Marketing department at (202) 861-8227 or communications@ihep.org.

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