



# Briefly...

## What Community Colleges Can Do to Reduce Unplanned Pregnancy and Improve Completion

Community college administrators and faculty have limited time and resources as well as many competing priorities, chief among them increasing student retention and completion. A great deal of work is being done to determine and eliminate the barriers that students face in completing their educational credentials. One important issue that can contribute to the completion agenda is helping students postpone having a (or another) child before achieving their educational goals.

Unplanned pregnancies increase the risk of dropping out or stopping out of college; 61% of women who have children after enrolling in community college fail to finish their degrees—a rate 65% higher than for those who didn't have children. Although most community college students recognize that having a (or another) child would threaten their ability to complete their education, there is often a gap between students' goals and their behavior. In effect, many students put themselves and their partners at risk of having an unplanned pregnancy, which could in turn make it harder to achieve their goals for education, career, and family.

Furthermore, while unplanned pregnancy has not historically gotten a lot of attention by college administrators, faculty, or staff, it is very real in the lives of students. Sean Brumfield, Ed.D., Executive Director of Civic Engagement and Service Learning at Georgia Perimeter College, said, "In the college where I worked at the time, Chattahoochee Technical College in Marietta, GA, a lot of our students were underserved, underprivileged. They didn't have the same education that other students had. They didn't really have any sort of formal education in sex ed. Maybe when they were 10 or 11 or 12 years old was the last time that they had that. So they were really able to apply this to their lives, especially my students who had been pregnant. It turned out that all of the female students in my class had been pregnant at one time or another... so these issues really did drive home with my students. It was something that they could relate to in their everyday lives."

To hear what students themselves say about unplanned pregnancy, view a short video on The National Campaign's website at [www.TheNationalCampaign.org/communitycolleges/audiovisual.aspx](http://www.TheNationalCampaign.org/communitycolleges/audiovisual.aspx).

This brief gives some low- or no-cost ways to address the issue of unplanned pregnancy among both young women and young men in community colleges, which will in turn contribute to the goal of improving student success and completion. These strategies fall into three broad categories:

1. Incorporate information about unplanned pregnancy into student support services including orientation, first-year experience, and other college success courses.
2. Integrate information about unplanned pregnancy into academic courses.
3. Raise awareness and provide resources about the connection between unplanned pregnancy and completion through college website.

### **Incorporate unplanned pregnancy prevention into student success courses or orientation**

Community colleges are increasingly offering first-year experience, freshman seminars, or other student success courses, which typically cover topics that can help students succeed in college and in life, such as financial aid, time management, and support services offered at the college. However, these courses often do not address relationships, unplanned pregnancy, and childbearing or their roles in the broader framework of goal-setting and decision-making. For example, a 2009 survey found that 88% of community and technical schools in South Carolina offered a "College 101" course, but only 21% included sexual health information in the curriculum.<sup>3</sup> A survey by the National Council on Student

Development (NCSd) of its members found strong support for the notion that unintended pregnancy makes it harder for students to successfully complete their schooling; that same survey found that information on sexual health or healthy relationships is not commonly included in student success courses.<sup>b</sup> NCSd members and other college leaders have expressed interest in incorporating these issues into orientation and first-year experience/college success courses.

To address this gap, NCSd, in partnership with The National Campaign, published *Making Smart Decisions to Improve Success in College and Life*,<sup>c</sup> a curriculum guide that emphasizes making healthy decisions about sexual behavior and increasing college success for community college students. It was authored by Ann Topping, Ed.D., Dean of Students at Monroe Community College (Rochester, NY) and a former NCSd board member. This seminar consists of five three-hour sessions that can be taught as a one-credit course, or one three-hour condensed session that can be included within orientation, first-year experience, college success, or wellness/health education. In addition, an instructor at Chattahoochee Technical College in Marietta, GA developed a [course template](#)<sup>d</sup> that can be incorporated into a College 101 course discussion of how unplanned pregnancy can adversely affect personal and educational goals.

Many community colleges offer freshman orientation—sometimes required, sometimes optional—in which students learn about resources offered by the college that support student success. Recognizing that colleges may have limited time to devote to additional content in orientation, one option is for colleges to simply offer links to resource information in their orientation materials. For example, Richland College in Dallas, TX, provides information about [www.StudentSexLife.org](http://www.StudentSexLife.org) (see below) on its website and introduces discussion of unplanned pregnancy in its freshman orientation. In addition, The National Campaign is in the process of developing three short online modules that colleges can use in orientation, first-year experience, and other courses.

### Integrate material into coursework

Several community colleges have created curriculum-based strategies in a variety of disciplines, some of which use service learning as a focus to improve student retention and provide resources that students need to prevent pregnancy and complete their college goals. As part of its *Make It Personal: College Completion* program, the American Association of Community Colleges has posted these course templates—available for subjects including English, sociology, statistics, and College 101—on

its website to download for free at [www.aacc.nche.edu/mipcc](http://www.aacc.nche.edu/mipcc). Initial evaluation of this approach shows encouraging results. Furthermore, faculty members who have incorporated discussion of unplanned pregnancy into their courses have found that discussing this topic increases student engagement and supports learning outcomes.

For example, Jodie Vangrov, Ed.D., at Chattahoochee Technical College, said about her sociology course, “The course objectives were to teach socialization and marriage and the family, along with many other objectives, but the unplanned pregnancy material fit in nicely with those course objectives. Students learned the content of those chapters with an emphasis on unplanned pregnancy. And so it was a good win for all of us, because it matched all my course objectives and the state standards for the technical college system.” To hear more, view a video on The National Campaign’s website featuring faculty and staff who have participated in the Make It Personal: College Completion program at [www.TheNationalCampaign.org/communitycolleges/audiovisual.aspx](http://www.TheNationalCampaign.org/communitycolleges/audiovisual.aspx).

“In this day and age, to keep students in school in any way possible is critical. We’ve got to find ways to empower our students to be better citizens and understanding service, understanding the world, making a difference. And so by [participating in *Make It Personal: College Completion*], I think we’re going to see some success. Already we’ve got faculty [asking], ‘What are we going to do next? How are we going to continue to be involved?’ And because [unplanned pregnancy] is something that unfortunately, probably won’t go away tomorrow, we’ll need to continue to educate and empower students to make a difference in this area.”

- Duane Oakes  
Faculty Director, Center for Service-Learning  
Mesa Community College, AZ

### Provide information on college websites

The website *Student Sex Life* ([www.StudentSexLife.org](http://www.StudentSexLife.org)) is a user-friendly portal that community colleges can use to help their students make smart decisions about sex and relationships, which can in turn affect their educational success. Recognizing that individual colleges may not be in a position to identify or create their own information about these topics, *Student Sex Life* provides links

to reliable sources of information about these topics. Colleges can include it in their online orientations, websites, courses, and other places where it will be useful. The web portal was developed with input from community college staff, faculty, and students.

“Schools can do a lot actually. They can provide courses, classes, online links, sexual protection. Things like that.”

- Male student

### **Make sure students are aware of community resources**

The majority of community colleges do not have on-site health care facilities, but there may be health centers or clinics nearby where students can obtain information and contraception to help them prevent unplanned pregnancy and avoid sexually transmitted infections. Among the resources at *Student Sex Life* is a clinic locator provided by [Bedsider.org](http://Bedsider.org), in which students can enter their zip codes and find a list of clinics in the area where they can obtain affordable birth control. Local health departments and other clinics often have brochures or flyers that can be made available on campus at student services, in the library, or distributed with orientation materials. Bedsider also provides helpful information about whether an individual might qualify for free or low-cost contraception.

### **Involve community partners**

Consider hosting a seminar, workshop, or forum on campus. If faculty and staff are uncomfortable talking to students about sexual health and contraception because the topic is outside of their discipline, invite a local health provider to present and/or serve as an expert advisor. Also, students may be interested in becoming peer educators; the BACCHUS Network has training resources available at [www.bacchusnetwork.org](http://www.bacchusnetwork.org).

“Schools can do stuff, they can have workshops to really stress to the students that it’s important to be careful out here, that you take precautionary steps and measures to make sure that you are safe.”

- Female student

### **Get student leaders and groups involved**

Seek involvement from student-led organizations on campus, such as student government and Phi Theta Kappa (PTK). Student

organizations lend credibility and enthusiasm for this topic, and student-driven activities can dovetail with colleges’ interest in promoting student service and leadership. At Mesa Community College, for example, PTK leaders took on the topic of preventing unplanned pregnancy as its Honors in Action project, called Project HOPE (Healthy Outcomes through Prevention and Education). The students who participated received national recognition and awards for their work at MCC, and also took Project HOPE to other local colleges.

“There were folks—when we sent out the first emails saying we’re going to talk about unplanned pregnancy in young folks—that [said], ‘Wow, isn’t that kind of a step, how come you’re doing that?’ I’m doing it because my students said we needed to.”

- Jim Walters  
Director of Student Life  
Takoma Park/Silver Spring Campus  
Montgomery College, MD

## **Things to Keep in Mind**

### **Make the issue relevant to all students**

Since unplanned pregnancy can affect completion as well as having broader economic and social implications, it is something that we as members of society should be concerned about. Still, some students may have a harder time relating to the topic and may need a different way to make it personal. Some students may be older and not at risk of unplanned pregnancy themselves, but by having the conversation in a classroom they may be more inclined to have a meaningful talk with their teenage children. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students may not see how this is relevant in their lives, but may have friends or siblings who are at risk of unplanned pregnancy. Be sensitive to students who may see pregnancy prevention from different cultural or ethnic perspectives. Be inclusive in conversations, discussions, and activities.

In addition to unplanned pregnancy, a college may have related concerns among its students, such as HIV/AIDS prevention, excessive alcohol or drug use, or dating violence. These issues also pose a threat to student health and success, and these topics should not be ignored in the conversation.

"I can't see myself going to school [if I had] another child to support. I would be very disappointed in myself because I have so many goals I want to accomplish and I'm not going to be able to if I have another child."

- Female student

### What about those who are already parents?

Given the large number of single parents among community college students, it may be a concern that they will find these topics irrelevant or even offensive. However, because they may have direct experience with the reality and challenges of unplanned pregnancy, those who are already parents can be very powerful communicators about this topic. For example, students who became parents when they were teenagers and later enrolled in Mesa Community College to further their education have been among the strongest champions of addressing pregnancy prevention with other students. In addition, a number of returning students have children who are now teenagers and have reported finding this information helpful in discussions with their own children.

Some students who are already parents are at risk of not completing their education if they have another child. In the words of one student, "Now would not be a good time [to have another child]. I don't know how I would do what I do. Right now I'm taking pre-nursing classes at the community college. I couldn't imagine doing it with two children, especially one being an infant."

### Address misperceptions and misinformation

Many faculty, staff, and students themselves assume that students are already informed about pregnancy prevention and the various methods of contraception by the time they reach college. However, although many students are aware of the range of birth control options available to them, research indicates that their knowledge about how they work, how they should be used, and how effective they are may be quite limited. At the same time, while the vast majority of young adults, including community college students, report they are not ready to get pregnant at this time, data indicate their actions often do not align with their intentions.<sup>e</sup>

Instead of telling students that they may have more to learn, it is more engaging to show them by asking them to complete a short quiz. Refer to The National Campaign's publication, *The Fog Zone*, for a survey called *Contraception and Pregnancy: The True and the False*.<sup>f</sup>

### Use research and statistics to start the conversation

Most colleges do not collect data on unplanned pregnancy, but instructors have found that sharing [statewide](#)<sup>g</sup> or national statistics is an effective way to start this conversation in the classroom. Reviewing and discussing polling data, such as the findings in *Magical Thinking*,<sup>h</sup> can help students depersonalize the issue so no one feels judged, at which point they can then have a meaningful discussion.

### Include men

Male students can be affected by unplanned pregnancy and interested in this topic. Although their birth control options are limited, they still have an important influence on their partners' decisions about whether to use birth control and which method to use. Any myths they believe can also be passed along to their partners, so it is important to dispel this misinformation and educate them on the full range of effective birth control methods. To help engage them on the topic, see the "Man Cave"<sup>a</sup> section on *Student Sex Life* that includes videos and information of particular interest to men. For example, there is a video of an Ivy Tech Community College (IN) student who discusses the challenges of being a father and a student. He says, "The responsibilities that come with being a father or being a parent increase the amount of work that you have to do to be successful as a student. ... I think that all students who are parents would not go back and change it, but they do realistically see the difference that it is with being a parent versus not being a parent and being a student."

### Other materials available from The National Campaign

- [Getting Started at Community Colleges: Reducing Unplanned Pregnancy and Strengthening Academic Achievement](#)  
This booklet provides guidance to community college faculty and staff members who are starting initiatives on unplanned pregnancy prevention.
- [Briefly: Unplanned Pregnancy and Community Colleges](#)  
This brief paper summarizes data and research about unplanned pregnancy and why it matters for community colleges.
- [Briefly: Relationships and Contraceptive Use Among Community College Students](#)  
This fact sheet provides insights based on qualitative research into why students, who say they want to postpone parenting, are not always using birth control consistently or effectively.

- *Science Says #46: The Sexual Behavior of California Community College Students*  
This research brief summarizes findings about contraceptive use, unintended pregnancy, and other sexual behaviors of 18–24-year-old community college students in California from a large survey conducted in 2007, and makes recommendations for how community colleges can address these issues.
- *The Odyssey Years: Preventing Teen Pregnancy Among Older Teens*  
Pregnancy rates for teens age 18-19, a population increasingly served by community colleges, are more than *three* times the rate for younger teens. In fact, about two-thirds of all teen pregnancies and births are to older teens. Why might this be and what can be done to help? This report explores these questions by providing data on older teens, exposing commonly held myths about older teens, and provides real-world examples of how groups are reaching these young adults.
- *The Changing Twenties*  
Is being in one's 20s at present different in important ways from previous decades? Find out in *The Changing Twenties* by William A. Galston, Ph.D.
- *The Fog Zone: How Misperceptions, Magical Thinking, and Ambivalence Put Young Adults at Risk for Unplanned Pregnancy*  
This research is based on a nationally representative survey of 1,800 unmarried young adults aged 18-29 and is the first of its kind to focus in depth on the attitudes and behavior of unmarried young adults—both men and women—regarding pregnancy planning, contraception, and related issues.

Please see: [www.TheNationalCampaign.org/CommunityColleges](http://www.TheNationalCampaign.org/CommunityColleges) for more information on these resources.

#### Notes:

- a. Kershner, S. and Flynn, S. (2009). Population Left Behind 2009: An assessment of sexual health information and services provided by South Carolina colleges and universities. Columbia, SC: SC Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.
- b. See <http://www.TheNationalCampaign.org/communitycolleges/makingsmartdecisions/Introduction.pdf>
- c. See <http://www.TheNationalCampaign.org/communitycolleges/makingsmartdecisions>
- d. See <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Resources/aaccprograms/horizons/Pages/curriculumtools.aspx>
- e. See <http://www.TheNationalCampaign.org/fogzone>
- f. See <http://www.TheNationalCampaign.org/fogzone/PDF/myths.pdf>
- g. See <http://www.TheNationalCampaign.org/state-data/default.aspx>
- h. See <http://www.TheNationalCampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/MagicalThinking.pdf>
- i. See <http://studentsexlife.org/?page=mancave>