



Supporting Pregnant and Parenting Students: Ideas for Faculty

This document contains some ideas of what you can do as a faculty member to support pregnant and parenting students on your campus. Each ‘best practice area’ described herein contains both a quick summary of legal requirements and some best practice examples that you can implement immediately. As always, listening to and utilizing the voices of our pregnant and parenting students shows us how we can do better as we move beyond Title IX compliance to best practice.

Best Practice Areas:

1. Set the tone and create a welcoming environment
2. Excuse absences related to pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting
3. Provide academic accommodations for students with impairments related to pregnancy and childbirth
4. Promote predictability in scheduling and communication while maintaining flexibility
5. Report harassment and discriminatory behavior
6. Build authentic relationships and support navigation of resources

Set the tone and create a welcoming environment

Many students hide the fact that they are parents and/or pregnant because they fear discrimination. Making sure that pregnant and parenting students feel welcome by acknowledging student parents and parenting responsibilities in your initial communications, including your syllabus, sets a welcoming tone for your class. It communicates to all students that student parents are valued, and it sets expectations for the class’s attitudes and behaviors towards pregnant and parenting students. Creating a welcoming environment for pregnant and parenting students is an active and ongoing practice.

Legal requirement: ensure no student is singled out or treated less favorably because of their sex, pregnancy and/or family status.

Best practice examples:

1. Write a family-friendly syllabus that acknowledges pregnant and parenting students, outlines possible accommodations, and lets students know that you are open to dialogue. Here are some examples:
 - You may want to include a non-discrimination and accommodation policy in your syllabi that helps explain Title IX protections (see [The Pregnant Scholar’s syllabus insert](#) as an example).
 - You might also use language similar to that outlined in this [Sample Student Parent Syllabus Language document from Generation Hope](#).

2. Send a ‘welcome’ email that acknowledges and embraces pregnancy and parenting. You can review this [Sample Welcome Letter from Generation Hope](#) to find promising language. This letter can be sent at the beginning of the semester or at any point before the semester ends!
3. Share with students that they are welcome to have their children present during virtual instruction, if needed. If a child speaks or makes noise while your student is off mute, let the student know that it is okay.
4. Actively promote a diverse classroom. You might say or use language such as “Our class is made up of students with different identities, thinking about race, gender, sexuality, and more, and we may have parents or caregivers in the room as well. Each of these identities contributes to our experiences and perspectives, and I am excited that we all have the opportunity to learn with and from one another this semester.”
5. Let all students know that Title IX prohibits the harassment of students based on sex, which includes pregnancy, childbirth, and related conditions. Communicate to students that you will maintain a “zero tolerance” policy for discriminatory or disparaging comments and behaviors against pregnant and parenting students (and other protected groups). If harassment does occur, report it to the Title IX coordinator.

Excuse absences related to pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting

Legal requirement: Title IX requires that students’ absences relating to pregnancy, childbirth, related conditions, and recovery therefrom be excused when such absences are medically necessary (or covered under your school’s maternity or disability policy, if it has one). This law applies regardless of your own typical attendance policy. You may not penalize a student for taking this leave; the student must be allowed to return to their studies in the same status they held before taking time off. To that end, students must be given an opportunity to make up any credits missed because of qualifying pregnancy or childbirth-related absences. Finally, faculty cannot ask for a physician’s note unless they request the same from students who need absences for medical reasons unrelated to pregnancy.

Best practice examples:

1. Inform students anticipating absences or leave related to pregnancy and childbirth that they will not be penalized for exercising their right to take medically necessary leave or leave under your institution’s disability or maternity leave policies. Make clear to the student that it is their decision to take leave; it is also their decision to decide on how much leave they will need.
2. If institutional policies limit your ability to excuse absences on your own, connect the student with other resources such as Title IX or disabled student services.
3. Remember that leave means that the student is on leave—not doing schoolwork. Do not assume that a student on leave will be able to complete academic work during their time away.

4. Limit communications with the student while they are absent/on leave. If communication with the student has to happen during their recovery, make clear that the priority is the student's health.
5. While the law typically does not require leave be provided for family emergencies, consider implementing excused absence policies that account for the illness or quarantine of a household member. These absences should be treated like the student's own sick/quarantine excused absence, to protect caregivers' access to education and to limit the risk of students coming to class after a household exposure to COVID or other illness.

Provide academic accommodations for students with impairments related to pregnancy and childbirth

Legal requirement: Title IX requires your institution to provide pregnant students with reasonable academic adjustments, when needed. These accommodations often take the form of the same sorts of services provided to students with disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and other law also requires your institution to provide reasonable accommodations to qualifying students with disabilities, including disabilities related to pregnancy and childbirth. Some students may request accommodations through your institution's ADA office, and others may come to you directly. Follow your college's procedures, and when in doubt, contact the Title IX and/or ADA offices.

View our [examples of pregnancy-related conditions and accommodations](#).

Best practice examples:

1. If you cannot immediately and independently provide an accommodation, treat pregnancy accommodation requests as you would any ADA/504 request, and refer the student to resources for additional help. Pregnant students often do not realize their condition may be covered by Title IX and the Americans with Disabilities Act and may not know the formal channels for asking for help.
2. Don't request medical information. If a student is struggling, ask to discuss their work and academic needs, but not their medical status. If personal medical information is disclosed to you by the student or another official at your institution, treat the information as confidential.
3. Include an accommodation statement in your syllabi so that students with difficulties will be more likely to seek help early (see our [syllabi insert](#) for an example).

Promote predictability in scheduling and communication while maintaining flexibility

As campuses continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic and its continued fallout, student parents often manage their work, childcare, and school schedules in a precarious and delicate balancing act. When scheduling check-ins, office hours, or other outside-class meeting times, it is

important to remain consistent and predictable in scheduling so that pregnant and parenting students can plan around those times and plan for care arrangements. At the same time, external forces (such as loss of childcare or family illness) can throw student parents off balance and into crisis. It is essential that faculty remain as flexible as possible with their deadlines, participation opportunities, and make-up work policies so that student parents faced with extenuating circumstances have the best chance to succeed.

Legal Requirement: Make accommodations and excuse absences when medically necessary for pregnancy-related reasons. Ensure that student parents have *at least* the same access to flexibility as other students in need, without regard to sex.

Best practice examples:

1. Consider providing choice in your participation options, exam requirements, and deadlines. Pregnant and parenting students often know what they need best—offering a menu of pedagogically appropriate options for students to learn and internalize your course content allows students to be as successful as possible.
 - For example, you might use language like “Before [insert date here], please complete this assignment in one of three ways: 1. [type your thoughts in the discussion board], 2. [upload video of yourself explaining this concept], or 3. [create social media content explaining the concept].”
2. Use flexible scheduling options. A student returning from leave or managing regular medical appointments may be less able to stop by for office hours or attend hastily scheduled meetings. Consider allowing meetings to occur over the phone or video chat and schedule standing meeting times so that students may plan for them in advance. If you do need to reschedule a check-in or office hours with individual students, give as much notice as possible.
3. Provide opportunities for students to take or make-up missed classes asynchronously (e.g. recording classes and making them available online), so that student parents can participate during hours when they are not providing care.
4. Students relying on asynchronous instruction due to care responsibilities should be permitted to make up participation credits, if any, by posting in class discussion forums or completing other assignments. *Be careful to ensure the time required to do this make-up work is fair considering the effort put in by synchronous class attendees.*
5. Do not require group assignments, and instead consider other participation options. Student parents report struggling with group assignments, as their childless peers have different schedules and time demands. In the unlikely event such assignments must be required, make clear that small group work can be performed virtually.
6. Preference self-paced options for assessments. For example, for many classes, papers may be an appropriate substitute for exams.
7. Announce all quiz or test dates in advance so that students can make care arrangements. Be sure to allow make-up exams for students with extenuating health needs or caregiving obligations.

8. Discuss deadlines for make-up work with students. Students returning from maternity/parental leave should have *at least* as much time to complete each assignment as other students had. Consider that returning students typically must catch up with the material while also negotiating new family responsibilities and ongoing health concerns.

Report harassment and discriminatory behavior

Legal Requirement: Pregnant and parenting students may face harassment and bias (conscious or not) from faculty or classmates. Title IX prohibits the harassment of students based on sex, which includes pregnancy, childbirth, and related conditions. Faculty must not harass or discriminate and must not permit either to occur in their classrooms. If discrimination does occur, Title IX provides several mechanisms for ensuring that institutions follow the law. Report and/or reform policies that discriminate on the basis of sex, pregnancy, related medical conditions, or based on parental, family or marital status. Reports can be made to your campus Title IX coordinator.

Best practice examples:

1. Maintain a “zero tolerance” policy for discriminatory or disparaging comments and behaviors against pregnant and parenting students (and other protected groups). Make it clear to all students that such hostility is unacceptable and constitutes harassment based on sex.
2. Make sure the employees you supervise are aware of their obligation to report discrimination on the basis of sex, including pregnancy, childbirth, related conditions, or family status. Publicly posting information on reporting discrimination serves as another reminder that discrimination is serious and will not be tolerated.
3. Encourage your department to enact policies that do not treat students differently on the basis of sex, including relating to pregnancy and parenting.

Build authentic relationships and support navigation of resources

Authentic relationships are the foundation for effectively supporting pregnant and parenting students. Authentic relationships are defined by [cultural humility](#)-- the lifelong process of critical self-reflection and self-critique, redressing power imbalances, respectful appreciation and attitude towards diverse lived experiences, and advocating for and maintaining institution accountability- and an acknowledgment of the other person’s agency. It is important that we are always “building” towards authentic relationships, as they take consistent effort, self-reflection, trust, and two-way communication.

Similarly, supporting the navigation of pre-existing resources supports building relationships and advancing student’s agency, ensuring pregnant and parenting students have all of the resources they need to be successful.

Best practice examples:

1. Ask parenting and pregnant students what they need and work to meet those needs. You might ask “What do you and your family need to be successful in this class?”
2. Familiarize yourself with the resources offered by your institution, and be prepared to make referrals or share information.
3. If students share a need that is not being met or addressed, and you are not certain how to address that need, you will want to connect with other folks on campus. You may want to reach out to the Title IX coordinator, a disability accommodations coordinator, or other staff as needed.
4. Examine your biases and assumptions about student parents and caregivers, and use an asset-based lens and language when engaging with pregnant and parenting students. Assuming a student will not be successful because they are pregnant or a parent is both incorrect and an example of deficit thinking, and deficit thinking promotes racism and sexism in education ([Yosso, 2005](#)).
 - Work to reframe your understanding: pregnancy is often a wonderful and joyous time in people’s lives, one that reinforces the benefits and strengths of family bonds, and a time during which students often have additional needs. How can you process and communicate that nuance to ensure pregnant and parenting students are as successful as possible?
 - Similarly, in advising students, communicate that the student’s educational choices are their own. Work to not make assumptions about a student based on their family status, health, gender, pregnancy, or marital or parental status.
5. If you still have questions, or if a student has shared a need that your campus does not have the capacity to respond to, you will want to check out the resources offered on the [Pregnant Scholar’s website](#). You might direct students to reach out to us through our [Contact form](#), or you may reach out yourselves. We will do our best to support you and point you in the right direction.