



BACK TO CAMPUS 2021

Supporting Pregnant and Parenting
Students During COVID-19



The
Pregnant
Scholar

The Center for
WorkLife Law,
UC Hastings College
of the Law

About Us

The Pregnant Scholar Initiative at the Center for WorkLife Law, UC Hastings College of the Law is a legal resource center dedicated to advancing opportunities for pregnant and parenting students in higher education.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Pregnant Scholar Initiative provides know-your-rights information to pregnant and parenting students, and technical assistance, training, and policy implementation coaching to campus change-makers. Most services are available free of charge.

[Contact us online.](#)

(415) 565-4640

University of California, Hastings College of the Law
200 McAllister St.
San Francisco, CA 94102

www.thepregnantscholar.org



Back to Campus 2021: Supporting Pregnant and Parenting Students During COVID-19

As the nation heads into the second fall of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of student parents enrolled in college are returning to in person instruction at the same time as their children. Roughly one in five undergraduates in the U.S. have minor children, and many others are pregnant during their education. More than ever before, prepping for student success this semester means paying attention to the needs students have outside the lecture hall, including their family responsibilities.

This guide offers key considerations for colleges and universities during 2021-22 school year as it relates to pregnant and parenting students.

1. Include student parents and other caregivers in your safety planning

Student parents have unique needs and lived experiences relevant to safety planning. In particular, parents are concerned not only with their own wellbeing, but also that of their children, who are unlikely to be vaccinated. While vaccination is a key strategy for protecting the health of your university community as a whole, it does not negate the importance of other safety measures, particularly for student parents and other caregivers. Ensure they have a seat at the table.

Examples of family-responsive safety planning:

- Ensure student parents and pregnant students are represented in surveys or other feedback channels regarding safety protocol. If you have a reopening working group or similar committee, make sure student parents are represented. (For a sample job description, see this [template](#) from Generation Hope.)
- Notify students as soon as possible of changes to safety protocol and attendance requirements.
- Make your process as transparent as is feasible. While it is often not possible to predict changes far in advance, transparent University assessment protocol will assist student parents making childcare and healthcare arrangements. For example, if students know the University will reassess certain operations once a test positivity rate hits 10%, they can begin making preparations when the rate is at 9%. (See CUNY "[Conditions for COVID-19 Closures](#)" and related materials for an example.)
- Establish a transition period. If classes are to transition from virtual to in-person, ensure students are permitted sufficient time to make care arrangements.
- Be specific. Students, particularly student parents, pregnant students, and others with caregiving or health needs are eager to know the details of your plans to keep them safe.



2. Extend health accommodations to pregnant students

While many campuses are aware of the need to provide reasonable accommodations to students who have disabilities, pregnant students are often left out of formal policies. Universities covered by Title IX are required to make adjustments to the educational program to allow pregnant or postpartum students to stay on track academically while protecting their health. Typically, that means students who are pregnant should have access to the same accommodations as are available to others under university student disability (ADA/Section 504) policies. Pregnant students are also entitled to take leave for as long as medically-necessary.

While pregnant students are always protected by these rights under Title IX, they are particularly important during the pandemic, as **pregnant people are at an increased risk of severe illness and adverse pregnancy outcomes from COVID-19.**

For more information or technical assistance with pregnancy accommodation legal compliance, contact the Pregnant Scholar team.

Examples of pandemic-related pregnancy accommodations:

- **Access to virtual instruction.** Pregnant students, due to their high-risk status, may request accommodations to limit their level of exposure on campus. These requests must be treated as well as other students' requests to avoid exposure due to high-risk conditions (including high-risk disabilities).
- **Improved ventilation or safety measures.** This may include HEPA filtration, additional/enhanced personal protective equipment (PPE), early/late access to class in order to allow for distancing, and modifications of in-class activities to lower exposure risk.
- **Exemptions to vaccine requirements.** While data about pregnancy and the COVID-19 vaccines was initially limited, it is growing, and the CDC now recommends that all pregnant people get vaccinated to prevent serious illness from COVID-19. That said, pregnant people have some of the lowest vaccination rates in the U.S., and some pregnant students may wish to delay vaccination. Students who are pregnant or have pregnancy-related conditions should be permitted to apply for medical exemptions from vaccine requirements like any other student with relevant medical conditions.

Sample language for syllabi, handbooks, or other materials:

- “[Insert College] does not discriminate against any student on the basis of pregnancy or related conditions. Absences due to medical conditions relating to pregnancy will be excused for as long as deemed medically necessary by a student’s doctor and students will be given the opportunity to make up missed work. Examples of pregnancy-related accommodations include, but are not limited to: modified schedules, seating changes, permission to record class or use a notetaker, break time to use the restroom or express milk, and absences for medical appointments.
Students needing accommodations can seek assistance with accommodations from [insert relevant contact and name].”
- “Students may request a medical exemption to the vaccine requirement or an accommodation based on a disability, pregnancy, or a sincerely held religious belief, practice, or observance.” (Be careful to ensure that forms are applicable to students requesting exemptions due to pregnancy.)
- The Pregnant Scholar model policy can be used to implement pregnancy accommodation and leave procedures applicable beyond the pandemic.



3. Provide lactation spaces that are COVID-19 prepared

Students who are lactating need to express milk or feed their child on a regular basis to avoid pain and potential health complications. Many students will need to pump on campus and a safe space to do so. Unfortunately, due to a high demand and few spaces, even before COVID-19 many students had difficulty finding an available lactation space. During the pandemic there are additional safety concerns to account for, with many parents hesitant to pump in shared spaces. (Note that recently pregnant people have an increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19 according to the CDC.)

Now that there are increased needs for distancing and sanitization, the challenge has grown. Ensuring lactating students have access to a safe space to pump will prevent students from being forced to choose between their education and their health.

Examples of lactation accommodation strategies:

- Identify over-full rooms or problem-areas early. Track the usage of your lactation rooms electronically (with an e-booking system or key card entry) or with a sign-in sheet. Encourage students and other users to provide feedback about the availability and suitability of the space.
- Require mask use in lactation rooms.
- Provide ample ventilation. If that is not possible, add a high-quality HEPA filter to lactation spaces.
- Include physical shields between users, such as a floor to ceiling hospital-style curtain, to the extent that it does not eliminate air flow out of the room or to the air filter.
- Establish additional lactation spaces to meet the demand and safety needs. Permit lactating students to access facility calendars so they may identify available space and pump in unused rooms as needed.

Additional resources:

- [Use and Cleaning of Lactation Rooms During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#), UNC Greensboro School of Health and Human Sciences
- [Interim Guidance: Care for Breastfeeding People](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- [Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- [Model Lactation Policy for Students](#), The Pregnant Scholar



4. Ensure your absence and participation policies account for family responsibilities

College student's children may need to stay home from school/child care due COVID-19 exposure or illness. As such, student parents will need changes to typical attendance policies to meet their family responsibilities, and to ensure they don't contribute to the spread of COVID-19 on campus. While providing access to virtual classes can alleviate some of the burden, synchronous virtual classes don't provide the flexibility many of these parents need, especially when their child is ill or requires assistance with virtual schooling. College and University leadership should encourage (and support) faculty members' use of flexible attendance policies, or require them, as appropriate. Note that layering options is a best practice.

Examples of family-responsive attendance policies:

- Implement 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.
- Make clear that students are welcome to have their children present during virtual instruction, if they need to do so.

- 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.
- 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 in light of the effort put in by synchronous class attendees.

Syllabus section examples:

- “The exceptional circumstances presented by the COVID pandemic create the potential for additional flexibility in qualifying absences as excused. Such extenuations might include: absences related to extended illness, quarantine, caring for family members, childcare (and support of children’s online learning) due to school closures, or urgent job concerns related to financial need, emergency situations, or food insecurity.” (Source: [Towson model language](#))
Absence for one of these reasons will be excused and make-up work provided, as appropriate. Please contact me as soon as possible to make arrangements.
- All absences are excused. During this pandemic, students often struggle with illness, quarantine, mental health challenges, child care unavailability, and other emergent needs. If you need assistance, please contact me to arrange make-up work or asynchronous learning.
- “Your health and your family's health should be your priority. If you are dealing with illness, sick family members, travel difficulties, a bad internet connection, increased anxiety, childcare challenges, or any other issues, please reach out and we will figure out accommodations.” (Source: [Grand Valley State University, Pew Faculty Teaching and Learning Center](#))



5. Consider academic policies that provide flexibility

Most students are experiencing significant strain as a result of the pandemic, including the death or illness of loved ones. Student parents are more likely to carry additional burdens, such as job loss or change, unusually tenuous childcare arrangements, difficulty getting quiet time to complete studies, and the need to keep unvaccinated children safe. Students may benefit from adjusted academic policies to account for this unprecedented pandemic. College and University leadership should encourage (and support) faculty members' use of flexible policies, or require them, as appropriate.

Examples of family-responsive academic policies:

- Do not require small group assignments, instead consider other participation options. Generation Hope reports that student parents struggle with group assignments, as their childless peers have different schedules. In the unlikely event such assignments must be required, make clear that small group work is to be performed virtually.
- 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.

- Provide self-paced options for assessments. For example, for many classes, papers may be an appropriate substitute for exams.
- Plan tests for maximum flexibility. For example, it may be possible to provide more than one time when students can take a quiz or exam—this increases the likelihood that parents can find a scheduling solution that matches their care arrangements. For in person testing, using multiple rooms can minimize COVID-19 exposure risks.
- Institutions should consider using Pass/No Credit or other alternative grading options, as was the norm in similar peaks of the pandemic.
- Institutions can safeguard funding for student parents and other impacted students by extending scholarship grace periods and taking other efforts to avoid penalizing students for reduced performance during this crisis.

6. Keep Metrics

Ensuring your campus is inclusive of student parents requires knowing how many student parents are enrolled and what their needs are. To that end, it is essential to keep (and evaluate) metrics on student parent enrollment. Establishing a baseline number will allow administrators to quickly identify trends in de-enrollment. If possible, identifying the students will allow support offices to solicit input and tailor services to their needs.

For assistance with implementing key metrics on student parent population size, needs, and retention, please [contact the Pregnant Scholar](#).



7. Support students' basic needs

Student parents continue to face heightened economic insecurity as a result of the pandemic, including increased food insecurity, housing insecurity, lack of access to high-speed internet and difficulty obtaining or maintaining childcare. More than two thirds of student parents live in or near poverty, and in 2019, roughly 1 in 6 college student parents experienced homelessness.

Many of the safety nets previously available to working students (such as Pandemic Unemployment, the CDC Eviction Moratorium and paid family leave) have expired or are expected to expire in September 2021.

For more on these challenges and solutions, visit:

- [STUDENT PARENTS IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: Heightened Need & the Imperative for Strengthened Support](#), Institute for Women's Policy Research
- [College students with children face special pandemic challenges](#), EdSource
- [Higher Ed Toolkit for Supporting Student Parents](#). Generation Hope
- [#RealCollege 2020: Five Years of Evidence on Campus Basic Needs Insecurity](#), Generation Hope

Examples of family-responsive strategies:

- Increase your childcare offerings, and evaluate placement based on need.
- Provide back-up childcare to all student parents so that they have assistance during school/care closures. See [UC Berkeley's policy](#).
- Share university counselling and mental health services directly with student parents, and ensure virtual options are available.
- Strengthen your emergency assistance programs such as interest free loans and food pantries, and share information about them directly to student parents.
- Ensure faculty have ready-to-use syllabus language to refer students in need to support services. See [University of Oregon's statement and basic needs website](#).

8. Protect student employees

While this guide focuses on pregnant and parenting students, employees have similar concerns. Employees (including student workers) who are pregnant, parenting, or have a disability or are caring for someone with a disability, may be entitled to protections under federal, state, and local law.

For more information about the return to in-person *work*, see [WorkLife Law's return to in-person work toolkit](#).



9. Don't exclude virtual learners

While many student parents and pregnant students will attend class in person, due to health risks, job duties, and the uncertainty of childcare arrangements, many will opt for virtual instruction. To retain these students and help them thrive, colleges should consider continuing virtual engagement options even if many in-person functions have returned.

Examples of inclusive strategies:

- Ensure outreach to student parents is conducted virtually, not just posted at in-person campus locations. This requires more frequent website and newsletter updates.
- Have community-building events online, such as socials with grab and go or delivery food options and virtual support groups.
- Ensure faculty have virtual office hours.
- Simulcast in-person panels and special events.

- Provide student organizations with access to rooms with video capability for in-person events and access to high-quality video platforms to encourage the inclusion of students who are not able to join in person.
- Send a welcome email that is family friendly so student parents feel comfortable reaching out. Consider this [Sample Welcome Letter](#) from Generation Hope.

10. Share your results

How is your campus implementing family-responsive COVID-19 planning? We want to hear from you! Please [share best practice examples](#) to be highlighted on PregnantScholar.org, and/or future editions of this guide.

By: Jessica Lee
Staff Attorney and Director,
Pregnant Scholar Initiative at The Center for WorkLife Law

Special thanks to Kybeth Ruiz-Gaytan for her tireless research and keen insight, and to Rachel Korn and Isha Patel for their editorial assistance.

August 2021