

# Briefly...

## Unplanned Pregnancy Among College Students and Strategies to Address It

As colleges strive to improve student success and completion, helping students delay pregnancy and parenting (or having additional children) means one less factor that can interfere with their college education. However, pregnancy planning and prevention is not something most colleges address, especially at the community college level. In an effort to help close this gap, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy has worked with community college leaders to develop and evaluate resources that are now available for any college to use, free of charge, including three short online lessons that have been shown to improve students' knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral intent when it comes to preventing unplanned pregnancy.

### *Unplanned Pregnancy and College Completion*

Since peaking in 1991, teen pregnancy in the U.S. has declined by more than half.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly good news for secondary education, since three in 10 teen girls who have dropped out of high school cite pregnancy or parenthood as a key reason.<sup>2</sup> However, progress has been slower among older teens (age 18-19) and unplanned pregnancy among unmarried young adults in their 20s remains stubbornly high,<sup>3</sup> with important implications for colleges.

Nationally, unplanned births account for nearly one in 10 dropouts among female students at community colleges, and 7 percent of dropouts among community college students overall.<sup>4</sup> The impact on students is significant—61 percent of community college students who have children after enrolling do not finish their education, which is 65 percent higher than for women who do not have children while in college.<sup>5</sup> A Mississippi survey found that 38 percent of female community college students who dropped out say becoming pregnant or having a baby is the reason they dropped out.<sup>6</sup> Unplanned pregnancies and the responsibilities of being a parent can increase emotional and financial stress on the young men and women involved, which can impede academic per-

formance. Unplanned pregnancies can also add to the overall costs and demands for colleges themselves, through increased need for child care and related support services.

*"My buddy is a year older than me so he had his kid at 21 and we were both in community college; we were both at this campus. He had to drop out. He's working two jobs now. He's not even with the baby's mother. It's tough. I couldn't have a kid and still manage school and everything else."*

– Male student

Although faculty and staff might initially be hesitant to address unplanned pregnancy, sex, and relationships, concern about pregnancy looms large in the lives of many students and students are interested in the topic. In fact, three-quarters of students report that preventing unplanned pregnancy is very important to them, and eight in 10 say that having a child while still in school would make it harder to accomplish their goals.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, as noted by Achieving the Dream, a national organization dedicated to student success in higher education, students with children face unique challenges, including child care, employment, student loans, and housing issues, which make completing their education more difficult.<sup>7</sup> Although some colleges have initiatives to provide student parents with resources to help them stay in college, many do not. Very few colleges provide students with the knowledge, strategies, and services to avoid unplanned pregnancy in the first place, or to help those who are already parents to delay subsequent pregnancies while they are focusing on their education.



Many faculty and staff assume that by the time students arrive at college, they are well informed about preventing pregnancy. After all, almost all college students are legal adults—old enough to serve in the military, to vote, and assume adult responsibilities—and three-quarters of 18–24 year-olds in the U.S. have had sex in the past 12 months.<sup>9</sup> However, many students grow up in homes where the topic of sex or contraception is off limits, and often the education they received in high school was inadequate or non-existent. Even if the information they received in high school was high-quality, the information may have come several years before and perhaps at a time that it wasn't yet relevant in their lives.

Students themselves sometimes think they have all the information they need to prevent a pregnancy. But research shows that myths, misinformation, and magical thinking are all too common among young adults when it comes to preventing unplanned pregnancy, which puts them and their partners at risk. For example, 94 percent of unmarried young adults age 18–29 say that they have all the information they need to avoid having or causing an unplanned pregnancy, but 11 percent say they know little or nothing about condoms, 40 percent say they know little or nothing about birth control pills, and 71 percent say they know little or nothing about intrauterine devices (IUDs).<sup>10</sup>

*"If colleges had programs to provide students—both those who do and those who do not have children—with relevant information, skills, and resources to help them avoid unplanned pregnancy, one very significant barrier [to completion] could be overcome."*

**- George Boggs and Mary Ellen Duncan, former community college presidents and National Campaign National College Advisory Group members, in a co-authored article.<sup>8</sup>**

### What Colleges Can Do

There are several low- or no-cost ways to address the issue of unplanned pregnancy with male and female students, which will in turn contribute to the goal of improving student success and completion. These strategies fall into four 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 the online resources, activities in residence halls, and student leaders and groups.

tion between unplanned pregnancy and completion through the online resources, activities in residence halls, and student leaders and groups.

4. Connect students to health services, including access to effective birth control, on or off campus.

### ***Incorporate information about unplanned pregnancy into student support services including orientation, first-year experience, and other college success courses.***

The three online lessons in *Preventing Unplanned Pregnancy and Completing College* help students learn how to prevent unplanned pregnancy and take action. The lessons, developed by community college faculty in collaboration with The National Campaign, and are available online free of charge. The online lessons are designed to help students understand the impact of unplanned pregnancy on their educational goals, social lives, significant relationships, and finances. Students also learn about various birth control methods; select the most appropriate method(s) for their values, lifestyles, and relationships; and create an action plan to decrease their chances of unplanned pregnancy. The lessons contain videos, interactive activities, links to helpful websites, and other resources that keep students interested and engaged.

The lessons are ideal for a first-year experience course, but can also be used in a variety of settings, such as new-student orientation, regular academic classes, residence life programs, or through student group activities on campus. They were designed to be helpful to both male and female students, and are sensitive to students who are already parents (for whom having another child while in college can make it that much harder to complete their education). For example, Lesson One includes a video created at Georgia Perimeter College that features a student speaking about the challenges of attending college as well as working full time and serving as the custodial parent of his daughter.

By offering the lessons, instructors can provide students with valuable information that will contribute to college success without requiring them to become experts on these topics themselves. The lessons are very flexible—some faculty have used them as in-class activities; others have assigned as homework for a grade or as extra credit. Each of the three lessons takes roughly 30 minutes to complete.

The lessons, along with supporting materials for faculty and students, are available for free at [TheNationalCampaign.org/resource/online-lessons-faculty-page](http://TheNationalCampaign.org/resource/online-lessons-faculty-page).



"I really enjoyed how interactive the online lessons were. I learned a lot especially from the self-check and true and false questions. I thought that I was fairly knowledgeable about pregnancy and birth control, but I was extremely humbled by the questions that I could not answer with certainty. As a college student there are many who feel the same as I did before going through the lessons and I believe that they can benefit from them as I did."

**-Female student, after completing the online lessons**

From the fall of 2012 to the spring of 2014, more than 2,800 students from four colleges—Cincinnati State Technical and Community College (OH), Georgia Perimeter College (GA), Miami Dade College (FL), and Palo Alto College (TX)—participated in an evaluation of the online lessons. The results were very positive: after completing the 90-minute lessons, students reported being significantly more knowledgeable about and prepared to take action to prevent unplanned pregnancy until they have completed their educational goals.

In addition to consistent quantitative results across several semesters and sites showing that the online lessons made a difference, feedback from faculty and students also indicate that they have been well received. One faculty member noted, "The videos allowed students to learn about other students' values and beliefs. They also gave different perspectives which allowed my students to make their own decisions." Students also found the lessons very helpful, informative, and educational. One student said, "I think the stories really helped me put things into perspective especially realizing that unplanned pregnancy is such a big thing. It changes everything!"

For the results of the evaluation and more feedback about the online lessons, download *Preventing Pregnancy and Completing College: An Evaluation of Online Lessons, 2nd Edition* at [TheNationalCampaign.org/resource/preventing-unplanned-pregnancy-and-completing-college](http://TheNationalCampaign.org/resource/preventing-unplanned-pregnancy-and-completing-college).

### **Integrate information about unplanned pregnancy into academic courses.**

Preventing unplanned pregnancy is often viewed as a health issue, but there are opportunities to include the topic in many other disciplines. Six community colleges in Arizona, Georgia, Maryland,

Minnesota, and Texas participated in *Make It Personal: College Completion* with the American Association of Community Colleges. Through this project, faculty created curriculum-based strategies in a variety of disciplines to help students prevent unplanned pregnancy and complete their college goals. These course templates are available as free downloads at [aacc.nche.edu/mipcc](http://aacc.nche.edu/mipcc) for subjects including English, sociology, statistics, and College 101. Faculty members who incorporated unplanned pregnancy into their courses have found that discussing this topic increases student engagement, supports learning, and meets academic course objectives.

"I found that having a topic to work toward enhanced my class and was well worth any extra time on my part," said Kari Taylor, a statistics instructor at Mesa Community College in Arizona. "My goals for this project were for students to learn the pitfalls and benefits of survey research. I would strongly suggest to all stats instructors to incorporate service learning into your course. It brings the course to life so much more than having students gather data on random topics."

In addition, Jodie Vangrov, Ed.D., said about her sociology course at Chattahoochee Technical College (GA), "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 from faculty who participated in the *Make It Personal: College Completion* project, watch a video on The National Campaign's website at [TheNationalCampaign.org/resource/community-college-faculty-talk-about-preventing-unplanned-pregnancy](http://TheNationalCampaign.org/resource/community-college-faculty-talk-about-preventing-unplanned-pregnancy). For more background about unplanned pregnancy among college students, stories from students themselves, and what students think they know about preventing unplanned pregnancy, download *Make It Personal: How Pregnancy Planning and Prevention Help Students Complete College*, published by the American Association of Community Colleges, at [TheNationalCampaign.org/resource/make-it-personal-how-pregnancy-planning-and-prevention-help-students-complete-college](http://TheNationalCampaign.org/resource/make-it-personal-how-pregnancy-planning-and-prevention-help-students-complete-college).



**Raise awareness and provide resources about the connection between unplanned pregnancy and completion through the college website and student activities.**

**Online Resources:** Providing students with resources is as easy as making them aware of The National Campaign's online birth control support network, [Bedsider.org](http://Bedsider.org). The information on Bedsider is honest, accurate, unbiased, and delivered with a humorous but always factual tone. Its goal is to help people find the method of birth control that's right for them and learn how to use it consistently and effectively. Bedsider was designed for women age 18-29, although it also appeals to those over 30 as well as young men, and students have expressed that they appreciate the tone and content on Bedsider. The website is a great resource for resident advisors, student groups, and health center staff. Colleges can also include it in their online orientations, websites, courses, student activities, residence life activities, and other places where it will help their students make smart decisions.

[Bedsider.org/StudentSexLife](http://Bedsider.org/StudentSexLife) is a one-stop source of information for college students, faculty, and health care providers. It makes the connection between preventing unplanned pregnancy and completing one's education, and includes specific resources of interest to college students. Consider it a gateway to [Bedsider.org](http://Bedsider.org), tailor-made for college students and faculty.

**Residence Halls:** There are many ways that content can be worked into programming in the dorms. For example, Hinds Community College (MS) has hosted viewing parties with shows that feature unplanned pregnancy, and encouraged students to discuss them afterwards. DVD copies of the shows *16 & Pregnant* and *Nine* are available through The National Campaign's online store; all DVDs come with discussion guides to assist in post-show conversations. Click [here](#) for *16 & Pregnant* and [here](#) for *Nine*, or visit [TheNationalCampaign.org/store](http://TheNationalCampaign.org/store). Another excellent option is MTV's *Virgin Territory* which is available to stream online free of charge at [mtv.com/shows/virgin-territory](http://mtv.com/shows/virgin-territory). In addition, dorms serve as a perfect location to display posters and provide students with information—to view and obtain Bedsider posters, visit [Providers.Bedsider.org/order-materials](http://Providers.Bedsider.org/order-materials).

**Student Leaders and Groups:** 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, and also took Project HOPE to other local colleges. PTK presents several opportunities to address preventing unplanned pregnancy:

- Honors in Action, *Theme 7: Health and Medicine as Frontiers* and *Theme 8: Exploring Political Economy*
- College Project
- Personal Endeavor
- Hallmark of Service and Civic Engagement

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy has free tools and resources that can support PTK members, including research about teen and unplanned pregnancy and births ([TheNationalCampaign.org/data/landing](http://TheNationalCampaign.org/data/landing)), the cost of teen births and unintended pregnancy at the national and state levels ([TheNationalCampaign.org/why-it-matters/public-cost](http://TheNationalCampaign.org/why-it-matters/public-cost)), materials ([TheNationalCampaign.org/store](http://TheNationalCampaign.org/store) and [Providers.Bedsider.org/order-materials](http://Providers.Bedsider.org/order-materials)), and more.

In another project, titled Peers Educating and Encouraging to Reduce Unintended Pregnancy (PEER UP), the Georgia Campaign for Adolescent Power & Potential (GCAPP) trained 16 students at Georgia Perimeter College (GPC) to serve as peer educators. These students answered students' questions; promoted campus, community, and online resources; encouraged use of low-cost health services; and helped support students in developing healthy relationships.

*"Some students I spoke with said that they received an abstinence-based education in high school that they were on board with. Then unexpectedly something changed and they didn't have the information they needed to reduce the risk of unintended pregnancy and pursue healthy sexual relationships... It was our hope that, with education and reflection, GPC students would be able to make informed decisions on when to take on the role of parenting."*

**- Female PEER UP leader**



**Connect students to health services, including access to effective birth control, on or off campus.**

Many four-year colleges have on-campus health clinics that provide students with a variety of services, including birth control. When there isn't a health center on campus or there is one but it doesn't provide contraceptive services, there are often health centers or clinics nearby where students can obtain information and contraception to help them prevent unplanned pregnancy and avoid sexually transmitted infections. Colleges should consider building partnerships with these clinics and educating students about what is available to them in the community. For example, Montgomery College (MD) discovered a clinic a short distance from the campus and forged a great relationship with them. Clinic staff now come to campus periodically to provide info to students, set up a table in the student services center, and serve as a resource on contraception. College faculty and staff also know now that they can refer students to the clinic.

*Bedsider.org* has a clinic locator that allows students to enter their zip code and find a list of clinics in the area where they can obtain affordable birth control. Bedsider also provides helpful information about whether an individual might qualify for free or low-cost contraception. In addition, local health departments and other clinics often have brochures or fliers that they can make available for the college to distribute on campus at a student center, in the library, or with orientation materials.

**Things to keep in mind**

**This issue is relevant to most students.**

Unplanned pregnancy can affect academic achievement and completion and has broader economic and social implications. Even so some students may not find the issue particularly or directly relevant to them. 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 or other family members. Gay, lesbian, 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, and be inclusive in conversations, discussions, and activities.

In addition to unplanned pregnancy, colleges may be addressing related concerns among students, such as HIV/AIDS preven-

**Policy Spotlight**

Federal and state encouragement and investment could go a long way to helping more colleges take steps to prevent unplanned pregnancy and promote healthy relationships among their students, which will in turn support college completion.

Two states have already taken action to address unplanned pregnancy at community colleges and public universities. In 2014, Mississippi passed an exciting law—the first of its kind in the country—directing community college and higher education leaders to develop a plan to address unplanned pregnancy through a range of strategies. In 2015, funds were appropriated to each of the community colleges to take action on this issue (see Section 21 of the Appropriations bill at [billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/documents/2015/pdf/SB/2800-2899/SB2854SG.pdf](http://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/documents/2015/pdf/SB/2800-2899/SB2854SG.pdf)). Taking its cue from Mississippi, in 2015 Arkansas also took the first step to address unplanned pregnancy by passing similar legislation, which can be viewed at [arkleg.state.ar.us/assembly/2015/2015R/Acts/Act943.pdf](http://arkleg.state.ar.us/assembly/2015/2015R/Acts/Act943.pdf).

tion, excessive alcohol or drug use, or dating violence/sexual assault. These issues also pose a threat to student health and success, and these topics should not be ignored in the conversation. By the same token, initiatives to address these issues offer important opportunities to also address pregnancy prevention.

**What about those who are already parents?**

Parents of dependent children make up nearly one-quarter (3.9 million) of the undergraduate students in the United States, and half of those parents are single parents.<sup>11</sup> However, because they may have direct experience with the reality and challenges of unplanned pregnancy, those who are already parents can be very powerful allies when communicating with their fellow students about this topic. 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.

Student parents often report that they're succeeding in school right now, but if they had another child their education may be put at risk. 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."



It's important that these students are able to postpone having a subsequent unplanned pregnancy that could make it harder to complete their educational goals.

*"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**

### Use research and statistics to start the conversation.

Most colleges do not collect data on unplanned pregnancy or how pregnancy affects student success, but instructors have found that sharing statewide or national statistics is an effective way to start this conversation in the classroom—go to [TheNationalCampaign.org/data/landing](http://TheNationalCampaign.org/data/landing) to get started. Reviewing and discussing polling data, such as the findings available at [TheNationalCampaign.org/public-opinion](http://TheNationalCampaign.org/public-opinion), can help students depersonalize the issue so no one feels judged, at which point they can then have a meaningful discussion.

### Consider involving 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.

If you are with an organization that focuses on preventing teen and unplanned pregnancy and you wish to know more about how to approach and work with colleges in your area, download *Preventing Teen Pregnancy Through Outreach and Engagement: Tips for Reaching Older Teens Through Community Colleges at [TheNationalCampaign.org/resource/tips-reaching-older-teens-through-community-colleges](http://TheNationalCampaign.org/resource/tips-reaching-older-teens-through-community-colleges).*

### Include men.

Male students can be affected by unplanned pregnancy and the responsibilities of being a parent, and are also interested in this topic. Although male birth control options are limited, men 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 be passed along to their partners, so it is important to educate them on the full range of effective birth control methods. To help engage them on the topic, see the *Guy's Guide* section on Bedsider at [Bedsider.org/guys\\_guide](http://Bedsider.org/guys_guide) for videos and information of particular interest to men. In addition, our online lessons were developed to be relevant to male and female students, and have proven to be successful with both genders.

To find additional resources, including student and faculty videos, research, and more, visit The National Campaign's website at [TheNationalCampaign.org/featured-topics/colleges](http://TheNationalCampaign.org/featured-topics/colleges). If you have questions or need more information, contact Chelsey Connolly, Senior Manager of College Initiatives, at 202.478.8519 or [cconnolly@thenc.org](mailto:cconnolly@thenc.org).

### SOURCES

1. Kost, K., & Henshaw, S. (2014). *U.S. Teenage Pregnancies, Births and Abortions, 2010: National and State Trends by Age, Race and Ethnicity*. Retrieved from the Guttmacher Institute website <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/USTPtrendsstate10.pdf>
2. Shuger, L. 2012. *Teen Pregnancy and High School Dropout: What Communities Are Doing to Address These Issues*. Washington, DC: The National Campaign and America's Promise Alliance.
3. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. (2012). *Briefly: Unplanned Pregnancy Among Unmarried Young Women*. Washington, DC: Author.
4. Prentice, M., Storin, C., and Robinson, G. (2012). *Make It Personal: How Pregnancy Planning and Prevention Help Students Complete College*. Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.
5. Bradburn, E. M. (2002). *Short-Term Enrollment in Postsecondary Education: Student Background and Institutional Differences in Reasons for Early Departure, 1996–98*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.
6. Hess, C., Krohn S., Reichlin, L., Roman, S., and Gault, B. (2014). *Securing a Better Future: A Portrait of Female Students in Mississippi's Community Colleges*. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research.
7. Clery, S., & Harmon, T. (2012). *Data Notes: Student Parents and Academic Outcomes*. Silver Spring, MD: Achieving the Dream, Inc.
8. Boggs, G., and Duncan, M.E. (2014). *Improving College Access and Success by Confronting Unplanned Pregnancy*. Leadership Abstracts, Volume 27, Number 2. Retrieved from <http://www.league.org/blog/post.cfm/Improving-college-access-and-success-by-confronting-unplanned-pregnancy>.
9. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. (2014). *Briefly: Getting the Facts Straight: Unplanned Pregnancy, Abortion, and the Benefits of Birth Control in America*. Washington, DC: Author.
10. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. (2015). *On a LARC: unpublished data set*. Washington, DC: Author.
11. Miller, K., Gault, B., and Thorman, A. (2011). *Improving Child Care Access to Promote Postsecondary Success Among Low-Income Parents*. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research.

