

# Briefly...

## Unplanned Pregnancy and Community Colleges

### Summary

- Half of all pregnancies in the United States— three million annually – are unplanned.<sup>1</sup>
- More than one-third of all unplanned pregnancies (1.1 million) are to unmarried women in their 20s.<sup>1</sup>
- Nearly half (48%) of community college students have ever been or gotten someone pregnant.<sup>2</sup>
- Unplanned pregnancies increase the risk of dropping out or stopping out of college – 61% of community college students who have children after enrolling don't finish their education, which is 65% higher than the rate for those who didn't have children.<sup>3</sup>
- Some community colleges offer classes, modules, or services to address unplanned pregnancy on their campuses.

can ultimately have a positive effect on such important community college goals as increasing student retention and helping students achieve their educational objectives.

This brief paper summarizes the problem of unplanned pregnancy and why it matters for community colleges, and offers some preliminary ideas for what community colleges could do to help.

*"Whether the opportunity for education is lost or delayed, unplanned pregnancy often makes life harder for those trying to achieve the 'dream' of a college education."*

- Mary Ellen Duncan, President Emerita  
Howard Community College

### Background

Over one million unplanned pregnancies occur to single women in their 20s—a group that includes many in community colleges. These unplanned, often unwanted pregnancies, result in a large number of single parents who struggle with finances, interrupted or indefinitely postponed education, unstable relationships, and a host of challenging health, educational, and social consequences for their children.

Given their standing and respected presence in communities around the country, community colleges are well-positioned to become part of an effective and far reaching effort to reduce the high rates of unplanned pregnancy among young adults. Because an unplanned pregnancy presents one more hurdle for students to overcome—with its additional demands on time, added financial responsibility, and further complication of relationships—decreasing high rates of unplanned pregnancy

### Scope of the Problem

Although many Americans have a general understanding that teen pregnancy is a major problem in the United States, few realize that *young adults* also struggle with pregnancy planning.

- Half of all pregnancies in the United States— three million annually – are unplanned.<sup>1</sup>
- More than one-third of all unplanned pregnancies (1.1 million) are to unmarried women in their 20s.<sup>1</sup>
- More than half of pregnancies reported by unmarried men in their twenties are unplanned.<sup>1</sup>
- Among unmarried women in their 20s with some college, 77% of all pregnancies are unplanned.<sup>1</sup>
- Of unmarried women in their 20s who have experienced an unplanned pregnancy, 40% have attended at least some college.<sup>1</sup>

## Consequences

There are a wide variety of serious consequences for the young men and women—especially those who are unmarried—who experience an unplanned pregnancy, as well as for the children born as a result of such pregnancies. From the standpoint of community colleges, the consequences may be especially compelling because, taken together, they can distract, delay, or derail students from reaching their educational goals.

- Unplanned pregnancies increase the risk of dropping out or stopping out of college – 61% of community college students who have children after enrolling don't finish their education, which is 65% higher than the rate for those who didn't have children.<sup>3</sup>
- Unplanned pregnancies can also increase emotional and financial stress on the young men and women involved, which can impede academic performance.<sup>4</sup>
- Unplanned pregnancies can also add to the overall costs of operating community colleges themselves, through increased demand for child care and related support services.

## About the National Campaign

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy's goal is to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy for reaching this goal is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and responsible policies in both the public and private sectors.

If we are successful, child and family well-being will improve. There will be less poverty, more opportunities for young men and women to complete their education or achieve other life goals, fewer abortions, and a stronger nation.

## Why Community Colleges?

Community colleges could be a key partner in the National Campaign's efforts to help young adults prevent unplanned pregnancy.

### Cristyane's Story

Cristyane is a 25-year old single mom with a 4-year old daughter, working part time and taking classes at the community college. After finishing high school, she wasn't sure what she wanted to do so she worked various jobs to support herself. At age 20, Christyane found herself unexpectedly pregnant.

Eventually, Cristyane moved closer to her mother and chose to enroll in her local community college because she felt that more schooling was the only way to provide enough for herself and her child.

Today, Cristyane is determined to move forward on the path to an Associate Degree and, hopefully, afterwards to a BSN. She says that continuing her nursing goal would be nearly impossible if she had another unplanned preg-

- **Key Fact:** *There are 11.5 million students in community colleges, representing nearly half (46%) of all undergraduate students in the United States.<sup>5</sup>*

For many years, community colleges have provided a great deal of support to students who are single parents which is deeply admirable, but little if any attention has been paid to *preventing* unplanned pregnancy in the first place in curricular or co-curricular activities. For example, women's centers were initiated to provide support for female students, including parents, yet in many instances, preventing unplanned pregnancy has often been a minor focus at best.

- **Key Fact:** *Only two out of ten students at 2-year institutions report receiving information from their college on pregnancy prevention, compared to 33 percent of students at 4-year institutions.<sup>2</sup>*
- **Key Fact:** *Approximately 15% of all community college students are single parents.<sup>6</sup>*

Data on the incidence or impact of unplanned pregnancy for community colleges is limited, yet a number of community college administrators recognize unplanned pregnancy as a barrier to their students' success. As the health services coordinator at one community college said, "The students who have lived through the experience are the first to confirm the challenges they face. As another college nurse said, "I have seen unplanned pregnancy cause some students to drop out or lose valuable class time."

- **Key Fact:** Two-thirds of community college students report having sex in the last 30 days, and among those less than one-quarter (23.9%) report consistent use of condoms.<sup>2</sup>
- **Key Fact:** Nearly half (48%) of community college students have ever been or gotten someone pregnant.<sup>2</sup>
- **Key Fact:** Seven out of ten births to never-married young men in their early twenties were the result of an unplanned pregnancy.<sup>1</sup>
- **Key Fact:** Seventy-two percent of all unplanned pregnancies to unmarried women in their twenties occur to women who have already had at least one pregnancy.<sup>1</sup>

For both women and men, an unplanned pregnancy can derail their education either temporarily or permanently. Conversations with student service personnel confirm that a portion of the community college population has long been the single parent – a student who struggles with finances, doesn't have health care, and takes a long time to complete his/her education. In some cases, young men are forced to leave school to work so that they are able to provide for a child.

### Robin's Story

Robin is 28 years old, single, the mother of three children, and working at a childcare center. Robin became pregnant with the first of her three children when she was just 15. Although she at first had no plans to go to college, she did want to better herself and be a good example for her daughter, so she chose to enroll in community college.

Even though she didn't want to get pregnant, Robin acknowledged that she was not using contraception each of the three times she became pregnant. During her enrollment at school, parental and work responsibilities directed her days. She spent minimal time on campus.

Today Robin has earned two Associate's degrees and is hoping to take a course at a four-year college next semester. She says that it would be impossible to continue on her educational path if she had another unplanned pregnancy. Her doctor continues to ask at appointments what if any contraceptive methods she is using. Robin's response is that she is currently abstinent.

*"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 community college student

## Unique Challenges

Community colleges have fewer resources to provide services such as those offered at universities and other four-year institutions. In particular, community colleges do not generally have comprehensive health services that meet the standards of the American College Health Association ([www.acha.org](http://www.acha.org)), as described in their guide, *Healthy Campus 2010*. Many community colleges also report that health services are often limited to part time or focused more on physical fitness. However, community colleges with residential housing (approximately one-quarter) tend to provide better health services.

Additionally, the composition of students who attend community college can be very different from traditional students in four-year colleges. Many are adult students, for example, who already have children, tend to spend less time on campus and use fewer "student life" resources than younger students who are in four-year institutions. But younger students are a growing segment in community colleges—an important change that is pressuring these colleges to provide a wider array of student services and student life activities.

- **Key Fact:** Community college students are 2.4 times more likely to be single parents compared to students attending four-year institutions (public and private non-profit).<sup>6</sup>

## Legislative Opportunities

Given their standing and respected presence in communities around the country, community colleges and similar institutions have great potential to become part of an effective and far reaching effort to reduce the high rates of unplanned pregnancy among young adults which will in turn improve student retention and success. These efforts would be greatly advanced with federal investments. For this reason, The National Campaign rec-

ommends that the Administration and Congress include up to \$100 million in the FY10 budget and A appropriations bill for a competitive grant program for community colleges and similar post-secondary institutions to implement a wide range of activities designed to help students avoid unplanned pregnancy, with ten percent of this funding dedicated to high-quality evaluations of the success of these programs.

## Sources

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