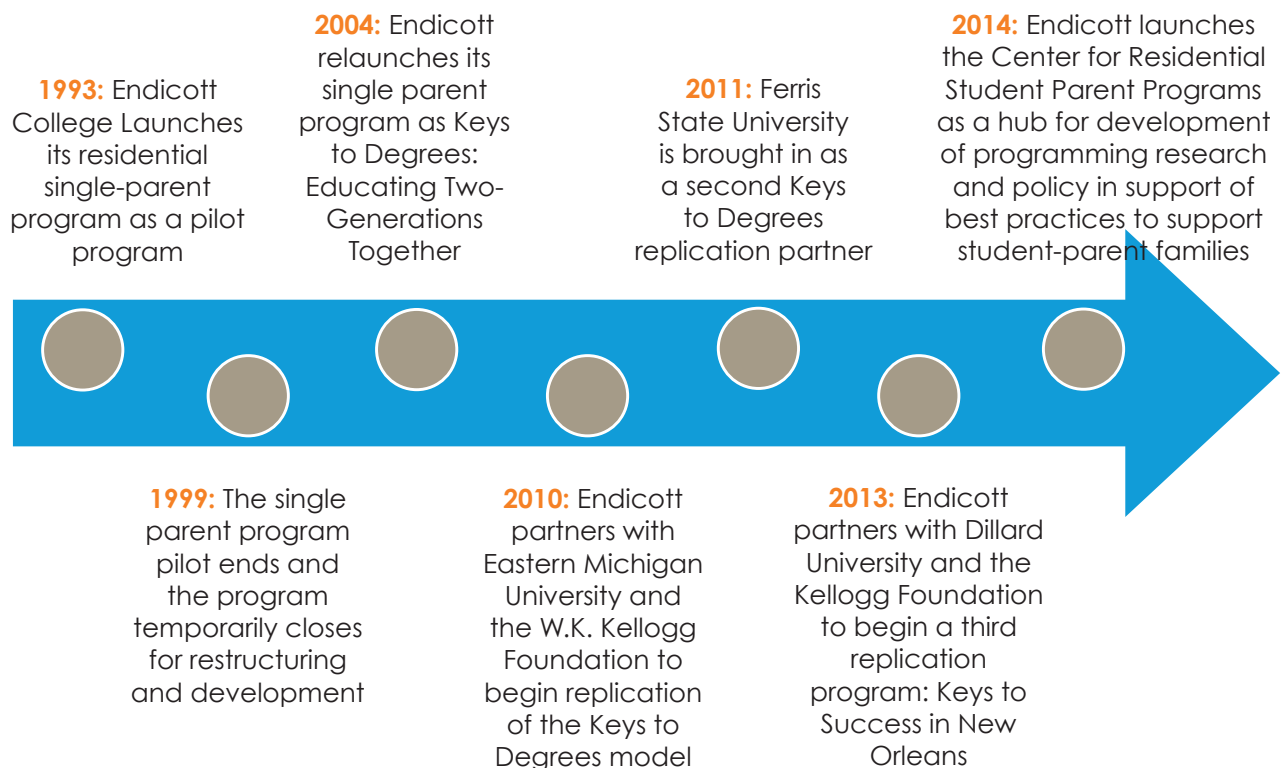




KEYS TO DEGREES: EDUCATING TWO GENERATIONS TOGETHER — AN INNOVATIVE POSTSECONDARY PROGRAM SUPPORTING TWO-GENERATION MOBILITY

Autumn Green and Richard Wylie, Endicott College

The story about how Endicott College began its successful single-parent program, Keys to Degrees, has become a bit of a legend at the college: In the early 1990s, a young woman carrying an infant ran into Endicott President Richard Wylie (co-author of this chapter) while she was touring the campus as a prospective student. The young woman was accompanied by her grumbling father. When Dr. Wylie welcomed them, the father replied, "I don't even know why we're here. This is a complete waste of time. My daughter cannot go to college here; she's a mother and needs to take care of her baby." At that point Dr. Wylie began to think about what he would do as a father if his own child had become a parent before she had the chance to complete college, given how important it is for young parents to have access to higher education to succeed. Thus, he decided to start a program that gives young single parents a place to both raise their children and obtain a college education in a supportive approximation of a traditional college experience.



Today the Keys to Degrees program at Endicott College houses 10 single parents and their young children (age six or younger at time of admission), with plans to increase the program's capacity to 20 students by 2017. Each student and child share a four-bedroom suite housed in a traditional college dormitory with another student and child. Each parent and each child has a private bedroom, with the bathroom, kitchen, living room, and dressing areas shared by the two families. New housing being built on campus will allow students to live in a building with other underclassman during their first two years and then move with their classmates to housing designated for upperclassman in their final two years in the program.

When families come into the program, we immediately see a sense of community. Our young adult students (age 18-24 at the time of admission) learn to co-parent with a suite-mate who they never would have imagined living and co-parenting with before they came to Endicott. The families in the program often sit together in the dining hall to share meals, carpool together to run errands, form study groups, and watch each other's children. The children develop family-like relationships too; the ones who live together often interact like siblings. While the program provides a package of resources to the students, including multiple supports and advantages, the sense of community among the families is one of the greatest program benefits.

The official motto of Keys to Degrees is *Educating Two Generations Together*, and all participants in the Keys to Degrees program are students. Parents are enrolled in traditional four-year, full-time baccalaureate degree programs, while children are enrolled in high-quality early childhood education programs or in local public schools.

While the Keys students may choose from any of Endicott College's baccalaureate degree programs, all enroll in career-minded majors. Current students have a diversity of majors, including education, nursing, social and human services, hospitality, art therapy, psychology, business and finance, applied mathematics, and biotechnology.

Students in the program receive a scholarship that allows them access to a personal tutor in the college's Student Support Center. Students meet with tutors one-on-one several times a week to receive assistance with individual academic topics and general academic study skills as well as help strategizing their balance of school, work, and family. Students also have full use of the college's other student resources, including counseling services and an on-campus health care center that accepts both adults and children as patients and accepts Medicaid insurance.

Career development is supported through Endicott's internship program. As part of the required course of study for all undergraduate programs at the college, students participate in three separate internships in their chosen field to gain real-world experience. During their senior year, students complete a full-time, semester-long internship and are often hired permanently at their internship site or with another employer in their chosen field immediately upon graduation.

Central to the two-generation approach of the Keys to Degrees Program, the child participants are also students. The Keys to Degrees program prescreens local community-based early child development programs and partners with these programs to ensure that children are not just being babysat while their parents are



in school, but rather being exposed to a high-quality early childhood education. Kindergarten-age children transition to local public schools.

Keys programming includes parent education covering various models and approaches of early childhood curricula. Students are then able to decide what model is most appropriate for their family and for their child. Elementary-age children receive similar support in finding quality local afterschool programs.

Some families opt for Montessori programs, while others choose Creative Curriculum or centers using blended philosophies. This allows the program participants to make choices about their child, empowering them as young parents in a way that they see as supportive. This addresses a key challenge of providing parent education to young parents: providing support for parental empowerment and skills development in ways that do not feel condescending. The program also pays a majority of the child's tuition through the Keys to Degrees child care scholarship program while the family is on the waiting list for a state-issued income-eligible child care assistance voucher.

We sometimes say participation in the Keys to Degrees program is similar to participation in varsity athletics. Students in the program are Endicott students first and Keys to Degrees participants second. Keys to Degrees staff serve as resources for participants, helping them navigate their daily balance of school, single parenting, and part-time employment. Keys to Degrees staff also serve as ambassadors, helping students connect with and navigate various on-campus offices, speaking to such offices on their behalf or to monitor their academic and personal successes and setbacks. Staff members also help students research and obtain community services and strategize with them on ways to address challenges that arise.

Just as being on an athletic team might include some additional requirements, Keys to Degrees also requires students to commit to participating in programming that is specific to Keys students. Through the mentoring component of the Keys to Degrees program, participants also receive the support of a volunteer mentor who is an established professional. These mentors provide advice and support on navigating college and career transitions based on their own experiences.

As college students, many of whom had their children while in high school or even middle school, all program participants are role models to younger parents who hope to complete college in the future. Program staff partner with local high schools and service providers that work with young parents to facilitate one-to-one and group encounters between the Keys students and other young parents.

Each summer, Keys to Degrees hosts an annual retreat in which young single parents from throughout New England (and beyond) come to Endicott College to learn more about the program, preview what college might be like, and hear from current students, alumni, and successful career professionals who completed college as student parents. At the retreat, participants receive support and encouragement for their college aspirations. Whether or not they ultimately choose Endicott for their education is irrelevant. The purpose of the retreat is not recruitment but rather to share the message that despite becoming parents early in life, they can still complete their education and pursue a professional career. The Keys to Degrees retreat is organized through collaborations between staff and students and provides an opportunity for leadership development for current program students and an alternative message about the future that young parents rarely hear in their daily lives.

Through the years, Keys to Degrees has experimented with various models of group learning and discussion for students in the program and has developed its current programming and curricula through a homegrown process. The program began



by holding weekly meetings of the students and program director. However, these meetings gradually evolved into weekly venting sessions that seemed to lack a clear purpose. Working with the dean of education, the program developed the weekly meeting into a one-credit service learning course taught by the program director, through which students would plan and conduct community service and mentoring activities and projects.

As this course evolved, it became clear that many of the young parent students in the program needed additional life skills curricula in addition to the service and mentoring curricula. Through in-class observations and findings from her previous research with student parents at other colleges, Dr. Green began to develop a new course curriculum that blends life skills with service and mentoring. During this time, Dr. Green was also partnering with the Jeremiah Program to launch a pilot single-parent program in Boston and learned that the life skills topics she had developed substantially overlapped with parts of the Jeremiah Program's life skills curriculum. These topics include:

- 1) Time management
- 2) Financial management and resources for student parents
- 3) Family, parenting, and life skills
- 4) Social networking and professional/career development
- 5) Personal empowerment/leadership development
- 6) Community service and mentoring

As Endicott continues to partner with Jeremiah on the launch of a single-parent program in Boston, we envision continuing to learn from each other on the life skills and mentoring components that each group uses. The curricula for both Keys to Degrees and the Jeremiah-Endicott partnership will be dynamically adapted based on these lessons.

In addition, during the first two years of the program, students are encouraged to register for a "cluster course," which is a course that meets a general education requirement that is open to all Endicott students. Keys students then have the opportunity to attend one class together with other students from the program. This helps them build a sense of academic camaraderie while also allowing them to be study partners and complete group work together.

These programming and curricular supports help ensure that program participants graduate both with the credentials and experience they need for an entry-level position in their chosen field — or a competitive portfolio for application to graduate school — and the skills to successfully balance work and family.

Keys to Degrees students are also supported in becoming fully engaged members of the campus community. Like traditional residential students, all Keys to Degrees students must sign up for a meal plan, and they regularly eat in the campus dining hall with their children (highchairs and booster seats can be found throughout the campus dining facility). While many use their kitchens to cook meals, maintaining at least the minimum meal plan helps augment the families' grocery budgets and safeguards against the risk of food insecurity. Children always eat for free with their parents in the dining hall.

Like traditional residential students, participants engage in a wide array of extra-curricular programming through the college. Keys to Degrees students are encouraged to fully integrate as members of the campus community, which includes studying in the library, working as research assistants or in on-campus offices, attending residence life-sponsored social events or activities in the dormitory, cheering on the team at the Friday night football game, and even starring in the school musical.

Keys to Degrees students also often connect and build friendships with traditional students who may help them with practical challenges or just lend an ear for emotional support. Furthermore, like many friendships that begin in college, the relationships students in the program develop at Endicott with one another, traditional students, faculty, and staff can become lasting connections that can help them build their social network and improve their future career connections and opportunities. Many students in the program are from disadvantaged communities and may be the first in their family to go to college; they may not otherwise have career professionals in their personal networks. Thus, the connections these low-income, first generation, and/or nontraditional students make in college are even more important.

PROGRAM RESULTS

Many who are familiar with the data on nontraditional students and student parents are often surprised that the students enrolled in the program complete their baccalaureate degrees in just four years. Nationally, student parents are an extremely high-risk population in terms of retention and degree completion. The national graduation rate within six years among students with children is only 3.9 percent for a baccalaureate degree; only 40 percent of parenting students complete any postsecondary degree or certificate within the same amount of time.¹

Given these comparisons, Keys to Degrees has been highly successful. Using data on Keys to Degrees program participants who graduated or otherwise left Endicott College from 2004-2014, 68 percent of participants who entered the program graduated with bachelor's degrees.² This is very close to Endicott College's average graduation rate, which is 71 percent. Among the same group of Keys to Degrees alumni, both median and mode average degree completion time for first-year freshman is four years; students who enter the program as transfer students average three years to complete their bachelor's degree.

Endicott ensures this graduation success by offering Keys to Degrees students the opportunity to live and study on campus year round. Recent federal policy changes ended the summer Pell grant program, and many low-income and single-parent students around the nation have since been unable to attend summer courses. However, at Endicott, institutional scholarships cover tuition, fees, and housing so that Keys to Degrees students may take courses during the winter and summer intersessions.

Students often use the opportunity to attend year round to reduce their course loads to 12 rather than 15 credits per term. This can help them improve their academic success while also raising and supporting a child. Interestingly, this allows them to accelerate their academic progress by up to a full semester per academic year

(12 credits), while still reducing their course load to the minimum full-time enrollment threshold in the fall, spring, and summer semesters; winter intersession enrollment is limited to six credits because of the condensed nature of the courses offered.

REPLICATION AND SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES

In some ways, the complex array of supports offered to students in the Keys to Degrees program is difficult to replicate. Yet three universities have currently stepped up to the challenge. The program continues to share information and work with other institutions and partners to replicate and adapt the Keys to Degrees model through the Keys to Degrees National Replication Program, which is presently supported through grants from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education.

At Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, the first cohort of students in its Keys to Degrees program is getting close to graduation. Modeling its program on Endicott's founding program, Eastern Michigan University's Keys to Degrees program also offers housing, child care, and programming and support to single parents attending the university. Keys to Degrees has also been replicated at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Michigan, and Keys to Success at Dillard University in New Orleans is just getting off the ground.

Among the greatest challenges to replication is raising the funds to staff the program and provide scholarships and supports to the students who enroll. While federal student aid generally supports tuition, fees, textbooks, and some living expenses, these funds are often exhausted before taking into account child care expenses and the general day-to-day costs of raising a family. At Eastern Michigan University and Dillard University, program staff members work with county and state agencies to help students secure child care assistance vouchers or find Head Start placements. Families at Ferris State University have access to the university's on-campus early child development center, Tot's Place, which also houses a full-time Head Start classroom primarily utilized by student families. Because Ferris State University was awarded a Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools (CCAMPIS) grant this year through the U.S. Department of Education, students with children enrolled at Tot's Place receive a tuition discount between 50 to 100 percent, based on their financial situation and maintenance of a minimum GPA. When space in Tot's Place is unavailable, Ferris State's Keys to



Degrees staff work with community partners to connect families with high-quality early childhood education programs in the community.

Housing is another challenge to replication. Endicott College built the dormitory that houses the Keys to Degree suites with the program in mind, but capital construction projects are significant barriers to replication at other institutions. Fortunately, at each of the replication sites, the institutions have been able to adapt existing housing units to meet the programs' needs. At Eastern Michigan and Dillard universities, the students live in dedicated on-campus apartment communities. At Ferris State University, students are incorporated into the university's family housing complex or granted program waivers to live in off-campus housing, if they find a more affordable option in the community immediately surrounding the campus.

Curricula and programming poses another challenge to replication. With diverse families from diverse corners of the country, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. In the replication process, programming may be adapted to meet the needs of the specific students in the program. Varying factors can include age of students/children, racial/ethnic diversity, regional differences, and other demographic variables. Consistent across programs are both a regular, formal interaction that brings together students and program staff and staff members who help students connect with and navigate program offerings on campus and in the greater community. Students in all four Keys to Degrees programs have direct access to every student service they qualify for on campus, such as tutoring and academic support, as well as a person who can help students advocate for themselves with professors and administrative offices.

To promote the success and sustainability of each Keys to Degrees program, the Office of Institutional Advancement at Endicott College offers to mentor the fundraising teams at other institutions as part of the replication process. While each program is responsible for developing its own fundraising and program sustainability strategy, providing advice and support in the development of this strategy is important to successful replication. In many ways, building and sustaining a program requires commitment and support from all levels of the institution.

Funding for the program is supported through local and community donations and grants as well as through blending state and federal government funding and private grant opportunities. Events-based fundraising, such as Endicott's annual Keys to Degrees Golf Tournament, also helps raise money for the programs and provides an opportunity for Keys to Degrees students to share their stories and experiences with donors. To complete evaluation research on the program outcomes and replication process, the Keys to Degrees National Replication Program, housed at Endicott College, continues to provide financial support to each of the three replication programs through a generous grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation; this research and evaluation is currently ongoing. Reports from this research can be found at www.endicott.edu/studentparentprograms.

KEYS TO DEGREES AS A POSTSECONDARY STRATEGY FOR TWO-GENERATION MOBILITY

Programs like Keys to Degrees meet a critical need for students with children and make an important contribution to anti-poverty agendas. Changing technologies and an increasingly global economy have largely shifted U.S. work and opportunity

structures. The job market today requires entry-level applicants to demonstrate more highly specialized training and experience in their chosen field. Bachelor's degrees are often used as the floor for prescreening career applicants.

Many young people who become parents before completing a college degree must turn to the alternative of low-wage work. This also mandates juggling public assistance programs to meet needs they are unable to sustain with their wages, such as child care, housing, food and nutrition, and emergency assistance. This also means raising their children within the many uncertainties of poverty and the inability to create what many of our students describe as "a better life" in which to raise their children.

While completing a bachelor's degree is an important mechanism for upward mobility for low-income families, nontraditional students (including first-generation, older, and/or parenting students) are a high-risk population with respect to postsecondary retention.³ Parenting students specifically face significant challenges in successfully balancing college with the responsibilities of raising and financially supporting a family.⁴ While the Keys to Degrees program does not ameliorate all of the causes of hardship faced by the students in the program, it reduces some of the challenges. The program prevents students from falling through the cracks, catching them when they experience challenges and keeping them engaged and supported through the completion of their baccalaureate degree and transition to life after college.

Importantly, Keys to Degrees is a two-generation program that simultaneously benefits both parents and children. In preliminary evaluation research conducted with the cohort in residence in 2010, 71 percent of parent participants reported that they believed that they would not be successful in college or were unsure if they would be successful in college without the program. Among the same group, 100 percent of participants reported that they believed they would complete their bachelor's degree through the program. Furthermore, alumni surveys sent the same year found that 100 percent of program graduates were employed full-time, 86 percent were employed in a career that directly related to their field of study in college, 57 percent earned an annual salary of \$40,000 or more, 71 percent described themselves as economically self-sufficient, and 100 percent did not receive support from the federal/state Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

Participants surveyed in 2010 also reported that since they came to the program, they felt supported as parents and were able to set clear boundaries and rules with their children. Additionally, 100 percent of respondents reported utilizing structured daily routines with their child at least several times per week, if not every day. Furthermore, all participants reported regularly reading to their children and understood and set age-appropriate limits for their child. While longitudinal research on the secondary outcomes for children involved in the program has not yet been conducted, these preliminary findings on parents' self-reflections demonstrate the programs' two-generation approach.

In addition, education has ripple effects within low-income families and communities. Just as the students in the Keys to Degrees program become mentors

and resources for other young parents, as first-generation college students, many similarly become resources and role models in their families and communities. By serving as an example and information source, Keys to Degrees students encourage others to follow in their footsteps. Things that may seem trivial to the seasoned student, like completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or deciding what classes to take, can present complete blockades to those without the knowledge or resources to handle the process. The mission is not that Keys to Degrees students will draw their family members into the program, but rather that through the program, students and staff reinforce the message that college is a possibility, even for those who have been told it is not.

TAKING OUR WORK TO THE NATIONAL LEVEL

The national situation of single-parent-headed families is marked by a day-to-day struggle to survive, while striving for the most basic promise of the American dream: a future for their children in which they are safe and well nourished, have access to meaningful opportunities for education and extracurricular enrichment, and can one day provide similar opportunities for their own children. Keys to Degrees is making an impact on these lives by supporting higher education access and career development strategies that help move families out of poverty. We are currently beginning a new phase of our efforts to support these families by bringing our work to a national level.

Working with the Program Evaluation & Research Group at Endicott College, we are currently conducting evaluation research on the Keys to Degrees programs. We are also developing research partnerships with other colleges and universities across the country that are working to support postsecondary education through offerings that include providing student parents with opportunities for housing, child care, and student-parent-specific supports and programming. This research will document the replication process and identify both the challenges to replication and the essential components to program success. Data is also being gathered on the types of programs and program offerings at higher education institutions across the country. This will help in the development of tools to guide prospective students to available programs and in the creation of a best-practices toolkit to support postsecondary institutions seeking to build two-generation programs on their campuses.

Our research and national replication efforts with the Keys to Degrees program moved Endicott College to launch the Center for Residential Student Parent Programs in the spring of 2014. Through this newly established research center, Endicott College will support programming, evidence-based research, and policy around postsecondary strategies for two-generation mobility.

Key to this work is building partnerships to develop new and innovative ways to support higher education access and success among student parents from a two-generation perspective. Higher education institutions need to share best practices for supporting low-income parents in using college as a means out of poverty. This requires a commitment from the entire institution, from the executive administration down. These students are willing to work hard for the opportunity to provide a better future for their children, but they need a hand up. If we want to see the promise of the American dream fulfilled, we all need to work together to help them climb.

A critical piece of the Keys to Degrees Program is building community. This happens through supporting the development of relationships and support networks between student parents in the Keys to Degrees program, incorporating these students and their children as fully engaged members of the residential campus, returning to their communities to encourage and serve as role-models to others, or engaging in partnerships with community organizations and service providers. From these communities, students in the Keys to Degrees program can draw support for their own postsecondary success, but they also become engaged as full members of those communities: building relationships, developing their skills, and eventually positioning themselves to pay it forward to the next group of students.

Extending beyond the Keys to Degrees program, we are seeking to build a national community through which we can support postsecondary strategies for two-generation mobility. We will do this by building effective programs that are guided by the needs and experiences of the families they serve, raising awareness of the challenges these families experience in their quest to leave poverty behind, and creating a national dialogue on how we can better support them in moving from poverty to the middle class.

¹ Miller, K., Gault, B., & Thorman, A. (2011). *Improving Childcare Access to Promote Postsecondary Success Among Low-Income Parents*. Student Parent Success Initiative Research Report. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research.

² This rate is calculated based on the percentage of students who entered the program at any point between 2004 and 2010 and have left the program with a bachelor's degree. This statistic is not technically comparable to graduation rates, which are based on incoming cohorts of students, because each incoming cohort of Keys to Degrees students is too small to establish statistical significance under these parameters. However, this alternate statistic uses a commonly accepted calculation used by most other two-generation programs and reflects high rates of success among program participants.

³ Medved, C. E., & Heisler, J. (2010). A negotiated order exploration of critical student-faculty interactions: Student-parents manage multiple roles. *Communication Education*, 51(2), 105-120.

⁴ Green, A. R. (2013). *Babies, Books & Bootstraps: Low-Income Mothers, Material Hardship, Role Strain and the Quest for Higher Education*. Dissertation. Boston, MA: Boston College. See also Home, A. M. (1998). Learning the hard way: Role strain, stress, role demands, and support in multiple-role women students. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 33(2), 335-346.