

Landscape of Student Parents Studying Engineering

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Abstract—This full research paper explores ways in which student parents who are studying engineering do and do not differ from other students who study engineering.

INTRODUCTION: About one-fifth of undergraduate students are parents, and these students are likely to differ somewhat from other students. However, little research has been conducted on student parents, particularly those who are studying engineering. Further, engineering continues to suffer from disproportionate representation of students from historically marginalized gender and/or racial/ethnic backgrounds, and the equity implications of parental status are currently poorly understood.

OBJECTIVE: The purpose of this paper is to answer the research question, How do engineering students who are parents differ from other engineering students?

METHODS: We analyzed data from the U.S. 2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study for undergraduate students, which indicates which students have dependent children. In this exploratory data analysis, we compared engineering students who are parents to those who are not across a variety of demographic, financial, and academic characteristics.

RESULTS: We found that engineering students are far less likely than other students to be parents (6% v. 18%). Engineering students who are parents differ from other engineering students in that they are more likely to be older, to be men, to be Black or African American, to have a job, to attend school part-time, and to attend a nonselective college or a two-year college. They are also more likely to have no funding for tuition other than a credit card and to experience food insecurity. They are, surprisingly, less likely to attend a school that offers child care. However, engineering students do not significantly differ with respect to their status as parents with regard to disability status or in their likelihood of having a high or low GPA.

DISCUSSION: Our findings suggest that engineering students who are parents face a distinct set of challenges (e.g., financial insecurity) but also show some strengths (e.g., similar GPAs) despite the many demands on their time. Further, the preponderance of Black engineering students who are parents suggests that better meeting the needs of student parents may be one vector for improving representation in engineering education.

Index Terms—equity, undergraduate, nontraditional students

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Recent years have seen a growth in efforts to collect more data about student parents. For example, in 2021, Illinois mandated the collection of data about student parents in higher education; one early result of this mandate is data released by the Illinois Community College Board [1] which includes data about the number of children enrolled in on-campus childcare or early learning centers as well as enrollment counts, demographic data, GPA, and program completion data for student parents, among other metrics.

Funding information here.

Despite these nascent efforts at data collection, there is currently, relative to their prevalence in the overall student population, little research on the experiences of undergraduates who are parents. And there is virtually no research specifically focused on engineering students who are parents. A recent literature review of research concerning student parents found that little such research exists, although there does appear to be a trend of it becoming more common [2]. This review found that the research that does exist mostly focuses on students in health care fields (e.g., nursing). Challenges faced by student parents include multiple demands on their time, a lack of awareness of resources available to student parents, and lack of access to child care. Assets of student parents include the development of important skills and personal qualities and the encouragement of a caregiving ethic. Further, this systematic literature review found that most studies of student parents used surveys and/or interviews – there were very few interventions or assessments of extant data (likely due to the fact that most data sets do not record a student’s parental status).

To address the gaps described above, this study seeks to answer the question, How do engineering students who are parents differ from other engineering students?

This question is particularly important because student parents are more likely than students who are not parents to be from demographic groups that have historically been marginalized in engineering [3], [4]. Currently, many institutions struggle to provide the support needed to sustain the retention of students from minoritized racial/ethnic and gender groups [5], [6]. Thus, improving the understanding of and support for student parents studying engineering may be a crucial component of rectifying the disparities in engineering education.

However, research that analyzes the experiences of minoritized groups often assumes a deficit framework [7]. That is, the differences between minoritized students and other students is implicitly assumed to stem from problems within these groups. This framing is liable to cause further marginalization of persons from these groups as they are blamed for the discrepancy between their performance and that of others while their potential strengths are given limited or no attention.

In contrast, this project adopts the theoretical framework of asset framing, which serves as a corrective and an alternative to deficit framing. It focuses on the funds of knowledge [8] that students bring from their personal backgrounds, experiences, and cultures. This work will foreground the assets that student

parents may have, and it will consider their challenges in such a way to actively discourage placing blame for systemic factors onto students.

II. METHODS

This paper uses data from the 2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) from the Institute for Education Sciences of the US Department of Education as the basis for an exploratory data analysis. This data set surveyed 146,150 undergraduates, reflecting a 73% response rate [9]. The NPSAS, which is conducted every three to four years, is a “nationally representative cross-sectional study of undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in postsecondary education” [10]. It investigates many characteristics of college students, focusing on how they fund their education, and it relies on many data sources, including surveys, institution-level records, and government databases. We accessed this data via the National Center for Education Statistic’s DataLab portal (nces.ed.gov/datalab). This project uses the data for undergraduate students.

One of the student characteristics collected by the NPSAS is whether the student has dependents who are children. Per the NPSAS, this determination is made based on the application for federal financial aid (via the FAFSA, or Free Application for Student Financial Aid), but if that data was not available, then the student survey was used to determine whether the student had dependent children. Another student characteristic recorded is the field of study (i.e., major), using the 45 categories created from the 2020 Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) maintained by the US Department of Education. This project focused on students majoring in engineering, comparing those who did and did not have dependents who are children.

Note that we used the category labels used by NPSAS (e.g., “female”), even in cases where other descriptors may be preferable [11]. Using the tools embedded in the DataLab interface, we conducted t-tests where possible (i.e., the data was reported and the standard error was <30%).

III. RESULTS

Overall, almost one in five (18.4%) undergraduate students has dependent children. However, the rate for engineering students is much lower, with only 5.5% of engineering majors having dependent children. The remainder of this section concerns only those student parents who are studying engineering, contrasted to engineering students without dependent children.

As Figure 1 shows, student parents are generally older than non-parents, with 52% of student parents over age 34; this result was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).

Student parents are more likely to be male than non-parents (90% versus 78%), a result that was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$); see Figure 2.

The proportion of White (65%) and American Indian or Alaska Native (2%) students is similar for both student parents and non-parents; student parents are more likely to be African American or Black (18% versus 8%), although this result was

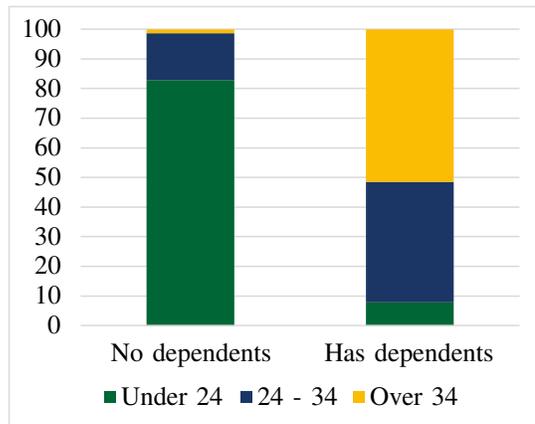


Fig. 1. Student age.

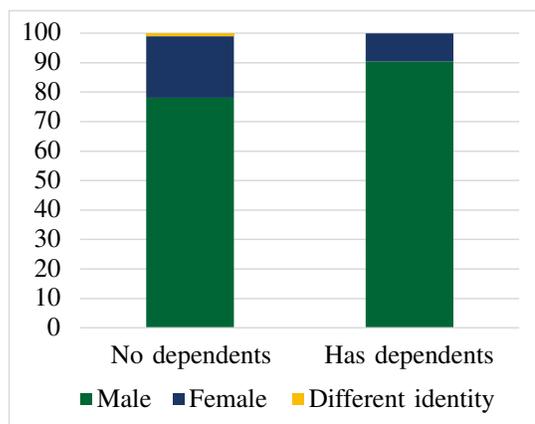


Fig. 2. Student gender.

not statistically significant ($p = 0.051$). Student parents are far less likely to be Asian (1% versus 15%).

For males, the proportions by racial group were similar to that described above, although there was a statistically significant difference for African American or Black men ($p = 0.045$); see Figure 3. (DataLab did not report racial group data for females due to the small sample size.)

Student parents and non-parents are similarly likely to be the first sibling in their family to go to college (55% and 51%).

Both student parents and non-parents have similar rates of disability (16% and 13%, respectively).

As Figure 4 shows, student parents are more likely to work (84% versus 74%) and more likely to work full-time (66% versus 42%) than non-parents ($p < 0.001$).

Student parents are less likely to be full time students (43% versus 59%, $p = 0.027$) and far more likely to attend part-time (38% versus 12%) than non-parents; see Figure 5.

As Figure 6 shows, student parents are much more likely to have ever attended a community college (83% versus 45%), a difference that is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$); they are also more likely to have ever taken at least one remedial course (32% versus 16%; $p = 0.009$), as shown in Figure 7.

As Figure 8 shows, for the vast majority (90%) of student

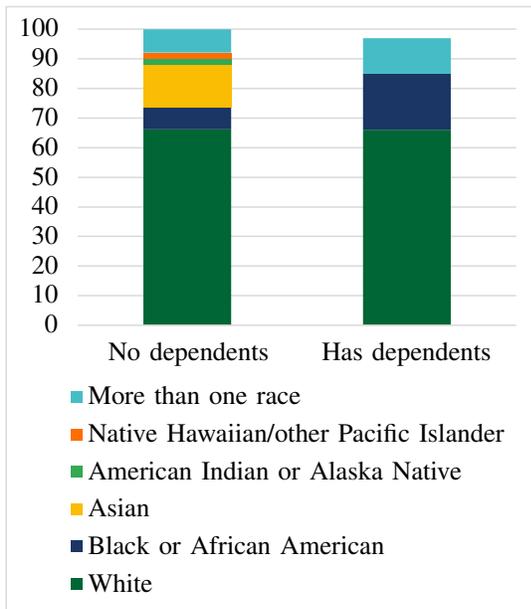


Fig. 3. Race/ethnicity for men. (Values may not sum to 100% due to rounding.)

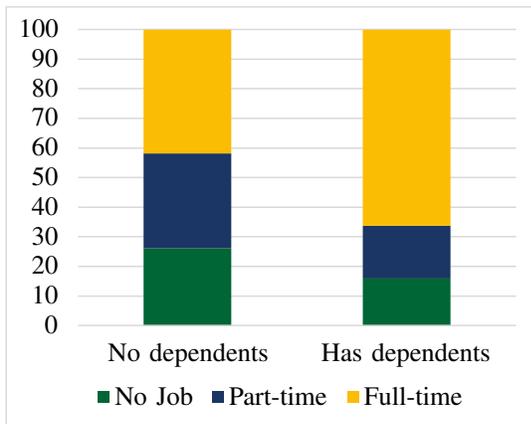


Fig. 4. Student employment status.

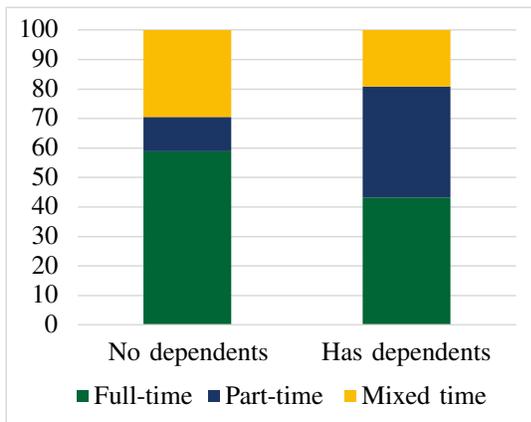


Fig. 5. Student enrollment status.

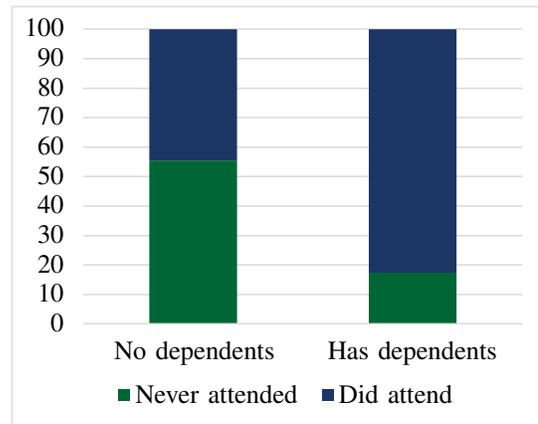


Fig. 6. Student attendance at a community college.

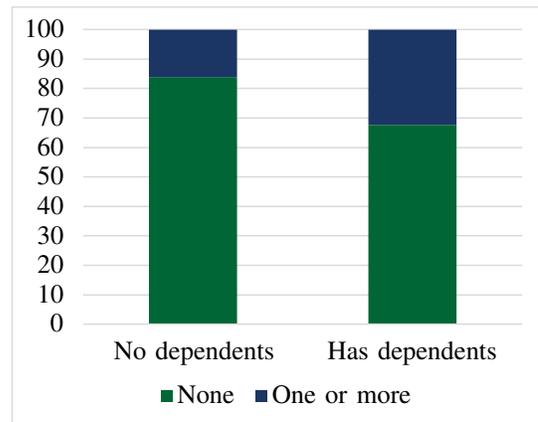


Fig. 7. Student experience with remedial courses.

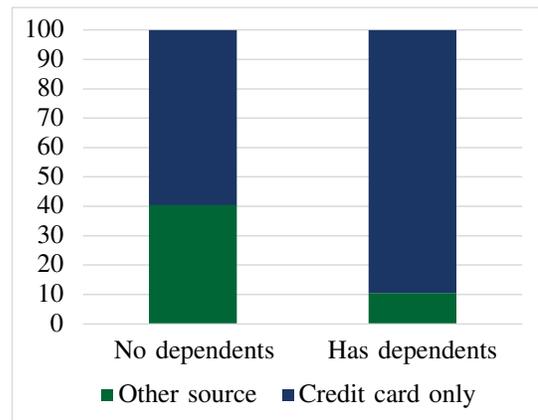


Fig. 8. Student has source other than credit card to pay tuition and fees.

parents, a credit card is their only source of funding to pay for tuition and fees; the same is true for 60% of non-parents, a difference that is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).

Perhaps surprisingly, student parents are *less* likely to attend an institution that offers child care on-campus (43% versus 61%; $p = 0.004$), as shown in Figure 9.

Student parents are far less likely to attend a very selective

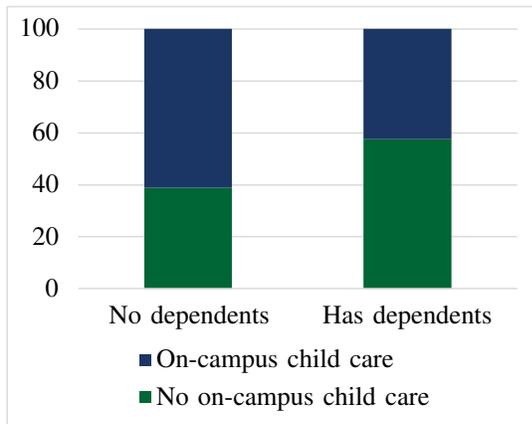


Fig. 9. Student is attending institution with on-campus childcare.

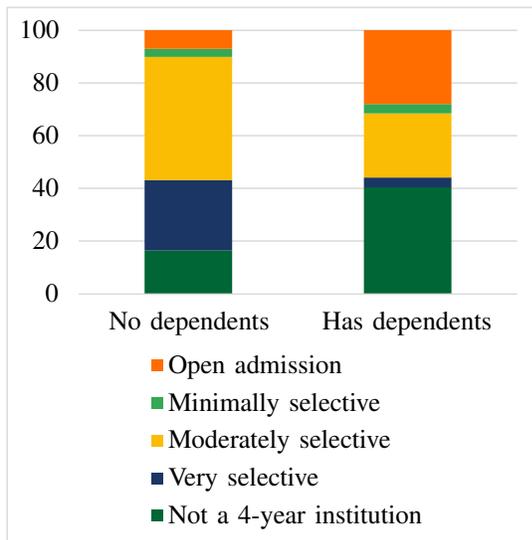


Fig. 10. Student attendance by institution selectivity.

institution (4% versus 27%) and far more likely to attend a school with an open admission policy (28% versus 7%), as shown in Figure 10, a difference that was statistically significant ($p = 0.004$).

Student parents and non-parents have similar GPAs: 33% of non-parents and 32% of parents have GPAs below 3.0, and 67% of non-parents and 68% of parents have GPAs of 3.00 or higher.

Student parents were more likely to have taken online classes than non-parents (68% versus 57%), but this difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.051$).

As Figure 11 illustrates, student parents are more likely to experience low or very low food security (32% versus 18%), a result that was statistically significant ($p = 0.030$).

Table I summarizes the factors where there is a significant difference between student parents and non-parents.

IV. DISCUSSION

Figure 12 summarizes the findings and recommendations.

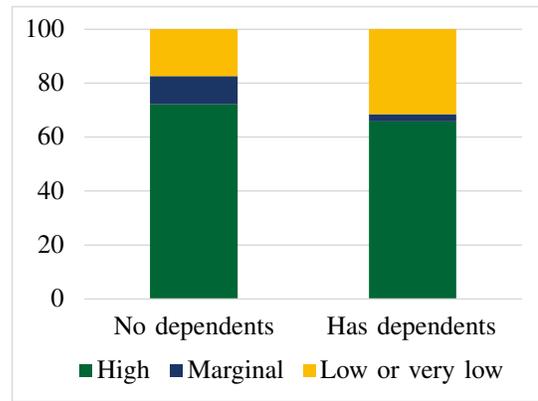


Fig. 11. Student level of food security.

	non-parents	student parents	p-value
% >34 years old	1	52	<0.001
% Female	21	10	<0.001
% Black male	8	19	0.045
% Full-time job	42	66	<0.001
% Full-time student	59	43	0.027
% Community college	45	83	<0.001
% Remedial course(s)	16	32	0.009
% Credit card only	60	90	<0.001
% Campus childcare	61	43	0.004
% Open admission	7	28	0.004
% Low food security	18	32	0.030

TABLE I

SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STUDENT PARENTS NON-PARENTS.

A. Similarities across Parenting Status

There were no significant differences between student parents and non-parents in terms of their disability status or their GPAs. The finding about GPAs is particularly important since it speaks to the fact that student parents are able to maintain similar levels of academic achievement with their peers who

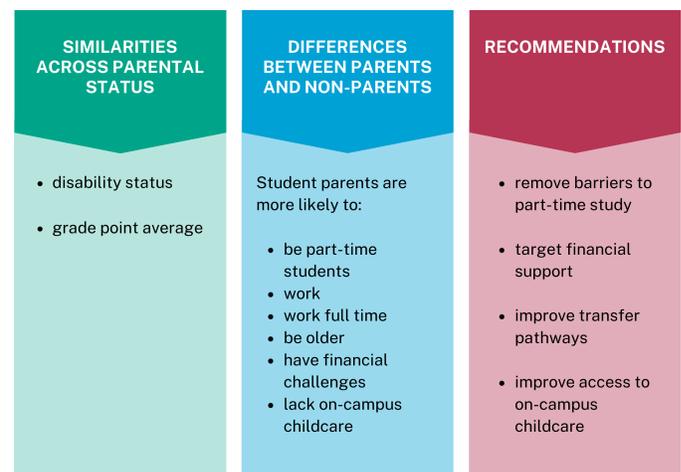


Fig. 12. Summary of findings and recommendations.

are non-parents. This finding points to some strengths and assets of student parents that counterbalance the time pressures that they face as parents.

B. Differences by Parenting Status and Recommendations

In several metrics, there were significant differences between student parents and non-parents. These differences also point at ways to better support student parents who are studying engineering by ensuring that the factors that differentiate them from other engineering students do not present barriers to their academic success. This subsection explores these differences and recommendations for ensuring that the differences do not become a systemic barrier to the academic success of student parents.

Student parents are more likely to be part-time students. Thus, any obstacles to part-time students will likely harm student parents since they are disproportionately likely to be studying part-time. But part-time study itself need not be detrimental to students so long as they have opportunities to develop professional skills via interactions with faculty and peers [12]. Thus, policies and programs that make it easier for students to have these opportunities are likely to benefit student parents. Given that older students can find it more difficult to develop these relationships due to the constraints on their time [13], careful crafting of accessible networking opportunities is needed.

Student parents tend to be older than non-parents. There is a growing awareness that older students, traditionally invisible from an institutional perspective, may have different needs and desires than younger students and might therefore benefit from targeted student services, ranging from family-friendly campus events to one-stop academic counseling [14]. Additionally, since older engineering students have higher grades and retention rates [15], the narrative around older students, including student parents, presents an opportunity to emphasize the assets that older students bring to their studies, departments, and institutions. Developing this asset-based narrative may be a particularly important corrective since older engineering students may feel less competent than their younger peers [16].

Student parents are more likely to have a credit card as the only source for paying school expenses are more likely to experience food insecurity. These findings are aligned with previous research on student parents, which found that financial challenges are one of the largest barriers to their academic success [17]. Clearly, more financial support for student parents would be beneficial, and it may also be the case that more efforts around disseminating information about already extant resources would also be helpful [3], [18].

Since student parents are more likely to have attended a community college, policies and programs that ease the transfer process would likely benefit them. Best practices for supporting engineering transfer students include strong campus support offices [19], assistance in integrating into the new campus [20], and mentorship [21]. Similarly, student parents are more likely than non-parents to have taken one or more remedial courses, and so best practices for remediation

present an opportunity to assist student parents. However, findings on the effectiveness of remedial courses are mixed [22], so further research in this area – focused particularly on engineering students, student parents, or student parents – is warranted.

Surprisingly, student parents are *less* likely to have access to on-campus childcare than non-parents. A previous study of student parents found that about one-third of student parents reported that (lack of) childcare hampered their ability to succeed in their studies [23], and intense time constraints is a hallmark of the student parent experience [24]–[26]. Further, over one-fifth of student parents in another study were under the impression that they would have access to on-campus childcare when they did not [27].

Student parents are also more likely to work and to work full-time than their counterparts. Schools can best support employed students, including student parents, by providing meaningful on-campus job opportunities, reigning in tuition and fees to reduce the need to work, and designing instruction to remove barriers for working students [28].

Student parents are also more likely to differ demographically from non-parents in two ways. First, student parents are more likely to be men: overall, per the NPSAS data, 20% of students studying engineering are women, but only 10% of student parents are women. Second, student parents are more likely to be Black men than non-parents are. These demographic differences between student parents and non-parents may have substantial equity implications. While more research is needed, it may be the case that better supporting student parents could result in more Black men persisting in the study of engineering and more women entering the major.

Other policies, including those that are not specifically tied to the differences identified between student parents and non-parents but designed to assist student parents more generally, may be a useful way for schools to recruit and retain student parents. For example, priority registration for student parents (which recently became a legal requirement in California [29]) can make it easier for student parents to succeed in balancing the many demands on their time.

C. Asset and Deficit Framing

As described previously, the theoretical framework for this project is asset framing, with an explicit commitment to avoid deficit framing – in this case, ascribing to student parents the responsibility for structural factors that constitute barriers to their success. The nature of the dataset used in this project necessitates that a thorough exploration of the funds of knowledge that student parents bring to their study of engineering is not possible, but it is nonetheless evident that student parents do bring strengths to their studies: they are able – despite being more likely to hold a full-time job, to experience food insecurity, and to attend a campus without childcare – to maintain grades similar to those of other engineering students.

D. Limitations and Future Research

This project relied in the NPSAS data, as the only large-scale dataset of undergraduate students to include an indicator

of parental status as well as major. However, this dataset has some substantial limitations, from the categories used to the granularity of the data which is released (which, in turn, impacts what kind of analysis can be performed). Further, this project is an exploratory data analysis using only the data for undergraduates. The data for graduate students in engineering warrants study, and regression analysis would also provide additional insights.

The rate of student parents studying engineering is far lower than the overall rate of student parents. The reasons for this disparity are currently unknown, given the paucity of research on student parents and, especially, those who are studying engineering. The discrepancy itself constitutes an equity issue to the extent that structural and/or institutional factors make the study of engineering an unappealing choice for student parents. The relatively low rate of student parents in engineering may interact with the disproportionate representation by race, ethnicity, and gender in the field although, again, the lack of data exploring the topic means that further research is warranted to determine how various factors interact to impact student experience and, ultimately, what changes can be made to ensure that engineering is a welcoming field for all students, including those who are parents. As described above, a better understanding of the funds of knowledge of student parents is warranted.

Future research should also explore – both qualitatively and quantitatively – how students intersecting identities shape their interest in and experience with studying engineering. Additionally, future research using the NPSAS data could disaggregate students from 2-year and 4-year colleges in order to better understand the landscape and how to best support students in each setting.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper presents an exploratory data analysis focused on answering the question of how student parents who are studying engineering differ from other engineering students. The former experience some substantial challenges, including financial challenges, but they are nonetheless able to maintain grades similar to their peers' grades. More research, including mixed-methods research that can probe the reasons for and perceptions of these differences – will position engineering departments to better support all of their students and will likely lead to improved equity in engineering programs.

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