

The Rise Prize:

Fostering Innovation to Support Student Parents

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SECTION 1

Seeking & Supporting Innovation for Student Parents



Student parents are remarkable and resilient. They represent nearly 25% of the total undergraduate population; comprise a significant portion of enrollees in non-traditional credential, certificate, and workforce programs; make up a major segment of the "some college credit, but no degree" population and study at exclusively online programs at a rate four times higher than that of their peers.¹ Student parents are often older and more financially independent than other postsecondary students, reflecting the evolving demographics of students in higher education overall.² They experience "shredded time" due to competing priorities—working, studying, and caring for their families.

In spite of those stakes—and their significant numbers—student parents navigate an outdated system that doesn't account for their unique needs. Student parents are 10 times less likely than non-parenting students to complete a bachelor's degree within five years.³ Over 50% will leave their college programs without obtaining a degree during a six-year enrollment period.⁴ And student parents form a largely invisible group: Many higher education institutions do not yet track their student parent populations. Still, student parents are exceptionally driven to succeed, for both themselves and their children; in fact, they have higher GPAs on average than their non-parenting peers.³ This is why we call them Risers—because they are dually motivated, courageous, and rise up in the face of systematic barriers.

Rise of the Risers

In 2018, [Imaginable Futures](#) (then Omidyar Network)—a venture of The Omidyar Group—partnered with [Entangled Solutions](#) (now [Guild Education](#)) to better understand this important, growing community of postsecondary learners. This research included 26 one-on-one interviews with Risers, along with researchers, leaders of community-based organizations, thought leaders, and education entrepreneurs serving Risers.

The collaboration produced a report, [Parent Learners Insights for Innovation](#), which drew on research and interviews from the field. Risers' postsecondary success—defined as first-time enrollment, re-enrollment, and completion; economic mobility; and well-being—yields major returns for their families.⁵ The report also established that an emerging field of innovative organizations, including nonprofits, for-profits, and academic institutions, was already building solutions that could promote postsecondary success for Risers. Most of all, it sparked a new initiative: an innovation competition that would seek out and foster the most promising and impactful solutions to accelerate Risers' success.



RISERS

By acknowledging the existence of Risers and understanding their unique needs and strengths, [the Rise Prize](#) sought to create a path to educational success, increase economic mobility, improve well-being, and achieve overall better outcomes for student parents and their children.

Launching the Rise Prize

In early 2020, [Imaginable Futures](#) and [Lumina Foundation](#), collaborated with [Entangled Solutions](#) to launch [the Rise Prize](#) to raise awareness about Risers and to accelerate postsecondary completion, economic mobility, and well-being for student parents. The first competition of its kind to focus on spurring innovation and scaling current solutions that address the specific needs of Risers in postsecondary programs, the Rise Prize provided exposure to funders and partners, strengthened solutions through mentoring support, and awarded monetary prizes totaling \$1.55 million. The Rise Prize team worked closely with 10 leading partners on the prize design, promotion, and elevating awareness about Risers.



Shortly after the Rise Prize launched, the COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges for potential applicants, especially colleges and universities. The Rise Prize team recognized the new constraints on applicants and, in response, extended the deadline by six weeks, increased the prize pool, and expanded the total number of prizes. By the deadline in May 2020, the Rise Prize had received 338 high-quality applications.

RISER NEEDS IDENTIFIED IN PARENT LEARNERS INSIGHTS FOR INNOVATION

CAREER NAVIGATION

Improved guidance to help individuals choose degrees, programs, and careers that lead to family-sustaining wages; better data (e.g., about job growth and earning potential); and more navigable information (e.g., about the skills and day-to-day duties of different careers)

CHILD CARE

Consistent, accessible, affordable, and high-quality child care

PERSISTENCE & COMPLETION

Resources and support to assist in degree completion

LEARNING DESIGN

Flexible learning design that enables asynchronous, job-relevant learning sessions that can be launched or paused as needed

FASTER ON-RAMPS TO CAREER

Alternatives to traditional college programs that allow workers to gain marketable and relevant skills quickly

EARN-AND-LEARN PROGRAMS

Opportunities to earn income while learning

INNOVATIVE FINANCING

Includes income-share agreements, employer-paid models, refund-based models, and other models beyond traditional student loans

SKILLS RECOGNITION

Mechanisms to recognize Risers' skills, build upon them, and translate them for would-be employers



The Rise Prize team selected [26 finalists](#) and assembled a group of [20 advisors](#)—comprising senior leaders in edtech, venture capital, higher education, philanthropy, and nonprofit—to help the finalist teams refine their solutions, advise on their applications, and prepare a virtual pitch. In surveys, applicants highlighted the advising experience as one of the most valuable components of the prize process.

The Rise Prize included a diverse range of expert judges from impact investment, higher education, workforce development, and two-generation ([2Gen](#)) advocacy.⁶ Two judges are Risers and [Ascend Parent Advisors](#), who brought a crucial lived experience and expertise to the judging process.

The judging panel selected [15 winners](#) in the following categories:



1 RISER'S CHOICE AWARD (\$100,000)

awarded to a winner selected by the two Riser judges



1 RISING STAR AWARD (\$50,000)

awarded to a winner that showed innovation in addressing the unique needs of Risers who are fathers



8 EARLY STAGE AWARDS (\$50,000 EACH)

awarded to newly launched ideas in pilot/market research stage



5 MATURE STAGE AWARDS (\$200,000 EACH)

awarded to solutions with a demonstrated track record of impact and proven ability to significantly scale

RISE PRIZE JUDGING CRITERIA

DEPTH

The solution's ability to impact Risers' postsecondary success—including postsecondary completion—and their families' economic mobility and well-being

REACH

The solution's potential to scale to reach many Risers

INFLUENCE

The solution's ability to influence others—for example, policymakers, community leaders, and other innovators—toward greater impact for Risers

FEASIBILITY

The solution's likelihood of achieving success in depth, reach, and influence goals

EQUITY

The solution's focus on serving underrepresented minority (defined by the Rise Prize team as those whose race or ethnicity falls into one or more of the following: Black or African American, Latino or Hispanic, or Native American) populations and whether the solution team includes Risers and people from underrepresented minority backgrounds

2GEN

Success for Risers also means success for their families. As defined by [Ascend](#), two-generation (2Gen) approaches foster whole-family well-being by supporting children and the adults in their lives simultaneously, for example through child-friendly study lounges.⁶ The Rise Prize team encouraged applicants to build or highlight 2Gen approaches and incorporated this lens into the review and judging process.

Taking It to the Next Level

The next section will use the Rise Prize applicant pool to shed light on the current landscape of solutions addressing Risers' unique needs. We'll highlight representative examples to uncover strengths in existing solutions and expose remaining gaps that offer opportunities for future innovation.

SECTION 2







Rise Prize Applicants & the State of Riser Innovation



The Rise Prize was designed to increase awareness of, identify, and reward solutions driving economic mobility and well-being for Risers. The application process identified compelling and impactful solutions and generated invaluable data about the field. The Rise Prize team analyzed data from 338 completed, submitted, and eligible applications. This augmented and confirmed the findings of the [Parent Learners Insights for Innovation](#) report and provided insights that can inform future efforts to support Risers.⁵

This section explores **eight key takeaways** from Rise Prize solutions, insights about the different types of solutions that currently exist, and opportunities that remain to support and lift up Risers.

The Rise Prize team and applicants leveraged the [6 C's framework](#)—developed by [Imaginable Futures](#) from the findings of the [Parent Learners Insights for Innovation](#) report—to identify whether solutions address what Risers and their families need to succeed.⁷

BARRIER	DESCRIPTION
 CHILD CARE	Access to high-quality, affordable child care increases Riser graduation rates by 300%, but access to on-campus child care has declined in recent years. ⁸ Moreover, the average cost of child care is higher than the average cost of tuition in most states. ⁹
 COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT	Holistic support services—including mentoring, coaching, mental health & well-being services, and peer learning & support—provide the crucial social capital that encourages students to complete their programs.
 COMPLETION TIME	Expanding access to programs that emphasize skills over credit hours, like competency-based learning solutions, can help Risers complete a degree or certificate quickly or incrementally as needed.
 CONVENIENCE FIRST	Due to their "shredded time"—schedules uniquely broken up by a combination of parenting, study, and work—Risers need access to high-quality virtual, digital, and online programs that enable them to flex their learning time.
 COST	Given the budgetary constraints that come with raising children, Risers need affordable solutions and access to financing. Innovative financing approaches can help Risers lower the cost of postsecondary education, access financing options, and connect to additional financial aid or emergency cash assistance.
 CREDENTIAL / CONNECTION TO CAREER	The future of work is reshaping the employment landscape. Credential-based programs that focus on skills and competencies employers need—and that make clear job and career connections—can help Risers achieve lasting economic mobility and well-being.

KEY TAKEAWAY #1: TAILOR TO RISERS' LAYERED IDENTITIES

The Rise Prize applicant pool reflected Risers' multifaceted identities.

In [Parent Learners Insights for Innovation](#), the Rise Prize team found that, despite their significant presence in postsecondary education, Risers often feel alone and invisible to their institutions.

SEVERAL APPLICANTS SHOWED INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO HIGHLIGHTING AND SERVING SPECIFIC INTERSECTING IDENTITIES OF RISERS, INCLUDING

(in alphabetical order):

INCARCERATED PERSONS

The [Prison University Project](#) (a Mature Stage award winner), soon to be called Mount Tamalpais College, provides education and support services to Risers incarcerated in San Quentin State Prison. [EDWINS Leadership and Restaurant Institute](#) is another solution serving incarcerated Risers.

MILITARY FAMILIES

The [National Military Family Association](#) works to eliminate education and child care funding barriers for military spouses through scholarships and child care stipends.

NATIVE FAMILIES

Several applicants developed solutions that address the unique needs of Native populations, including the [American Indian College Fund](#)'s Ina Wa Wounspe Pi (Lakota for "Mothers Who Are Learning", an Early Stage award winner), which provides coaching and support for Native student mothers enrolled in participating tribal colleges and universities. The [American Indian Science and Engineering Society](#) proposed a culturally contextualized approach to providing Indigenous mothers with the meaningful peer and mentor support they need to achieve postsecondary success.

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Specific supports for people with learning differences include [Bristol Community College](#)'s (an Early Stage award winner) collaboration between its Office of Disability Services and [BuildED Corporation](#), which provides tech-enabled learning solutions adapted to the ideal pace and modality of each student's learning, including those with disabilities.

REFUGEES

The [International Rescue Committee in Atlanta](#) proposed Connect to Success, a program that would support refugee Risers by offering flexible distance learning secondary diploma programs with integrated academic and career coaching, evaluation and translation of foreign degrees, and help refugees apply to postsecondary programs.

UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS

A few applicants, such as [Frederick Community College](#)'s Parents Lead program, specifically identified the need to provide resources to Risers who are undocumented immigrants.

FATHERS

Only three applicants specifically called out fathers as the population of service, yet student fathers—comprising about 30% of Risers—experience unique barriers to success.² As shared in [Parent Learners Insights for Innovation](#), these include time management challenges, financial issues, and frequent exclusion from campus activities geared toward student mothers as the "default." Solutions like [Morehouse College](#)'s Fathers to the Finish Line (the Rising Star award winner), which provides mentorship and leadership training, and [TalentMarks](#)' Career Support for Fathers, which provides career coaching and connections to student father alumni, can guide future support for fathers.

KEY TAKEAWAY #2: ENHANCE ACCESS TO CHILD CARE

Many solutions addressed child care in several ways, including innovative approaches with online and 2Gen delivery, but child care solutions are worthy of more investment.

The defining difference between Risers and other students is, of course, their parenting responsibilities. Accessible, high-quality child care is crucial for Risers—and it's in short supply, not just for student parents, but also for all parents across the US. In [Parent Learners Insights for Innovation](#), the Rise Prize team identified securing affordable, high-quality child care as the top logistical challenge for Risers and child care as the single most frequently cited barrier facing Risers.⁸ While a 2017 study found that Risers who used on-campus child care were three times more likely to complete college,⁸ campus child care is steadily declining, and 95% of child care centers at two- and four-year schools across the country had waiting lists with an average of 82 children.⁹

Accordingly, 14% of Rise Prize applicants identified their solutions as primarily addressing child care—and even more (34%) incorporated it as a part of their solutions. Innovative modalities, such as online tutoring and programming for the child and parent to learn together, can meaningfully address the needs of Risers and their children.

SOLUTIONS FOCUSING ON CHILD CARE SPAN SEVERAL DELIVERY METHODS

HOME-BASED CHILD CARE

Caregivers providing care in their or others' homes is the most common type of child care, serving over 7 million children.¹⁰ A number of solutions offered this. [Sitters Without Borders](#), for example, matches volunteer babysitters with Risers for a semester or more at a time, often forging lasting relationships. [Aufero LLC](#) (an Early Stage finalist) proposed [RisersCircle.com](#), a platform that would enable parents to match with pre-screened child care providers who would conduct online sessions using curated materials. [Montana State University](#) proposed a partnership with [MyVillage](#) to reduce the challenges of starting and running home-based child care within campus housing.

CENTER-BASED CHILD CARE/CHILD CARE OUTSIDE THE HOME

This delivery method can be on or off campus. The [Los Angeles Valley College Family Resource Center](#) (a Mature Stage finalist) offers a menu of Riser support services, including family activities, on campus. [ArteLatAm](#), on the other hand, proposed offering art classes for Risers' children at either the artist's studio, public libraries, or family homes.

2GEN LEARNING

This approach, in which students and their children learn together, obviates the need for child care and provides an opportunity for quality parent-child time. Around 5% of the total applicant pool specifically highlighted 2Gen approaches, but more are needed. [Wellesley Centers for Women's Two-Generation Classroom Initiative](#) (an Early Stage finalist) is piloting curricula designed for joint learning between the parent and child, designed with input from Risers.

PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS AND NONPROFITS

Some academic institutions proposed solutions that incorporated on-campus or drop-in child care as one part of holistic, wraparound support for Risers in partnership with community organizations. For instance, [Rockland Community College](#) proposed partnering with the [Rockland County YMCA](#) to offer enriching child care while parents are on campus for three hours or fewer. [North Central Texas College \(NCTC\)](#) proposed Hope Rises, a collaboration in which community child care centers would provide child care at study sessions for Risers. [Everett Community College](#) (an Early Stage award winner) is developing Weekend College, a program allowing parents to obtain a postsecondary credential while maintaining their other responsibilities; the college plans to offer, through a partnership, drop-in child care for attending student parents.

KEY TAKEAWAY #3: SERVE RISERS WITH WRAPAROUND SERVICES

More solutions address Community of Support than any other barrier, and the majority of those solutions are provided by colleges and universities.

Solutions primarily aimed at providing [Community of Support](#), representing 43% of all applicants, offer Risers [social capital](#) through supportive networks that they can draw on to help manage academics and the demands of everyday life. Interviewing Risers for [Parent Learners Insights for Innovation](#), the Rise Prize team found that resources for student parents, such as child care subsidies, financial assistance, and community services, are available, but can be spread across various sources and are often hidden.⁵

The majority of solutions focused on Community of Support were offered by nonprofits (44%) and academic institutions (40%), whose student success centers have been well positioned to create comprehensive, wraparound services centralized through one institutional body.

FOUR PREDOMINANT TYPES OF RESOURCES ADDRESS COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT-ORIENTED SOLUTIONS

MENTORING, COACHING, AND TUTORING

These solutions provide Risers with one-on-one coaching from a professional for academic advising, career support, and/or general counseling. The [American Indian College Fund](#)'s Ina Wa Wounspe Pi solution (Lakota for "Mothers Who Are Learning", an Early Stage award winner), provides direct coaching to first-generation Risers at tribal colleges with low completion rates. The [City University of New York's Office of Early Childhood Initiatives](#) proposed designing professional development for campus child care staff to act as an "extended family," available to support and guide Risers through the family, financial, and academic challenges they face, in addition to providing high-quality child care.

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS SERVICES

These solutions include counseling, stress-management guidance, support groups, and crisis hotlines. The [Jed Foundation](#) is building an evidence-based guidance framework to help schools provide mental health support to Risers. [Project Self-Sufficiency](#) proposed a Riser-designed wellness app that would serve as an online mental health space for fellow Risers. [BetterYou](#) proposed an app to help Risers find time for physical health, social health, education, and mindfulness.

CONNECTION TO EXISTING RESOURCES

These services link Risers with the community support that can help them achieve postsecondary success. [Arizona State University](#) (an Early Stage award winner) plans to add enhancements to its existing bilingual chatbot, [Sunnybot](#), that would connect Risers with community and campus resources to help them complete their degrees. Through [BestFit's](#) (an Early Stage award winner) web platform, Risers can locate and apply for local and federal assistance. [Compete LA](#) by the [University of Louisiana System](#) (a Mature Stage finalist) provides connections with community resources in order to remove barriers to re-entry for Risers with some credit, but no degree.

PEER COMMUNITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

These services help Risers build interpersonal bonds. [Project Self-Sufficiency](#)'s Riser wellness app involves peer support components. [College Unbound](#)'s Bachelor of Arts with a major in Organizational Leadership and Change (the Risers' Choice award winner) places Risers in cohorts to help them cement strong relationships.

KEY TAKEAWAY #4: MEET RISERS' BASIC NEEDS

Some solutions seek to ensure the basic needs of Risers and their families are met, including housing and food security.

The majority of Risers and their children experience difficulty meeting their basic needs. A recent study from Temple University's Hope Center found that 68% of Risers were experiencing housing insecurity, 17% were homeless, and 53% were experiencing food insecurity.¹¹

The Rise Prize team saw many high-quality, innovative solutions addressing basic needs.

SOLUTIONS ADDRESS SEVERAL TYPES OF INTERSECTING BASIC NEEDS

HOUSING

[Family Scholar House](#) (a Mature Stage award winner) offers Risers access to subsidized family housing on its campuses, along with other supports such as on-site child care, academic coaches, and family advocacy services. [Jeremiah Program](#) (a Mature Stage award winner) offers a 2Gen strategy to help Risers and their children disrupt generational poverty by providing multiple supports, including safe and affordable housing.

FOOD SECURITY

Solutions such as those offered by [Urban Strategies Council](#) help provide funding and access to a secure food supply for Risers and their families.

EMERGENCY AID

For some Risers, the money needed to handle an emergency can mean the difference between staying in school and stopping out. [Raise the Barr](#) administers emergency grants to help single Risers pay for unexpected financial expenses and coordinate other emergency grant resources to help stabilize the family so parents can persist in their education. [Edquity](#) (a Mature Stage award winner) administers emergency grants for Risers to pay for unexpected expenses from car repair to medical bills, helping them persist in their programs by alleviating some of their financial burden.

ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY

The pandemic has revealed that access to reliable technology infrastructure is a necessity, not a luxury, especially for online learners and workers. [Rivet School](#) (a Mature Stage award winner) provides its students with laptops and technical assistance, recognizing that some Risers may lack the technology or technical literacy needed to access their online courses.

MENTAL HEALTH, PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL SAFETY

Risers often face challenges relating to physical and emotional safety, such as domestic violence and mental health issues. [Alegria Technologies'](#) GradUS Project works with survivors of domestic violence to provide them access to emergency basic needs, help them find transitional employment, and offer them entrepreneurship workshops.

MULTIPLE INTERSECTING NEEDS

Various solutions address the needs of Risers using an intersectional lens. These solutions provide social services, academic advising, and other supports, with a special focus on housing insecurity. The [Los Angeles Valley College Family Resource Center](#) (a Mature Stage finalist) provides support ranging from academic tutoring and mental health counseling to child-friendly study lounges, parenting classes, and emergency funds. [Social Finance's](#) Career Impact Bond funds career training as well as supportive services, such as benefits enrollment assistance and emergency aid funds.

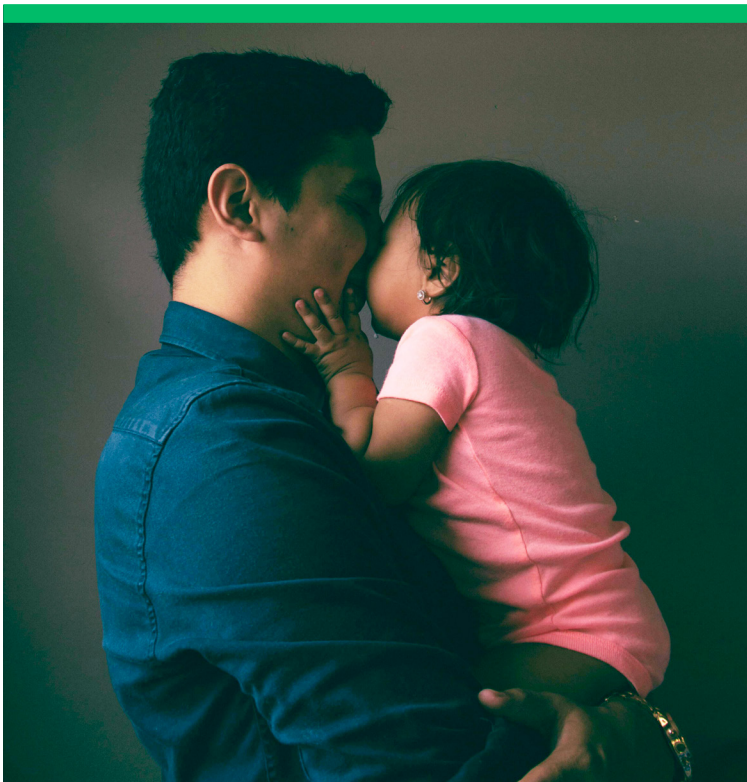
KEY TAKEAWAY #5: OFFER FLEXIBLE & CONVENIENT APPROACHES

Solutions delivering resources through SMS and other flexible approaches have grown in significance, something that all solution designers can learn from in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Risers frequently turn to online instruction to better accommodate their "shredded time" schedules.⁵ About 25% of undergraduate Risers enrolled exclusively in online programs, compared with just 7% of other undergraduates.¹ Some of these online programs have partnered with nonprofits to provide the in-person coaching and support needed for adult learners and Risers to thrive. [PelotonU](#), a pioneer in offering and helping other institutions launch hybrid colleges nationwide, proposed an entirely virtual pilot that would provide Risers with flexible learning to fit their schedules.

Risers need high-quality, flexible learning solutions that address "time poverty," one of their biggest barriers to postsecondary completion.⁴ For example, [Cell-Ed](#) (an Early Stage award winner) delivers essential skills training with live coaching through SMS text messages, negating any need for a smartphone or a data plan. Its S.T.E.P.S. (Steps To Educational Pathways Success) solution incorporates programming co-created with Riser advisors that bridges skill gaps, offers certificate programs, and provides coaching support. [Southern New Hampshire University](#) proposed "A Bridge to Possibility," a program that would provide free, three-credit skill-based learning experiences geared toward Risers unemployed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences would consist of micro-sized units provided both online and on mobile, allowing time-strapped Risers to fit learning around their busy schedules.

As a result of the pandemic, the need for social distancing, and parents' increased care responsibilities, this kind of flexibility is needed. There is a clear opportunity for academic institutions not only to move classes online, but also to embrace microlearning, learning that is mobile-first, and learning that doesn't require high-bandwidth internet access.



Mobile-first solutions offer student parents a convenient way to locate resources that support their postsecondary success. For example, [Beyond 12](#) offers a digital coaching platform combining human coaches, a campus-customized mobile app, and artificial intelligence (AI)-powered analytics to help first-generation students thrive. [RaiseMe](#) nudges Risers to complete tasks related to success, such as filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and rewards them with financial incentives for each completed task. [Upswing](#) (a Mature Stage finalist) reaches Risers through a text-based AI assistant named Ana, which sends reminders, nudges students, and asks how she can help before compiling resources to fit customized needs. For-profits lead the way in delivering convenient and flexible learning approaches—84% of for-profit solutions were delivered online, and 46% of Convenience First solutions were from for-profits.

KEY TAKEAWAY #6: TACKLE CAREER NAVIGATION & COST BARRIERS THROUGH EARN-AND-LEARN

Several solutions address career navigation. But there are opportunities to expand navigation to incorporate earn-and-learn solutions.

While 27% of Rise Prize applications primarily focused on [Credential/Connection to Career](#), more than 40—or 15% of the total applicant pool—primarily addressed career navigation. Some of these solutions provide guidance and training for specific career paths—for example, [i.c.stars](#) and [CNM Ingenuity](#) for careers in programming. [Neighborhood Villages](#) (a Mature Stage finalist) provides Risers with an on-ramp to become early childhood educators by offering them a debt-free credential and placing them in child care centers. [TechBridge](#) (a Mature Stage finalist) provides a free part-time 16-week technology and business education program designed to prepare unemployed or underemployed parents for a career in the technology sector through industry-certified technology training, financial literacy, mentoring from IT professionals, job placement, and social services. [Chicago Commons Association's Pathways for Parents](#), a partnership with [City Colleges of Chicago](#), also prepares Risers for careers in early childhood education, which serves both as child care and as a springboard for launching our "[littlest learners](#)" into lifelong success and well-being.¹²



Other solutions provide long-term career navigation, which helps Risers not only get their next jobs but navigate their careers as a whole. [Workbay](#) proposed to expand their mobile platform for [Goodwill Excel Center Mid-South Inc.](#), which gives free access to employer-advised programs and interview invites through a dashboard integrating skills training with job postings and career pathway programs. [CenterState CEO](#) proposed providing Risers with training and support to transition to higher-paying tech jobs with more advanced skill sets, such as programming and digital customer service. [Monroe Community College](#) (a Mature Stage finalist) enrolls Risers in short-term, highly impactful training and academic programs supported by high-touch, tailored, and career-oriented programming. Risers need solutions providing these kinds of roadmaps to successful careers that improve long-term economic mobility and well-being.

Earn-and-learn experiences can simultaneously help provide Connection to Career, promote career navigation, and meet Risers' financial needs. For example, [Arapahoe Community College](#) and [Centura Health](#) offer a no-debt healthcare apprenticeship program that pays student parents on day one and gives them hands-on experience to try a healthcare career. [Lutheran Child and Family Services of Indiana/Kentucky](#) proposed the Youth Support Center Pathway, which would offer a compensated pathway program for a career in youth services that combines classroom learning with full-time employment.

Paid apprenticeship and internship programs like these can help students earn money and mitigate their risk while they experience a new career path. These are especially impactful for the nearly one million low-income working Risers, who need programs providing income and lowered risk while trying out a career.¹³

KEY TAKEAWAY #7: BOLSTER ALTERNATE POSTSECONDARY PATHWAYS

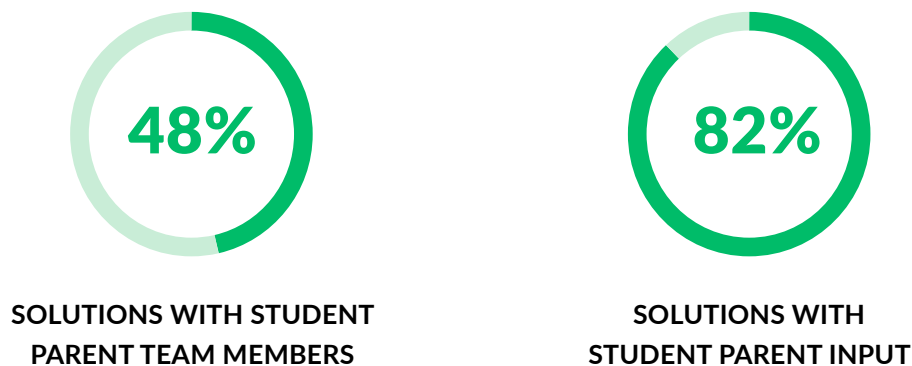
Innovative approaches to non-degree pathways and credit for prior learning and experience are accelerating Riser postsecondary success.

[Parent Learners Insights for Innovation](#) found that Risers bring unique assets—such as previous skills, experiences, and even credentials—to their educational institutions and employers. Risers need to have their skills recognized, built upon, and translated for would-be employers for them to recognize learning when it happens. For example, [Jobspeaker](#) automatically builds a Skills Transcript to represent students' earned skills and connect them to the right employers.

The report also identified a need for faster on-ramps to career. Alternative pathway programs allow workers to gain marketable skills relevant to well-paid careers.

Solutions focusing on addressing Credential/Connection to Career primarily provide skill-based or competency-based education and training that offers a degree or credential in rapid time, often incorporating hands-on experience and coaching. [Rivet School](#) (a Mature Stage winner) partners with competency-based university programs and provides intensive, one-on-one coaching support to help Risers earn an accredited bachelor's degree online in as little as two to three years and for less than \$10,000 total. Southern New Hampshire University and [JEVS Human Services](#) proposed [SNHU@JEVS](#), which would provide a competency-based degree program to deliver self-paced, employer-aligned education through an online portal and virtual and in-person coaching.

RISER VOICE



Solutions leveraging Riser voice tend to be more impactful because they have a deeper understanding of user needs and are directly engaging with stakeholders. Most solutions incorporated Riser input, but less than half included a Riser team member. Some solutions leveraged Riser input to tailor their existing solutions for student parents. For example, [Cell-Ed](#) (an Early Stage award winner) reached out to one of [Ascend's student parent advisors](#) and engaged her deeply in co-creating a new solution for Risers: S.T.E.P.S (Steps to Educational Pathways Success).

KEY TAKEAWAY #8: INCREASE EDUCATIONAL AFFORDABILITY

Solutions increasing the affordability of education are critical investments for Risers; there are notable solutions but not enough of them.

Financial burden, such as tuition costs or reduced income due to time spent on school, is the number one reason college students stop out of postsecondary education.¹⁴ The student loan debt crisis, totaling \$1.7 trillion, has increasingly impacted the higher education ecosystem, causing one in five prospective college students to pursue alternative pathways to postsecondary success.¹⁴ Risers are under even more financial stress, with two and a half times more loan debt than the average student.² Even though Cost is an important component of Riser postsecondary success, the Rise Prize only saw 22 solutions—or 9% of all solutions—focus on it. This presents an opportunity for innovators to address this critical need.

SOLUTIONS ADDRESSING COST FOCUSED ON FOUR ASPECTS

TUITION ASSISTANCE

Some solutions aim to provide financial aid for members of marginalized groups or those in targeted degree programs. [Union Institute & University](#) proposed providing scholarships and other supports to Risers interested in working in healthcare and recovery addiction recovery programs. The [Women's Foundation of Southern Arizona](#)'s Pathways program (an Early Stage award winner) offers single mothers an opportunity to earn a one-year certificate in a career path with high local demand by covering their tuition and child care, along with other supports. [Spelman College](#) offers Risers scholarship opportunities to assist with tuition as well as non-tuition expenses, such as child care.

INCOME SHARE AGREEMENTS (ISAs)

A few solutions, such as [ENTITY Academy](#) and [Pursuit](#), offer ISAs, in which the student pays no upfront cost in exchange for repaying a fixed percentage of their future income over a predetermined period of time. ISAs are a promising option for Risers when the terms are framed in the students' best interests.

ASSISTANCE WITH NON-TUITION EXPENSES

The peripheral costs of postsecondary study can outstrip direct costs like tuition. [Dallas College](#) addresses the problem by proposing a fund to help students with non-tuition costs like GED testing and nursing uniforms. [Charter Oak State College Foundation](#) offers a holistic approach for low-income single mothers by removing barriers such as child care, technology, and internet access while providing book vouchers, academic counseling, and other supports.

NAVIGATIONAL ASSISTANCE

Risers can use a guiding hand as they sort through the student financial aid application process. [Yenko's FutureGrad](#) software platform (an Early Stage award winner) pulls together information about federal, state, and institutional financial aid policies, helping time-strapped Risers understand the actions they need to take in order to maintain eligibility.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE RISE PRIZE

The [COVID-19 pandemic](#) spurred widespread job instability, sudden transitions to remote working and learning, and severe disruptions to child care arrangements. These factors affected both Risers and the organizations working on solutions for them.

In order to better support organizations in completing and submitting applications, the Rise Prize team extended the submission deadline, expanded the number of prizes offered, and increased the total prize amount by more than half a million dollars.

There were a total of 580 applications started, yet only 338 were completed by the deadline. Through conversations with applicants, the Rise Prize team heard that many organizations were challenged by the pandemic. Only 50% of academic organizations completed and submitted their applications, compared to 69% of for-profits and 62% of nonprofits, likely reflecting capacity constraints associated with transitioning not only staff, but also students, and support services online.

SECTION 3

The Rise Prize Winners



Rise Prize winners embody the extraordinary innovation, creativity, and dedication that organizations across the country have shown in support of Risers and their families.



RISERS CHOICE AWARD

\$100,000 awarded to a winner selected by the two student parent judges who brought an authentic understanding to the challenges that student parents face



RISING STAR AWARD

\$50,000 awarded to a winner that showed innovation in addressing the unique needs of Risers who are fathers



College Unbound
Providence, RI

College Unbound provides a Bachelor's Degree designed for working and parenting adults, where student passion drives learning and transformation, reframing life experiences and gaining real skills to realize and release student potential.



Morehouse College
Fathers to the Finish Line
Atlanta, GA

Fathers to the Finish Line creates a platform for providing student parents with holistic support through access to resources, including mentorship, professional development/career readiness, and leadership training.



EARLY STAGE

\$50,000 awarded to each of the eight early stage winners—newly launched ideas in pilot/market research mode



American Indian College Fund
"Ina wa wounspe pi"
(Mothers who are learning)
Denver, CO

A coaching program centered on Native students' cultural identities, offering financial, academic progression, and career readiness supports for Native, first generation, single mothers in higher education.



Arizona State University
The ASU Sunnybot Student-Parent Program
Tempe, AZ

The Sunnybot Student-Parents Program enhances ASU's chatbot Sunny to support ASU student parents by connecting them with resources with the goal of increasing postsecondary success and completion.



BestFit
Atlanta, GA

BestFit is a web platform that empowers student parents to design their own social safety nets—providing a one-stop shop for on-campus, community, government, and philanthropic resources.



Bristol Community College
Parenting Advancement Pathways
Fall River, MA

Parenting Advancement Pathways (PAP) promotes economic mobility by providing holistic supports and skills to help low-income single parents from diverse backgrounds move toward economic independence.



Cell-Ed
S.T.E.P.S (Steps to Educational Pathways Success)
Palo Alto, CA

One Million Learners will gain essential skills for life, school and work for free with Cell-Ed—certifications and live coaching, co-created, used by, and designed with parent learners.



Everett Community College
Weekend College
Everett, WA

Weekend College for Parents is a holistic, 2-generational approach that will help parents complete a degree or credential leading to economic mobility and stronger families by pairing weekend-only college coursework with access to essential student services, including drop-in child care.



Future Grad by Yenko
Brooklyn, NY

FutureGrad by Yenko is a financial aid eligibility platform that provides targeted and timely analytics, alerts, and recommendations to ensure that student parents maintain financial aid necessary to keep college affordable.



Women's Foundation of Southern Arizona
Pathways
Tucson, AZ

A 2-generational program for single mothers to secure advanced educational attainment toward their economic self-sufficiency, lifting entire families.



MATURE STAGE

\$200,000 awarded to each of the five mature stage winners—solutions with demonstrated track record of impact and proven ability to significantly scale



Edquity
Brooklyn, NY

Edquity is an end-to-end provider of emergency cash grants and social services referrals for student parents, helping student parents overcome financial obstacles on their way to postsecondary credentials.



Family Scholar House, Inc.
Louisville, KY

Family Scholar House is ending the cycle of poverty and transforming communities by empowering student parents to succeed in postsecondary education and achieve lifelong self-sufficiency.



Jeremiah Program
Minneapolis, MN

Scalable 2-generation programming that centers the full identity of single mom student parents, as both students and parents, and provides moms the tools and resources to surmount the systemic barriers they face in postsecondary education persistence.



Prison University Project
San Quentin State Prison, CA

Higher education for incarcerated parents provides a life-changing opportunity to break the intergenerational cycles of inequality and incarceration, improve employment opportunities and economic mobility post-release, and create a better life for parents and their children.



Rivet School
Richmond, CA

Rivet School, formerly known as Concourse Education, is college reimaged to serve post-traditional students like working adults and parent learners—delivering an accredited BA in two to three years and for \$10,000.

The winners have created and are scaling innovative solutions that leverage Riser strengths, directly address their needs, and collectively incorporate the [6 C's](#) for improving Riser success.

Some winners prioritize convenience, with mobile-based delivery that addresses Risers' time and technology challenges like [Cell-Ed's](#) S.T.E.P.S. and ASU's [Sunnybot](#) chatbot. Others offer a combination of supports to fulfill Risers' basic needs that are the prerequisite for self-actualization, such as [BestFit's](#) platform enabling Risers to design their own social safety nets or [Family Scholar House's](#) programs to promote affordable housing for Risers and their children. Some solutions combine mechanisms for emergency funding with digital innovation, such as [Edquity's](#) technology platform for emergency aid delivery. [Everett Community College's](#) Weekend College for Parents takes a 2Gen approach by pairing weekend-only college coursework with access to essential student services, including drop-in child care.

While winning solutions addressed a broad range of Riser needs, opportunities remain for further innovation to help remove key barriers, including child care access and 2Gen approaches.

SECTION 4

Accelerating Success: Building on the Rise Prize



The Rise Prize was established to raise awareness about student parents and enhance their economic mobility and well-being through postsecondary success. It was the first competition of its kind to focus on spurring innovation and advancing scalable solutions on behalf of Risers. The Rise Prize brought together higher education institutions, for-profit companies, nonprofit organizations, funders, and partners. It strengthened solutions with advising and awarded funding totaling \$1.55 million. Rise Prize solutions reveal that innovative interventions for Risers are flourishing across the country, helping make an often unseen population more visible and successful. Still, there are opportunities for continued innovation and investment to build on this progress.

It is important to fund and scale impactful solutions that recognize and serve Risers' multiple identities, enhance access to child care, accelerate learners' time to a credential, expand earn-and-learn opportunities, and adopt innovative approaches to financing. Investing in solutions for Risers' success brings benefits not only to student parents and their families but also to society as a whole.

In addition to raising awareness, innovation prizes can foster discourse that leads to real initiatives for change. [Ascend](#) recently launched the [Aspen Parent Powered Solutions Fund](#), which provides 12-month grants to nonprofit organizations that support Risers' postsecondary success.

When student parents rise, we all rise.¹⁴ And the Rise Prize has demonstrated that increased funding can prompt and expand the innovations that best help Risers succeed. Risers are ambitious, resilient, future-focused, and ready to advance. They need education providers, solutions, and funders to deliver innovations and capital that will ease their path and fuel their success.

WRITTEN BY THE RISE PRIZE TEAM

Authors: Vinice Davis, Isabelle Hau, Cindy Minn, Wayne Taliaferro, Sara Beth Hoffman, Anna Jiang, Michelle Nie, and George Vinton

The [Rise Prize team](#) includes members of [Imaginable Futures](#), [Lumina Foundation](#), and Entangled Solutions (now [Guild Education](#)). We could not have done this without the support of our [10 leading partners](#), [insightful judges](#), [supportive advisors](#), and the inspiring applicants creating a better postsecondary system for Risers.

Judges: Lesley Del Rio, Maria Flynn, Matt Greenfield, Martha Kanter, Anne Mosle, Maia Sharpley, and Ariel Ventura-Lazo

Advisors: Rosa Maria Castañeda, Rosye Cloud, David A. Croom, Brian Fleming, Jade Grieve, Dr. Adrian K. Haugabrook, Jessica Haselton, Chandler Koglmeier, Bethany Miller, Natalie Murray, Caleb Offley, Jason Palmer, Abigail Seldin, Marjorie Sims, David Soo, Julia Stiglitz, Dr. Karen A. Stout, Michelle R. Weise, Ph. D., Rachel Wexler, and Jennifer Zeisler

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Thank you

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