ABSTRACT

VANN-JOHNSON, JOAN DENIESE. Single Parents in the University. (Under the direction of Drs. Duane Akroyd and Wynetta Lee.)

This qualitative study explores the academic experiences of single-parent undergraduate students at North Carolina Central University. The world of single parents is one of children, employers, and themselves. When the parent adds the role of student, educational demands may be difficult to balance. Family and work responsibilities may interfere with educational attainment. This study suggests that the experiences of single-parent undergraduate students consist of complex responsibilities and roles. Yet, with a solid commitment, a reduction in daily situational barriers, and faculty, staff, and family support, these students are capable of attaining educational goals.
SINGLE-PARENT STUDENTS IN THE UNIVERSITY

by

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Over the last two decades, demographic shifts of undergraduate student populations have resulted in learning environments more inclusive of women, older students, commuter students, and students who are enrolled part-time. There has also been an increase in the number of single parents who enroll in American colleges and universities.

Data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2000) indicate that approximately thirteen percent of undergraduates age 23 or younger, reported being single parents. More women (69%) than men (30%) reported being single parents. Moreover, data from the American Council on Education (1999) indicates that two-thirds of independent African-American students have dependents. Approximately two-thirds of these students are single parents, the largest proportion of any racial/ethnic group.

The single-parent student has myriad responsibilities and potential problems (Ray, Bratton & Brandt, 2000). These problems are compounded for those students without financial support for their child(ren). Data from the American Council on Education (1999) confirm that African-American single parent students have a lower income profile than any other racial/ethnic group. Educational demands are difficult to balance with the numerous other responsibilities they must bear. Single parents often assume concurrently the roles of parent and employee, among others. As the role of student is added to this profile, the adjustment can be a difficult one. Other responsibilities often conflict with class attendance, assignment completion, persistence and graduation. This study focuses on the experiences of traditional-aged single parents in the university, the way they view themselves in relation to the institutional
environment, and how they manage to fit school into their already busy lives. Towards that end, this study will explore a holistic, rich, descriptive perspective of single-parent undergraduate student experiences.

Purpose of the Study

The world of the single parent is one of multiple demands: of children, of employers, and of themselves. Their schedules and lives are often overwhelming. The purpose of this study is to provide an understanding of the experiences of the single-parent undergraduate student at the university, and to explore what it means to be a student, parent, and employee, especially in the context of African-American communities. Student participants describe their academic experiences, issues which shape their experiences, and their feelings about acceptance and recognition in the university. They discuss the breadth of their roles as parent, student, and employee and their management of these roles as they strive towards completing academic goals.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions.

1. What are the academic experiences of single-parent undergraduate students at the university?

2. How do single parents perceive their acceptance by fellow students, faculty and university administration?
Theoretical Framework

The person-environment fit theory provides a framework for understanding experiences perceived by single parents. This theoretical framework explores the relationship between individuals and their environment. Individuals bring their own physical, social, and psychological characteristics into the environment (conceptualized as the institution), but the environment in which they live (situation) and their feeling concerning their confidence (disposition) also influences and impacts behavior. A good person-environment fit occurs when personal characteristics match the demands of the environment in which the person functions. How students interact with educational institutions is directly related to academic achievement, student satisfaction, and completion of academic goals. When the needs, goals, and expectations of the student are met in the institutional environment, then “fit” between student and institution is presumed to exist. Likewise, in the student’s personal life (situation), a good “fit” exists when the single parent adapts and responds accordingly to demands of school, family and work. Using this framework can lend insight into understanding both the experiences of single-parent students and their relationship to the institution.

Tinto’s (1975) model of higher education retention contributed to this research. Tinto’s theory basically asserts that students enter the institutional environment with individual characteristics and attributes. These characteristics dictate the students’ levels of (a) commitment to the goal of earning a degree, and (b) commitment to the institution. The student’s level of goal commitment determines the degree to which he or she will invest in the learning process, including studying, discussing topics in class, and conversing with faculty. The more the student engages in the learning process, the greater the degree to which the student will
be integrated academically into the institution. The amount of academic integration will, in turn, result in a new level of goal commitment. Likewise, the students’ level of institutional commitment will determine the degree to which he or she interacts with peers and faculty outside of class, and join organizations. The more the student engages in these behaviors, the greater the degree to which the student will be integrated socially into the institution. The increased social integration will result in greater institutional commitment. The model anticipates that if either goal or institutional commitment is low, the students will withdraw from the institution to cope with the incongruence. While his theory on student retention focuses on the traditional college student, the concepts are useful to understand persistence of non-traditional, single-parent students.

Significance of the Study

My professional training as an academic advisor to undergraduate students has made me conscious of the increasing number of traditional aged students who are single parents. These students encounter external and internal constraints that conflict with persistence and degree completion. Some work full-time while enrolled. This situation is further compounded by long commutes between home, work, and school. Childcare challenges can cause students to “stop out.” A single parent myself, having long ago obtained my undergraduate degree, my children are now adolescents and my career is well settled. Considering how the roles of parent, worker and student affect me as a mature doctoral student, I am concerned about the impact these nontraditional roles have on the lives of undergraduate traditional-aged students. While assisting these students in planning their class schedules, listening to them discuss their roles, goals and academic options, I found their experiences at the university intriguing.
This study is significant in that it offers important understandings and insights concerning traditional aged single-parent students. These findings reveal characteristics of single-parent students, and their survival strategies in juggling the roles of student, parent and employee. From this exposition, one can learn from the beliefs, values, and experiences of these single-parent students in an effort to minimize conditions that may impede or deter others, as well as assess strategies to motivate future generations of single parents.

This study identifies needs of single-parent students (to administrators and faculty), to the various roles of the single parent. The results of this study may suggest action for support, special academic programs, class scheduling, and financial aid assistance to institutions seeking to serve the single-parent student population. Descriptions of these students, who they are and how they survive in this role will give practitioners a better understanding of how to serve them.
CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

What We Know About Single Parenthood

The accelerated increase of single parents raising children is a major issue in our society (Ray, Bratton & Brandt, 2000). Single-parent families have become an increasingly prevalent family form in the United States. Currently, one in five households is headed by a single parent (Maning & Smock, 1997). Politicians, and religious leaders are concerned about single parenthood, as single-parent families are at higher risk for a number of social problems. Moreover, the portrayal of African-American single-parent families, in particular, conjures up negative images. The media portrays such families as “symptoms” of a decaying society. African-American single parent families are more often characterized as deficient rather than resilient, and as failures rather than successes (Ziegler, 1995). Hill (1998) however finds that African-American single parent families are resilient, and it is that resiliency that helps them overcome and resolve major problems and challenges. He suggests that strong achievement and work orientation, flexible family roles, and strong kinship bonds are attributes that support the survival and perseverance of the African-American single parent family.

The majority of single parents are mothers. The case of single motherhood is expected to grow at an average rate of 18 percent between 1990 and 2010. They are predicted to remain the bulk of all single parents in 2010, at nearly 8 million households (Edmondson & Waldrop, 1993). Some speculate that more than half of the nation’s households are now headed by single mothers (Walker, 1999). The single mother is often portrayed as an underaged, barely educated, welfare
recipient. She is frequently accused of rearing juvenile delinquents and menaces to society, and is constantly blamed for the moral decay of the nation (Heath & Orthner, 1999). Lower rates of high school and college graduation have also been attributed to the condition of growing up in a single-parent, female-headed household (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Popenoe, 1996). Families headed by single women are statistically the poorest of any major demographic groups (Kleist, 1999). Most single mothers do work outside the home, though the median income in 1998 for single mothers was only $18,000 a year – barely above the poverty level (Sidel, 1996). The terms “single mother” and “welfare-dependent” have come to be highly intertwined, adding to the stereotype of the single mother as being “lazy and unmotivated” (Seecombe & Battle-Walters, 1998).

Single mothers represent all classes, creeds and incomes. They come from all walks of life. They face the same challenges that affect all parents – having enough money to pay the bills, finding time and energy for their children amidst hectic work schedules, and making sure their children’s needs are met (Walker, 1999). Working single mothers have difficulty finding time for personal needs, and often go without sleep and leisure time so that they can meet the needs of their children (Hilton & Devall, 1998). The burden of being the only available parent often leads to feelings of isolation. Experts say it is not uncommon for mothers to feel guilt, regret, or even frustration with their circumstances (Walker, 1999). African-American single mothers, many of whom struggle to meet the demands of single parenthood, adapt to the world around them by using their social networks of diverse extended families of both blood kin and fictive kin.

Stereotypical thinking about single-parent families is that they consist of mothers raising children alone (Kalman, 2003). As women head the majority of single-parent families, only a
small body of research has focused on single fathers, however, early studies suggest that young African-American single fathers were at risk of joblessness, drug abuse, criminal victimization and imprisonment (Ziegler, 1995). The main contributing factors included low or no marketable employment skills, lack of role models and low basic education.

A single father heads one in ten single-parent families. The number of single fathers increased by 25 percent from 1995 to 1998. In 2000, single-father families grew from 393,000 to 2 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Relatively little is known about the parenting experiences of single fathers. It is expected, however, that single-parent fathers experience the same types of difficulties commonly reported by single-parent mothers: constrained finances and role and task overload. According to Rasbury (2000), there are single fathers who are natural nurturers and care providers and who are very comfortable with giving affection and expressing feelings that help to create a nurturing environment. The concept used to describe their caretaking is non-gendered mothering.

Kleist (1999) researched differences between single mothers and fathers concluding that single mothers and fathers were more alike than different, yet noted differences in their parenting process. Single mothers were less positive. Results also suggested that it was easier for fathers to add the primary-parenting role than for single mothers. This may be due to institutional factors supporting the single father: due to their uniqueness in number, the public may support single fathers’ efforts to succeed more than those of single mothers. Rasbury (2000) concedes that fathers who handle all “motherly duties” are viewed as special men.

Edmondson and Walthrop (1993) assert that one factor does not differ by gender is the time deficit. Single parents who have no other adult in their household are busy people, whether or not they work outside the home. They may get substantial physical and emotional support
from relatives and friends, but they alone shoulder the burden of raising the children. Without a partner in the household, it falls on the solo parent to meet and reconcile the competing demands for time, energy, and resources (Walker, 1999).

Parenthood is stressful. The stress associated with single parenting and related problems of role overload, social isolation, emotional and psychological problems, economic difficulties, time shortages, child care and lack of parenting support has been documented in the literature (Cunningham & Brown, 1984). Research by Voydanoff and Donnelly (1998) confirms that single parenthood and economic strain are likely sources of parental stress. Berk (1979) suggests that single parents experience more demands on their personal time due to increased housework and child-related demands. Economic demands are higher for single parents, with increased costs for household expenditures and childcare (Bird, 1997). Voydanoff & Donnelly (1998) contend that this economic pressure often translates into lower personal and parental well-being, even among those with incomes similar to non-parents. Furthermore, the increasingly competitive nature of the employment market is requiring that individuals achieve a level of education beyond high school to meet the basic financial needs of their families.

Hence, it is hardly surprising that large numbers of single parents seek an answer to their economic plight by attending a college or university. This study is concerned with the experiences of single parents. More specifically, this study is concerned with the single-parent undergraduate student who is enrolled at least part-time at the university and is the primary caretaker to offspring. More often than not, this student is employed and works an average of 20-40 hours per week.
Universities are experiencing increased numbers of students who manage concurrent roles in the family, the workplace and the university (Dill & Henley, 1998). These students frequently juggle homework and housework while trying to hold down a full-time job. College experts group these students within the categorization of “nontraditional students,” and they are becoming increasingly common on college campuses (Block, 1999). Cross (1981) defines the nontraditional student as one who returns to school full-time or part-time while maintaining responsibilities such as employment, family, and other tasks of adult life. These nontraditional students face diverse obstacles in universities designed around a traditional student role (Home, 1995). These demands can add a level of stress to their already frenzied lives (Simons, Beaman, Conger & Chao, 1993). If nontraditional student enrollment continues, these students will soon make up the majority of the student population attending higher education institutions. Hammer, Grisby & Woods (1998) suggest that with the growing number of nontraditional students in urban college and university settings, comes an increased need to determine ways of helping students manage the multiple roles of their hectic lives.

In an exploration of stress in traditional and nontraditional students, Jacobi (1987) found that nontraditional students had more time constraints and role conflicts than the traditional students. However, the nontraditional students showed less academic stress, reported greater satisfaction in the school domain, and experienced fewer negative health problems.

Linville (1987) posits that nontraditional students probably have greater self-complexity with more varied roles than the traditional student, and thus experience less anxiety related to the successful performance of the specific role of student. As such, the nontraditional students
cushion themselves from stressful academic events by gaining high self-appraisal in other roles, such as parent or employee.

Because many colleges and universities are still designed to serve a population of young persons between the ages of 18-22 who live on or near campus, and who are supported by someone other than themselves, university culture is built upon the expectation that students have time to attend classes without other responsibilities (Levine, 1993). Horn (1996) asserts that while traditional undergraduates are able to direct most of their energy toward studies, single-parent students frequently have family and work responsibilities competing with school for their time, energy and financial resources. The single-parent student, on the other hand, has numerous outside responsibilities, limited time, and financial instability (Cain, 1993). Some potential problems that single parents may encounter while attending college include unemployment, lack of childcare assistance, loneliness, lack of resources, poor or dearth of social support systems, and greater demands on time.

So long as the university assumes that students have few responsibilities except study, then programs and activities planned for traditional students will not support the needs of nontraditional students (Levine, 1993). The university needs programs and services for nontraditional students that provide a positive foundation of support to facilitate their transition into the university setting. As one professor said, “Many nontraditional students think things will work out fine, they can just go to school and be with their family, only to discover they have bitten off more than they can chew” (Home, 1995). In contrast to jobs with fixed hours and tasks, single-parent students find that family and student work just never ends (Dill & Henley, 1998).
Determinants of Success and Failure for Single Parent Students

Persistence. Studies (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Hoffman, 2000; Lombard, 1992) note that while the number of nontraditional students entering higher education has increased by as much as 50%, the number of nontraditional students leaving higher education without completing a degree is approaching 60%. In addition, it is documented that African-American students are more likely to drop out of college than their nonminority counterparts (Nettles, 1986). Furthermore Cross (1993), finds that historically black colleges tend to have a highly disappointing student graduation rate. In order for an institution to be successful in retaining students, students must persist and choose to remain at the institution through the completion of their degree. Therefore, an inquiry into persistence seeks to explain what influences student departure from college. In the last two decades, substantial research has been conducted on student persistence and withdrawal from institutions of higher education (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994).

Tinto (1987) finds that approximately 75% of students who leave college will do so during the first two years. He formulated a student integration theory of persistence based on the relationships between students and institutions. Tinto’s theory states that students persist in college because there is a match between the individual’s motivation and academic ability, and the institution’s academic and social characteristics. Hence, he posits that individuals fail to persist in higher education if they are unable to establish academic and social linkages within the institution. He characterized academic integration into institutions of higher education by grade performance and intellectual development. He defined social integration as peer group interactions, informal interaction with faculty, and involvement in campus life and extracurricular activities.
Wentzel (1999) posits that there are a number of factors that may influence student’s degree of social integration into the social fabric of the university. Because of the limited time spent on campus, due to their many personal responsibilities and rigid schedules, single-parent students may have less social integration into the student body and a lower degree of institutional commitment. These students’ lives may be centered around their family rather than the institution. Pascarella’s (1980) research findings are of the same opinion, in that they indicate nontraditional students who commute to their universities are on campus for shorter periods of time than residential students. Thus, they have fewer options to form peer relationships and engage in socialization.

Walleri and Peglow-Hoch (1988) concur, suggesting that persistence is independent of integration into campus life. They suggest that integration into campus life may matter less to single-parent students, since college is but one part of their daily lives. Students residing on campus have only the institution’s environment with which to contend. As such, they can avail themselves to fraternities, sororities, social clubs, study groups, and other campus groups which provide them with social enculturation. Those students who reside off-campus, however must face and confront multiple environments on a daily basis (school, work, family, transportation). Therefore, the researchers contend that persistent students have close relationships with faculty, share values and good relationships with other students and have specific career goals. Developing a professional and/or personal relationship, feeling understood, being encouraged, and/or receiving feedback was more important to their academic performance and persistence. Some researchers have found that external factors exert significant influence on the persistence of African-American students. Examples of those external factors that appear to exert influence on persistence include financial and non-financial support, and encouragement from family and
friends. As a result, the hypothesis of social integration being a predictor of persistence may not be applicable to the single-parent student population.

Chapman and Pasacarella (1983) believe that while students may be less socially integrated, they are not necessarily less academically integrated. Tinto (1993) and Jacoby (1989) agree, proposing that the critical college feature for commuters is the classroom because this is where they spend what little time they have on campus. Pascarella, Terenzini, and Wolfe (1986) emphasize the influence of faculty involvement on student retention and overall satisfaction. Student-faculty interactions, which include both formal classroom experiences and informal interactions outside of class, are also crucial to the intellectual development and persistence of students. According to Tinto (1987), a lack of such interactions is a very significant determinant of attrition. Likewise, Pascarelli and Terenzini (1976) report that the frequency and quality of student-faculty interactions significantly predict freshman academic outcomes such as college satisfaction and attrition. Moreover, Nauta, Epperson & Kahn (1998) find that students who develop interpersonal relationships with faculty members are also more satisfied with their institutional experiences. Furthermore, Allen (1986) found that grades were higher for African-American students with positive faculty relationships, and that African-American students at black colleges and universities are twice as likely to claim positive relationships with white faculty.

Bean and Metzer (1985) developed a model of attrition (voluntarily leaving an institution) specifically applied to nontraditional students. Their model considers that the attrition of nontraditional students is affected more by situational factors (outside of the academic environment, including finances, hours of employment and family responsibilities) than by integration into the academic environment. They argue that alleviating environmental
stress factors play a more important role in helping nontraditional students realize their educational goals than it does for more traditional students. Moreover they state that such assistance may compensate for nontraditional students’ poor academic preparation or lack of social integration – key variables related to traditional students’ persistence and attainment as illustrated in Tinto’s model of attrition. Likewise, Spanard (1990) adds that nontraditional students’ reasons for leaving college are often based on responsibilities relating to situations external to education that involve families or jobs. Thus, single-parent students often have obligations than hinder the devotion of time and effort to their studies.

Kelly (1980) finds that an important indicator of persistence in college is the general well-being and satisfaction of the single-parent student. Barry (1979) confirms this belief, referring to the almost universal discovery of the well-being of the parent in charge of the family. Bean and Metzer (1985) indicate that there is evidence that satisfaction has a positive correlation with persistence, and is one of the most important variables to consider in relation to attrition among nontraditional students. Moreover, Astin (1975) reports that greater satisfaction with the college environment is expressed by students who interact with faculty. Hence, it has been suggested that general well-being and satisfaction is necessary for continued motivation and persistence.

Stone (1994) assesses issues of persistence for poor, single mother college students and finds that participants indicate that support of peers is one of the most important factors to academic success and persistence. Though a few participants noted that they developed extensive networks with a wide variety of students, most associated mainly with other nontraditional students, especially other single-mother students. Participants stressed the importance of their peers for help with tutoring, obtaining books and notes, and receiving
emotional support. Moreover, Cabrera (1992) finds that a nontraditional student’s support may be largely from family, friends, and significant others.

Braxton (1997) tested fifteen propositions hypothesized to be directly related to student departure decisions. He found that students who developed relationships with peers persisted to a greater degree than those who did not develop relationships. For single-parent students, relationships may very well play a factor. Students that have relationships with other students may think of dropping out, only to be talked out of it by a friend. Sometimes it is easier to “tough it out” when you have a friend to “tough it out” with.

According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999), lack of money is one of the two most cited reasons for non-traditional student attrition. Because of personal family resources, or lack thereof, many non-traditional students must work part or full-time just to meet their expenses. Tinto (1993) proposes that the effect of finances on student attrition can be indirect and long-term as well as short-term. Thus, while single-parent students are already operating on a tight budget, any significant family event can prompt them to withdraw from college.

Another determinant of attrition is academic difficulty. Academic failure reflects a scenario in which the academic demands of the university are incongruent with the academic abilities of the student (Tinto, 1993). In some cases, academic boredom results in student attrition. Thus, some academic dismissals are a result of a decision made by the student not to invest the time and energy needed to maintain minimum academic standards. Working takes vital time away from study time of single-parent students. A natural result is that grade point averages for working students, with family responsibilities will suffer.

While national statistics on the attrition rates among single-parent students are not readily accessible, even if drop-out rates among single-parent students are high, Danowoski (1983)
suggests it is evident that at least some single parent students perform well academically, and eventually earn their degrees.

In summary, single-parent students often have obligations that hinder the devotion of time and effort to their studies. Self-supporting, the single-parent student does not have the luxury of being absorbed socially, academically, emotionally, or physically in the academic environment. With the numbers of such students increasing, the reality is that single-parent students are far less likely to complete academic goals.

**Barriers.** There are many factors that promote or hinder the completion of academic goals of nontraditional students. Christie and Dinham (1991) note that many students face simultaneous multiple demands of working, attending school and rearing a family. These students may find it a challenge to stay enrolled. They present a new set of problems for institutions of higher education that want to attract and retain them until graduation. These problems are commonly called “barriers.” Glass and Rose (1994) contend that these barriers challenge their ability to learn and complete their education.

Cross (1981) identified and listed three potential categories of barriers, which may hinder completion of academic goals. They are dispositional barriers, situational barriers and institutional barriers. Dispositional barriers are those related to attitudes and self-perceptions about oneself as a learner. They include:

1. lack of confidence in one’s academic ability
2. insufficient energy or stamina
3. lack of studying
4. lack of scholastic enthusiasm
The setting of long and short term goals, as well as mentoring by other nontraditional students may be able to serve as solutions to these dispositional influences. Loeb and Magee (1992) imply that students with low self-esteem who find it difficult to adjust to college academics may benefit from support (faculty, peers, family) that may lead to increased satisfaction with college and enhanced self-concept.

Eifler and Potthoff (1998) investigated factors that affect the persistence of nontraditional college students, and found that familial and institutional support are crucial to the persistence and academic success of nontraditional students. Nontraditional students who often attend class faithfully but have little time to initiate friendships may feel somewhat isolated from the institutional environment as a whole. Noel (1985) suggests that students persist in their education when they feel they are important to their institutions, and when they are satisfied with their educational experiences. Accordingly, Schlosserberg (1989) maintains that nontraditional students need the feeling that they “matter” to their colleges. “Mattering” is a belief people have that they matter to someone else, that they are the objects of someone else’s attention, and that others care about them and appreciate them. Tracey and Sedlacek (1985) conclude that the presence of a strong support person has been positively linked to academic success and retention for nontraditional students. Naretto (1995) maintains that membership in a supportive community is an important factor for retention of both nontraditional and traditional students. Adversely, feeling a sense of lack of connection with the institution results in student departure.

Situational barriers are those arising from one’s situation in life at a given time. Home and family responsibilities, need for childcare, job responsibilities, commuting and time restraints impact on the learner’s total environment. At the University of Cincinnati, a large urban university, a report compiled by the Office of Financial Aid showed that in 1996-97, 3,204
students indicated that they were single with at least one child. For these parents, situational issues of inadequate childcare, transportation, and child illnesses were as much parts of the pressures of college as are final exams and final reports (Parker, 1998).

Thus, competing roles and familial responsibilities must be realigned in order for single parents to focus on academic success. First, with regard to the family, Home (1993) compares the family to a “greedy institution.” Greedy institutions are identified as those seeking exclusive and undivided loyalty that weaken ties with institutions or persons that might make claims that conflict with their own agenda. As such, families can be considered greedy institutions, requiring constant allegiance and availability. When the single-parent desires to participate in more than one greedy institution (e.g., family, work, and education), he or she may be inundated with an overwhelming number of demands and obligations.

Second, the nontraditional students’ ability to finance their college education may play an important role in attrition. Unmet financial aid need has been argued, and found to challenge a student’s persistence (Nora, 1990). This need increases anxieties associated with securing resources to finance the education. Astin (1975) concludes that student persistence is positively affected by financial grants. The federal government has shifted from offering grants and scholarships to providing student loans. Data from the American Council on Education (1999) indicate that one-third of African-American students take out student loans each year. For most African-American students, student loans during the academic year help pay college bills. Many students are reluctant to take on huge debt. Occasionally, students leave the university due to an inability to meet tuition payments. Thus, financial aid continues to be a major factor in the lack of student persistence.
Third, employment is a situational barrier that challenges the single-parent student. Work is a very important factor in the life of most African-American students. In fact, almost half of employed African-American students identify themselves as primarily employees who are also taking classes, as opposed to students who are working to meet college expenses. Bean and Metzer (1985) and, Naretto (1995) assert that the number of hours a student is employed is related to his or her persistence. They agree that students who work more than twenty hours a week are less likely to persist than those who work fewer hours. Likewise, Astin (1975) concludes that students who work fewer than 20 hours a week are more likely to persist than even those who are unemployed. Given that almost 40 percent of African-American students work full-time, and another 30 percent work between 16 and 35 hours per week, excessive employment has a negative influence on persistence in college. Nonetheless, despite the agreement regarding the effect of work on persistence, this fact is lost on the students who must work.

Other situational barriers include:

1. time scarcity
2. child care availability
3. transportation availability
4. inadequate space to study or practice

Nontraditional students facing such situational barriers need services to enhance their academic and social adjustment by allowing them to concentrate on the role of student. Services might include assistance with transportation and childcare, alternatives to interrupting their academic program such as independent study, contract learning, and creative financial aid package including flexible tuition payment plans.
Institutional barriers [administrative and educational practices] consist of events and procedures that deter single-parent students from participating in educational activities. They include:

1. degree completion time lines
2. inadequate academic counseling
3. strict attendance requirements
4. time and availability of course offerings
5. inadequate scholarship and financial aid
6. availability of tutorial services
7. registration and bursar issues

Students who need access to tutorial services, career and personal counseling or access to academic advising may find that the services are offered only during weekdays and only during daytime hours. Thus, limited access to academic advisors, career counselors, and tutorial services impact student success. Academic curriculums and class schedules may be established whereby only full-time students can successfully complete the academic requirements. Such programs are not geared toward single-parent students who need part-time and evening programs to complete their academic degrees. The perception of these challenges may hinder the single-parent student from returning the following semester in pursuit of degree completion.

Difficulty with classes or study skills presents a challenge for the single-parent student. Academic or intellectual mismatch between the student and the academic requirements may result in the student’s voluntary departure. The academic mismatch may be between the student’s capabilities and interests for the required coursework, or the needed/required skills to pass the courses. Grades are equally important to traditional and nontraditional students.
However, if a single-parent student does not do well during a semester, perhaps due to outside job demands or a family crisis, the poor performance in itself may become a reason for departure.

**Person-Environment Fit**

The person-environment fit theory can be used to determine the unique relationships among students (single parents) and their environment (university). Theorists and researchers, especially from psychology and sociology dating back to 1924, have explored the relationships between individuals and their environments. Originated by the father of social psychology, Lewin (1936), the person-environment theory describes that behavior is the result of the function of a person and their environment. Both Kantor (1924), and Murray (1938), were early contributors to the theoretical foundation for interactionism that concluded that motivation was expressed in the form of goals towards which an individual would strive. In their opinion, the degree to which these goals were achieved impacted the individual.

Murray developed his own model for the person-environment theory. His model, based on the concept of “need-press”, described the motives, drives and goals of an individual (need), and the resources and demands of the environment (press). Murray thought that press of an object had the ability to influence a person either in a positive or negative manner. He further delineated that in any given press, a person will have a need or drive gratified to some degree. Murray is credited for being the first individual to define the person-environment theory in a way that was operational and defined the interaction between person and environment in an apparent manner (Walsh, Craik & Price, 1992).

Pace and Stern (1958), embraced Murray’s model and utilized it to study satisfaction and performance in higher education environments. They suggested that satisfaction and
performance in college environments be studied in terms of congruence (fit) between needs and press. Thus, they felt that congruence between needs and press would be more predictive of achievement, growth, and change than any other aspect of either the person or the environment.

Other researchers began exploring the interaction between college students and their academic setting. Pervin (1976), adopted Murray’s model, and created his own concept of person-environment interaction. His theory, the Transactional Theory, established a relationship between the individual, the environment, and congruency with an individual’s level of satisfaction. Adapting the theory directly to the higher education environment, Pervin (1976) studied college students and their perceived fit with their environment. His research concluded that a higher degree of congruency between the individual and environment contributed to a higher degree of satisfaction, while a lower degree of congruency resulted in dissatisfaction.

Brown (1982) used the person-environment fit theory model to review congruence of college matriculation and persistence of African-American students. His study supported the idea that the more congruent a student was with their college environment, the more likely they were to persist in college.

Witt (1984) used the person-environment fit model to study student satisfaction with their college experience. Results of 150 undergraduate students indicated that environmental variables were useful in predicting satisfaction in the participants. Thus, this study supported the idea that the more congruent a student is with their college environment, the more satisfied they can be with their college experience.

In 1970, Spady proposed a model of higher education dropout. He proposed that a student’s ability to adapt to the stresses of college life was influenced by past experiences.
addition, he felt that a student drops out of college due to many factors, and the student's entire life experience could impact the decision to drop out.

Tinto (1975) modified Spady’s (1970) model and proposed an amended model, the Student Integration Model. This model focused on the interaction of the quality of the student’s experiences on campus. It maintains that congruence between a student’s academic ability, and motivation, and the institution’s social and academic characteristics contributes to the student’s commitment to his or her educational goal and commitment to remain at the chosen institution. The theory asserts that, other factors being equal, the match between an individual’s characteristics and those of the institution shape a commitment to completing college (college goal), and a commitment to his or her respective institution (institutional commitment). Thus, the intention and commitment of individual students are affected by their subsequent interaction on campus. Students who have difficulty adjusting to a new way of life may wish to return to the familiarity of home. Students who have academic or social difficulty may become discouraged and less committed to educational goals. Other students may find incongruence between their personal commitments and the commitments of others on campus. They may feel they do not fit in socially or academically.

Thus, Tinto (1993) hypothesizes that the greater the integration and assimilation into the academic network of student peer groups, informal faculty-student activities, counseling and tutorial services, the greater the likelihood the student will succeed academically. In other words, integration helps determine success or failure.

Williams (1985) suggests that when student goals, needs, interests, values and expectations are adequately met within the institution environment, then from the student’s perspective, a certain degree of fit or congruency exists. Painter and Painter (1982), propose that
the right fit will match the student with the college that considers personal abilities and 
personality, resulting in feelings of gratification on the part of the student. Thus, a misfit will 
cause frustration and angry blame-fixing by the student and the college.

Pace (1980) acknowledges that students who perceive their campus environment to be 
friendly, congenial and supportive are more likely to be satisfied with the environment. He 
contends that students entering college with highly unrealistic expectations about the 
environment are more likely to have problems adjusting and are more likely to withdraw.

A study conducted by Hammer, Grisby and Woods (1998) to understand how multiple 
demands of work, family and school interact to affect role conflict of students at an urban 
university revealed that students who perceived the university as providing effective support 
services reported the lowest levels of work-school conflict. The students with lower satisfaction 
with their educational experience reported higher levels of work-school conflict. These findings 
suggest that there is a need to help students better balance the demands of work and school that 
could lead to a fit in the educational environment and higher retention levels.

*Multiple Roles of the Single-Parent*

With the growing number of single-parent students in higher education institutions 
comes an increased need to determine ways of helping these students manage the varied aspects 
of their lives. Work, school, and family role are a particular concern to urban universities with 
an increasing nontraditional student population. Their students are likely to maintain work 
and/or family responsibilities in addition to those responsibilities related to school (Hammer, 
Grisby & Woods, 1998). Any one of these roles is usually regarded as a full-time or primary 
role, and can result in stress on the single-parent student. Sarbin and Allen (1986) state that role 
ambiguity arises when people are unsure of what is expected of them. In the case of the single
father student, help may be offered in raising the children, but he may perceive that such care-
taking matters are a mother’s responsibility, thus causing him to experience role ambiguity
(Grief & DeMaris, 1990). These fathers are likely to feel unsure about what is expected of them,
which, in turn, may result in dissatisfaction and discomfort.

Although the role of custodial father is more common than ever before, men are rarely
socialized to be the primary caretaker of children. Fathers have few role models for balancing
the conflicting demands of work, housekeeping, socializing and childcare. In the past, cultural
discrimination persisted against fathers who assumed the primary parenting role (McCant, 1987).

Kelly and Voydanoff (1985) note that certain single women may be more vulnerable to
role strain because of their demanding life situations. For example, some single women
experience higher overload and work-family conflict. Furthermore, according to Cross (1981) in
some instances, as the sole financial support for a family, female nontraditional students often
experience stress trying to fulfill their multiples roles as student and mother. Accordingly, Astin
(1984) maintains that one of the most common reasons nontraditional female students drop out
of college relate to other responsibilities that compete with the time and energy which could
otherwise be dedicated to academics. Thus, female nontraditional students find it difficult to
balance the demands outside of college, such as family, with the demands of academic life.

Cross (1981), suggests that multiple role students face high financial or social costs, time
and priority pressures, and inadequate dependent care. Smith (1991) implies that they must also
cope with institutional obstacles such as inconvenient scheduling or locations, as well as
procedural rigidity regarding degree completion.

In a study of African-American single parents, Randolph (1995), found that the mother’s
level of education and the gender of the child were predictors of role strain. Mothers with less
than high school education who had sons were more likely to experience lower levels of parent life satisfaction than mothers with education beyond high school who were parenting sons. Furthermore, researching parent life satisfaction and family structure of single African-American mothers, Wan and Jaccard (1996) found that there was a correlation between parent life satisfaction and the social support provided by kin and non-kin.

Schmidt and Scott (1986) cite other life situations such as number of children, focus of study and full or part-time student and employee status as effects on role strain. Research has shown that people experience a great amount of stress in coping with the demands of work and family, resulting in negative consequences both on and off the job (Frone & Cooper, 1992). These negative consequences may also exist when people attempt to balance work, family and student roles simultaneously. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) define the conflict in which role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect as “interrole conflict.” The demands of one role are made more difficult by requirements of the other role.

In most circumstances, single custodial working parents are the primary earners within their families. They rarely live with another adult who can provide them supplemental support when the competing demands of their worker and parent roles converge (Wright, 1989). These parents often have more difficulty finding employment. Heath & Orthner (1999) report that work organizations often maintain policies or practices that conflict with family responsibilities, or even worse, they have organizational biases that reflect negative perceptions of single-parent status. Lambert (1993) agrees that jobs that involve long, unpredictable, or inflexible hours demand exclusive devotion, and are intolerant of interference from other roles can also be problematic.
In terms of their attention to their children and the consequences of single parent status for child development, Coleman (1992) has observed that single parents spend less time with their children and are less able to supervise children’s after-school activities. They spend less time in their children’s schools and with the social networks of their children. Successful adaptation to parental and work demands can have positive consequences for both the children and for the work organization that employs the parent (Burden, 1986; Hines, 1997; Orthner & Neeman, 1996). When adaptation is poor, both the family and work environments likely suffer, adding stress to the parent. Family and friends can be a primary source of support, and they can reduce conflict (Hobfall, 1986).
CHAPTER III

Methods

Nationally, institutions of higher education experienced a dramatic change in the demographics of the undergraduate student population. The traditional undergraduate college student who earned a high school diploma, enrolled full time immediately after finishing high school, depends on parents for financial support, is the exception rather than the rule. In 1999-2000, just 27 percent of undergraduates met all of these criteria (U. S. Department of Education Statistics, 2002). In particular, there has been an increase in the number of single parents who enroll in universities of higher education. There is no reason to expect that trends in North Carolina’s institutions of higher education are any different. This study explores the experiences of the single-parent undergraduate student at the institution. How do they view themselves in relation to the institutional environment? How do they manage to fit school into their lives as they juggle many other agendas and responsibilities?

The purpose of this study is an attempt to understand the experiences of the single-parent undergraduate student at the university, and explore what it means to be a student, parent and employee. Participants describe their academic experiences and issues that shape their experiences as they strive towards completion of academic goals.

The assumption is that the single-parent undergraduate student enters the institutional environment with various roles and responsibilities. Because many institutions do not involve students who do not fit the “traditional student mode,” single-parent students may feel they are not a part and do not fit in the institutional environment. This “misfit” may hinder or make completion of academic goals difficult.
Overview of Research Approach

The approach used in this study highlights description, grounded theory, and the study of people’s understanding – qualitative research. Qualitative or descriptive research is used to examine events. Qualitative researchers strive to learn the perspectives of the participants in order to portray the inner aspects of situations – aspects that are not often visible to the outsider (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). The data collected consists of detailed descriptions of situations, events, interpersonal interactions, and observed behaviors: direct quotations from people about their experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts (Patton, 1980). The purpose of such a study is insight, discovery and interpretation rather than correlation and causation.

In this study, the researcher reflects he Bogdan and Biklen (1992) view of qualitative research, where the researcher is the key instrument. Concerned with process rather than outcome, the data are analyzed inductively. Generalizations, concepts, or hypotheses emerge from an examination of data grounded in the context itself (Merriam, 1988).

The specific focus of this study concerns the experiences of the single-parent undergraduate student at the university. Because this researcher is interested in exploring feelings, attitudes, and understanding how single-parent undergraduate students make sense of their world in relation to the university environment, the qualitative approach was most appropriate. The data collected includes background surveys (Appendix B) and open-ended interviews (Appendix C).

The Setting

This study was based at North Carolina Central University, a historically black institution, located in Durham, North Carolina. Research Triangle Park (RTP) surrounds the institution. Though the university serves its traditional clientele of African-American students, it
is pushing to increase enrollment fifty percent by 2008 to attract new kinds of students (Cheng, 2000). The university is bolstering its evening and weekend studies program to attract Research Triangle Park (RTP) workers and other non-traditional students to meet the educational needs of a student body that is diverse in race and other socioeconomic attributes. Surrounded by large research institutions, the university offers something different to the broader community: an education in a nurturing environment. The goal is to develop into an institution where students can earn a degree between the demands of work and family – all at an affordable price.

To attract and diversify its student body, the university is targeting students who are reflective of its community. Single-parent students are a large part of that community, and a number of those single-parent students are enrolled in the university. For these parents, issues of daycare, transportation, and child illnesses are as much a part of the pressures of college as are term papers and exams. The university operates a laboratory school for preschoolers (a child care program administered by the Department of Human Sciences for the purpose of observation, training, and research). However, present opportunities are limited as there are only thirty-eight openings, and the tuition is $125 per week, with no discount for students. Furthermore, the university child care center opens from Monday through Friday from 7:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. Some constraints are beginning to lift. This year the university will offer nighttime registration, nighttime dining services, and even possible childcare to attract more single-parent students.

In addition, an adolescent parent scholarship fund was established at the university in 1994. In 1995, the university was awarded additional funding from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation. This funding produced Strivin’ and Survivin’, a single-parent project for students twenty-four years and younger. The goal of the program is to make certain that each participant graduates from the university. Seminars assist young single-parent students in enhancing their
parenting abilities and in obtaining economic self-sufficiency. Strivin’ and Survivin’ also provides funds to assist with tuition and childcare. Those single-parent students who are not a part of Strivin’ and Survivin’ must pay full cost for childcare.

Sample

The study population consists of single-parent undergraduate students who are heads of household and primary caretakers of at least one child. Participants were selected by purposeful sampling on the basis of the following criteria: 1) is age 26 or less; 2) is enrolled in a minimum of six hours at the university; 3) has completed at least one semester of coursework at the university; 4) has one or more dependents; 5) is employed at least 20 hours per week; 6) is primary caretaker of dependent(s); 7) has always parented as a single parent; and, 8) willingness to be interviewed. It was assumed by the researcher that those students who have completed at least one semester at the university would have a wider range of experiences in the environment than students who are new to the environment. The researcher also assumed that single-parent students who have always been in the single parent roles are different and will have different experiences than those who have had previous dual parenting relationships. Therefore, those students with previous dual parenting relationships were not included in this study. Likewise, as this researcher was more concerned with the traditional aged students in non-traditional roles, those students over the age of 26 were not included in this study.

Participants were recruited by the snowballing technique with the assistance of faculty from the School of Business and the College of Arts and Sciences. Those faculty members were identified because they teach students who would have been enrolled at the university for at least one semester. Faculty were contacted by telephone to solicit their participation.
From the background data questionnaires, interview participants were chosen by the purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling is based on the assumption that one wants to discover, understand, gain insight; therefore one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most (Chen, 1981). Twenty single-parent students were chosen as part of the interview pool. From this pool, five participants were selected for the interview process.

Pool of Qualified Potential Participants

Faculty members of the School of Business and the College of Arts and Sciences read a research announcement to their classes (Appendix A). The announcements described the nature of the study and requested student participation in the study. Interested students were urged to contact the researcher via contact information included in the announcement. Upon initial contact with the researcher, students were asked to complete a background questionnaire (Appendix B) as part of the screening process. The questionnaire addressed demographics including, but not limited to: name, age, address (e-mail and home), telephone numbers (home, work and cellular), race, enrollment status at the university, number of semesters at the university, primary caretaker of child(ren), gender, number of children, marital status, employment status (full or part-time), as well as their interest in participating in this study. After completing the questionnaire, students were told they would be contacted by the researcher to schedule an interview.

Student Participants

Participants included five single-parent undergraduate students enrolled in North Carolina Central University. Students will be identified by pseudonym. Student participants are briefly introduced in the following section.
Leland is a 26-year-old male. Leland initially enrolled at the university during fall semester 1994. Through spring semester 1995, he was enrolled as a part-time student. Since the beginning of the 1997 summer session, Leland has been consistently enrolled as a full-time student. Tanner is a 23-year-old male. From fall 1999 through spring 2001, he was enrolled as a part-time student. During fall 2001, he began matriculating as a full-time student. Eve is a 22-year-old female. She began matriculation at North Carolina Central University during fall 1998. Mina is a 19-year-old female. Before enrolling in North Carolina Central University during fall 2002, Mina lived at home with her parents while she attended a community college. Chamille is a 19-year-old female. She enrolled in the university fall 2001.

Data Collection Procedures

Upon initial contact with this researcher, students were asked to complete a background data questionnaire (Appendix B). The questionnaire focused on personal queries concerning work, university status and parenting status. Of specific interest were decisive factors for inclusion of participation in this study: age, number of children, employment status, enrollment status, whether student was primary caretaker of at least one child.

Interviews were conducted in the researcher’s office on campus. The office is situated in the building away from the flow of student traffic and noise, and thus served as an ideal interview atmosphere.

Before beginning the interview, participants were asked to read and sign the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Informed Consent Form. The researcher made every effort to assure that the participant was comfortable so as to elicit information as candid as possible, such as adjusting the temperature in the office, re-routing telephone distractions by forwarding calls to the receptionist area. The interview was audio-taped. Semi-structured, open-ended interview
was used following a protocol list of questions developed by the researcher based on the interview questions (Appendix C). The protocol list of questions was used only as a guide and participants were allowed to answer interview questions in their own terms, and/or raise other issues. The questions focused on three areas: daily experiences at the university, educational attainment, and relationships at the university. Specifically the issues were: typical day for the student; their experiences as a single-parent student at the university; their long and short-term educational goals, and their relationships with professors, peers, and staff at the university. During the interview, the researcher did not take written notes but made mental notes of the interviewee’s behavior, body language, and facial expressions. The interviews averaged one hour.

At the end of the interview session, the participants were thanked for their time and invited, if necessary, to a follow-up session. The follow-up sessions would entail reading of the transcripts by student participants. Mental reflections were documented immediately following the interview.

Data Analysis

To increase understanding of the data so that it could be presented, the researcher organized the data (background questionnaire and interview transcripts) and broke it down into components. It was then analyzed for common themes, consistencies and inconsistencies using the constant comparative method, which is a research design for multidata sources. The sources used for data collection were the background questionnaire and the interview. Formal analysis began early in the study and was nearly completed by the end of data collection (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). This method was used to select themes and generate explanations, and identify
emerging factors that were consistent or inconsistent among the experiences of single-parent college students.

As each interview session was completed, cassettes were transcribed and copies were printed. In order to assure the validity and integrity of collected data, the researcher asked student participants to read transcripts for clarity and accuracy of data interpretation. By the end of the last interview session, all preceding interview cassettes had been transcribed, printed and verified by student participants. As the researcher read transcript copies, common concerns of single-parent students were identified. Transcripts were cut and pasted so that text for each question was combined to form separate documents. For example, all participant responses for question number one were combined into one document. Responses for question number two were combined into one document. All succeeding responses were prepared in the same manner, with one exception. Since participants tended to group responses to questions five and six, those responses were merged into one document. The cutting/pasting procedure resulted in six documents that were scanned for shared concerns, ideas, beliefs and themes. As a result, several codes were developed. Highlighters were used to designate codes. For example, the code for “childcare” was designated using a yellow highlighter. All references of childcare were subsequently designated using the yellow highlighter. The code for “finances” was designated using a green highlighter. All references of finances were subsequently designated using a green highlighter. This method was used to generate explanations and emerging patterns about single-parent students and their experiences at the university.
CHAPTER IV

Results

This chapter provides a narrative summation of student demographics from the background data questionnaire. One area of interest of the background questionnaire was the age of single-parent student participants. The ages of the student participants ranged from 19 to 26. Participants consisted of two male students and three female students. Male students, Leland and Tanner, reported being 26 and 23 years of age, respectively. Female students included Eve, Chamille and Mina. Eve reported being 22 years old. Both Chamille and Mina reported being 19 years old. Another subject of interest on the background questionnaire was number of children. Leland had the largest number of children. He reported having four children - two daughters and two sons. His two oldest children are age 11. The two younger children are 8 years old. Tanner reported having one child – a 3 ½ year-old daughter. Eve reported having one child, a 4-year-old son. Chamille reported having two very young children - a 2 ½ year-old son and a 2 month-old son. Mina reported having one child, a 13-month-old daughter.

Note that all participants are employed. The number of hours worked each week varied from part-time (20 hours per week) to full-time (45 hours per week). The male subjects both reported working 40 hours or more per week. Leland reported working sometimes up to 45 hours per week. Female participants worked fewer hours. Eve reported working 20 hours per week. Chamille reported working 20 hours per week. Mina reported working up to 23 hours per week.

Though a condition for the study was that the student must be enrolled at least part-time (6 semester hours or more), it is important to note that three student participants consistently maintained full-time status (12 semester hours or more) since their initial enrollment at the
The other participants began as part-time students. One participant, Tanner, is enrolled in 18 semester hours. Three participants – Leland, Eve and Chamille are currently enrolled in 15 semester hours. Mina is enrolled in 13 semester hours. Another criteria of this study was that the single parent be primary caretaker of the child(ren). In reference to the criteria of primary caretaker, all five single-parent students are primary caretakers.

The interview questions were aimed at extracting thoughts, perceptions, and attitudes of single-parent students. The questions sought insight into three areas: normal daily activities and experiences as single parents, educational goals, and relationships at the university. Specifically, questions concerned with normal daily activities and experiences as single-parent students are: 1) Describe what a typical day is like for you; and 2) Tell me about your experiences as a single-parent student enrolled at North Carolina Central University. The question concerning educational attainment is: 3) Tell me about your short-term and long-term educational goals. Questions concerning relationships at the university are: 4) Tell me about your interpersonal relationships with your peers at the university; 5) How would you describe your relationship with your professors at the university?; 6) How would you describe your relationship with staff at the university?; and 7) How have faculty and staff contributed to your success at the university?

Responses to these inquiries are portrayed in the following vignettes.

**Student Interview Vignettes**

*Describe what a typical day is like for you.*

The single parent who attends college has various daily responsibilities. These responsibilities include, but are not limited to, childcare, transportation, jobs, and class assignments. Single-parent students oftentimes find themselves in a double bind. Without a college education, they may find themselves unable to provide for themselves and their
Single Parents

offspring; however, attending college may cause financial, emotional and personal difficulties by adding additional stress to their lives. On the other hand, single parents who add college to their daily responsibilities may view the additional role as a contributing factor toward a better future for themselves and their education. What are their daily schedules like? Participants describe what a typical day is like for them in the following excerpts.

_Mina:_ Our day starts at 6:00 a.m. Her [daughter’s] clothes are ironed the night before. There is usually a fight because she does not like to have her clothes put on. She likes to do it herself. We don’t do much to the house. I have class from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Tuesdays and Thursdays I do work-study. I have to pick her [daughter] up by 6:00 p.m. I take her home, feed her, bathe her and put her to bed. I actually get in bed myself for about two hours. I wake up around 9:00 p.m. She is still asleep. That’s when I study.

_Chamille:_ I get up at 6:30 a.m. and let the boys sleep until I get dressed. I would have ironed their clothes and laid them out the night before. I also would have packed their bags for the day and made sure I had everything in my backpack. I get my 2-½ year old son up first and dress him. Then I wake my 2-month-old son. We have to wait on my mom to come and get us so that she can drop him [oldest son] off at daycare and take me to campus [North Carolina Central University]. I work on campus – 20 hours a week. Mondays I have a 2:00 class. After class I go to work. On Tuesdays and Thursdays my class times are 11:35, 1:00 and 2:25. On Wednesday nights, I have a 6:00 p.m. class. At 5:00 p.m., I have to pick up both of my sons. If my 2-month-old son has not eaten, I will feed him first. Before I start feeding him, I will go upstairs and put Barney on for my oldest son to watch. I come downstairs, figure out what to fix for dinner, cook dinner, let
my 2-½ year old son eat (he likes to feed himself) and give them both a bath. After I put my 2-month-old son to bed I clean the kitchen. My 2-½ year old son is watching Barney again. After I get finished in the kitchen, I put my 2-½ year old son to bed. Then it is time for ME – time to study or complete assignments or – it all depends on if my two-month-old son is still asleep or not. By 11:00 p.m. I can finally get in the bed.

Eve: My alarm clock goes off around 8:00 a.m., but I lay there until 8:30 a.m. I would have laid both our clothes out the night before. I wake my son, tell him to go to the bathroom, brush his teeth and wash his face. He will come back sluggish because he does not want to go to bed at night. I help him get his clothes on. While he is eating, I put my clothes on. I take him to daycare, drop him off, and go to work. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays my classes don’t start until 6:00 p.m. That’s also when I do my homework and studying – before going to work. I leave my job and pick him up from daycare before I go to class. I make sure he is fed and bathed and has some kind of homework assignment to do while he is being watched. I try to have him in bed by 8:30 p.m., but on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays it’s hard because I don’t get out of class until 8:45 p.m.

Tanner: First of all you should know that my sister and I share a house. We thought we could help each other out. She [sister] is divorced and has a 7 year-old daughter. My daughter is three years old. I have to be at work at 8:00 a.m. every day, so I wake up around 6:00 a.m. Sometimes my sister helps me with my daughter. It all depends on what she [sister] has to do herself. She [daughter] knows how to wash her face, brush her teeth, and basically put her clothes on. Some days she moves too slow, so I do that for her myself. The daycare feeds her breakfast, but some mornings she will eat breakfast at
home with her cousin. When I leave home I take her to daycare. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, I go straight to campus after I drop her off – to an 8:00 a.m. class. After class I go to work until 5:00 p.m. except for Tuesdays and Thursdays when I leave work early to get to a 4:00 p.m. class. Sometimes I work on Saturdays. My sister helps out by picking her [daughter] up in the evening and making sure she is fed and bathed. When I come home, I spend some time with her. After she goes to sleep I look over my class notes.

Leland: I wake up in the morning around 6:00 a.m. My sons are 11 and 8, so they pretty much get themselves ready in the morning. Sometimes I fix breakfast. Sometimes we stop and get something to eat. Most of the time I am running late. Once we leave home, I go and pick up my daughter and her brother and take them to school. After everybody is dropped off, I go to campus for my 9:00 a.m. class. I have classes until 11:00 a.m. After that I go back home and check on my father; then I go to the studio. My father was recently diagnosed with Parkinson’s. He has good days and bad days, but I have to make sure he is doing ok. I have to be back on campus for class from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. Then I pick up my daughter and her brother from after-school care. I pick up my oldest son from after-school care and take them home. I make sure they are fed and that they do their homework. I go back to the studio around 9:00 p.m. By the time I get home, probably around 2:30 a.m., I fall in the bed and start over the next day. I check over homework in the morning. That’s why I am usually running late.
Tell me about your experiences as a single parent enrolled at North Carolina Central University.

Mina: I go to class – that is pretty much all I can do here. There are all these seminars and other educational experiences that the professors require of us. I have to go to work. Then I have to pick the baby up at daycare at 5:00 p.m. There is no “partying.” I don’t go out. I don’t leave my baby with anyone else here.

Chamille: Being a single parent you want to be involved. When I was in high school, I was involved in everything, but now being a single parent it is kind of hard to do. If I want to be involved in anything I have to get a babysitter. When I find one, I have to pay them. Most of the time, my mom has other plans. Sometimes I want to go to party, go out and hang around with my friends, but I can’t do that because I have got children and they come first.

Eve: It is hard because I made the decision to be a parent. Coming to college was my decision as well. Basically you have to suck it up. Sometimes I want to go out on Thursday, Friday or Saturday nights, but if I have a test on Monday, I can’t go out. As far as doing homework, I have to constrict time before work to do that because at night I am running behind him, trying to pick up, trying to clean up, trying to get ready for the next day, trying to get me enough rest, trying to get me fed. So it’s not that I am trying to do anything at night other than take care of him. I do take part in some campus activities like step shows and basketball games, but I have to take him with me. It’s nothing I can do without him. If he is sick, I either have to find a babysitter or not go to class. Being in college, you always have to depend on somebody else.
Tanner: Before I came to N. C. Central, I went to East Carolina University. I didn’t have my daughter then. Things are different when you’re a single parent. Though my sister and I share responsibilities at home, things are still much different for me than before. Then I went to college and worked to have extra money for clothes, accessories for my car – things that I wanted. Now I work to support my daughter and to make a future for us. At East Carolina I used to be involved in extra-curricular activities. My only extra-curricular activity now is NSBE (National Society of Black Engineers). I come to campus for class; then I leave campus to go to work, and on some afternoons I come back for more classes. I am enrolled in eighteen hours and plan to challenge a course so that I will be able to graduate in December 2003. This is my life right now – school, work. I spend as much time with my daughter as I can, but right now – for a while longer – it’s got to be this way.

Leland: As far as actually being on campus, I am only here for my classes. Outside of that, I am working and trying to provide for my children. Just came from paying daycare for my daughter and her little brother on yesterday. Did you know that before and after school care is $370 a month? That’s hard earned money, though Social Services helps with some before and after school care. Besides my four children, I am also involved with three other children from previous relationships. Then there is my father. So, I don’t have much time for on campus at all. I don’t hang around campus. I was involved a little in Student Government two years ago.

In examining the typical daily activities and experiences of single-parent students, common themes which emerged were childcare, finances, time, roles and relationships, parenting skills, and feelings of loneliness.
Childcare. All participants required some form of childcare assistance, either by daycare for very young children or before/after school care for school-aged children too young to be left unsupervised. Childcare for Chamille was just out her back door. She explained, “My youngest son is 2 ½ months old and goes to my cousin’s daycare just across the street.” For Leland, childcare is in the form of after school care. He explains, “My oldest son is in after school care and he does not get out until 4:30 p.m.” In attempts to minimize childcare concerns, Leland, Tanner, Eve and Chamille negotiated childcare assistance with family and/or peers. For example, Leland would negotiate with the mothers of his child(ren) for afternoon pick-up and care. He explains, “There is some co-opting with the mothers. They sometimes come in the evenings to pick them [children] up.” Eve sometimes sought assistance from her roommate so that she could attend late evening classes. “On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, I have a 7:30 p.m. class which ends at 8:45 p.m. My roommate will watch him [child] for me.” Chamille would negotiate for childcare assistance with her mother. She reported, “If my mom has not made other plans, she will take care of them [children] for me.” One participant, Mina, reported that with the exception of daycare, she did not leave her child with anyone else.

Childcare was necessary so that participants could attend classes and go to work. In one instance, it was necessary so that a participant could attend meetings of his organization (extra-curricular activity) that were held on campus. Tanner is a member of NSBE (National Society of Black Engineers). Their meetings are held at night. He explained, “If my sister has other obligations, then I have to pay someone to care for her [child] so that I can attend the meetings.” The one exception to having to pay for childcare in order to attend extra-curricular activities was Eve. Because of her place of residence (she resides on campus), she was able to attend extra-
curricular activities such as basketball games, step shows, and cultural events. She simply took her child with her.

Findings of this study conclude that student participants could benefit from childcare assistance. Childcare that extends from late afternoon through night would greatly assist these students. Evening to nighttime childcare would allow single-parent students more time in the campus environment. This time could permit for study activities, and allow an outlet for peer networking, and perhaps more faculty-student informal interactions. Thus, according to Wetzel (1999) by having evening childcare, students can become socially integrated into the student body and therefore have a higher degree of institutional commitment. Evening to nighttime childcare could also serve as an avenue for social integration for the single-parent student.

**Time.** Consistent with the research of Edmondson & Walthrop (1993) is that time, or the lack of it, is a common concern of all single-parent students – male and female – regardless of the amount of support received from family and friends. Time seemed a precious commodity for these single-parent students. Their days consisted of job-related, school-related, and parenting-related activities. Enrolled as full-time students, participants spent their time transporting children either to school and/or daycare in the morning before going to work or class, and picking up child(ren) from daycare in the afternoon. Eve noted, “Trying to get an education and raising a baby at the same time don’t complement each other. You have to rearrange your whole schedule around that itty-bitty person’s [child’s] schedule.

All participants in this study experienced demands on their time. As a result of these demands, Eve, Chamille, and Mina utilized time management skills in their parent domain by completing chores and tasks at night in order to ease the morning transition. They would perform such chores as ironing clothes and preparing diaper bags and/or backpacks. Chamille,
mother of two, reports, “I would have ironed their clothes the night before so I would not have much to do in the morning.” Mina stated, “I pack her bag and lay her things out at night.” Eve agreed, saying, “Normally, I would have laid his clothes out the night before. That helps me in the morning.” Eve and Chamille also utilized the time between classes to do other chores. Eve reported, “After I drop him [child] off and I need to do some running around to pay bills, I will do it then.” Chamille stated, “If I need to go to the mall, I do during the day when my kids are in daycare.”

Time demands for Leland and Tanner included work and family-related tasks. Leland and Tanner both work forty hours or more per week. In addition to their full-time work, they also care for extended family members. Tanner reported, “My sister and I have an arrangement. I work full-time, pay most of the bills and she helps with household responsibilities and taking care of my daughter.” Leland reports, “Last year after my father was diagnosed with Parkinson’s, I moved him into my home. I drive back and forth during the day to check on him, to make sure he has his medicine and that he eats.” Leland further explains, “Last year I helped create a company – Platinum Music and Videos – we have a studio. After my 11:00 a.m. class, I go to the studio and work. I go back to the studio around 9:00 p.m. and work and just try to finish up. I am also engineer-producer so we do a lot of recording. We come up with a lot of concepts for the show.”

To alleviate some of the demands of their daily lives, student participants sometimes received support from family and or friends. For example, Leland said, “There is some co-opting with the mothers, and my dad helps out on his good days.” Eve and Chamille reported receiving assistance from friends. Chamille stated, “My boyfriend helps me out on from time to time.” Mina was the only participant who reported receiving no assistance with childcare and or
parenting related activities. Findings of this study conclude that single-parent students benefit from support of family and friends. The support served as a primary source of daily assistance. In Eve’s case, the support served to reduce conflict which would have occurred had it not been for the childcare assistance of her roommate. Without such support, it would have been difficult for Eve to attend her night classes.

The support offered single-parent participants in the area of childcare and family-related tasks “alleviated situational factors.” Therefore, according to Bean and Metzer (1985), lessening of situational factors such as childcare and family-related responsibilities plays an important part in helping single parent students realize their educational goals.

Findings of this study conclude that because of demands on their time, devising methods of managing school-related, childcare/family-related, and work-related responsibilities was not only important but also essential for student participants. As a result, student participants developed time management strategies to encompass the various aspects of their multi-role lives.

Finances. Financial constraints and time spent working can hinder single-parent students from concentrating on their studies full-time, putting them at risk of not completing their educational program. All participants were employed. Chamille and Mina are employed through the work-study program on the campus. They work part-time: Chamille works 20 hours a week, and Mina works 23 hours a week. Work-study pays $7.50 per hour, payable on the 15th of each month. Eve recently obtained a job at the mall as a cashier. She works 20 hours per week. She reported, “It’s not what I want to do, but I have to make some money.” Chamille, Mina, and Eve rely on refunds from student loans and financial aid to subsidize expenses.

Voyandoff and Donelly (1998) contend that stress from economic pressure can translate into lower parental well-being. For example, as a result of losing her previous job, Eve was
evicted from her apartment, and at the time of the interview she was living on campus in the co-ed dormitory with her young son. Eve reported being uneasy about living in the dormitory with her son. The university does not have family residence dormitories.

Leland, Eve, Chamille and Mina all reported receiving financial assistance from the Department of Social Services. The assistance was in the form of childcare vouchers, food stamps, and assistance with housing. Leland explains, “Before and after-school care is $370 a month, but Social Services helps with it, so it really works out.” Mina details, “I get vouchers from the Durham Childcare Alliance for daycare, so I pay about $100 a month which is not bad at all.” Chamille and Mina reports receiving housing assistance. Chamille says, “I live in a two-bedroom apartment provided by the Durham Housing Authority. My rent payment is based on the amount of money I make each month.”

Tanner did not receive financial assistance from Social Services, but did receive it from his parents from time to time. According to Tanner, “Sometimes things happen [financially] and you are not expecting them. That’s when I go to my parents.”

Tanner and Leland reported working not only to provide for their families, but also to subsidize their education. They made the decision rather than incur additional debt in the form of student loans. Leland explains, “I am already in the hole with the federal government. I don’t want to graduate with too much debt.”

Findings of this study conclude that single-parent students are aware of the support services available to them through local and state agencies. Four of the student participants utilized the resources of the agencies; however, in Eve’s case, the assistance did not seem to be sufficient to sustain her. Eve reports, “Sometimes money is really tight. Last night, for example, I wanted to take him [child] out to eat. I only had $10.00 but I needed gas money too. I decided
that I needed the gas more.” These findings correlate with those of Cain (1993) which contend that in addition to their numerous outside responsibilities, single-parent students have unstable financial situations. This concern will also be delineated in the following section on transportation.

**Transportation.** Reliable transportation is imperative for single-parent students. They have to travel from job to school to home. Oftentimes unstable financial situations permitted single-parent students from owning personal, reliable transportation. When this happened, single-parent students encountered problems. Chamille and Eve reported having transportation problems. Chamille depends on her mother to transport her to and from campus and her oldest son to daycare. She explains, “We have to wait on mom to come and get us and take my oldest son to his daycare center which is down the street from her [mom’s] job.”

Eve reports that her car is unreliable, and that from time to time she borrows her roommate’s car. She says, “This morning I had to use someone else’s car to get my baby to daycare.” Due to lack of transportation and unreliable transportation, both Eve and Chamille would have problems leaving the campus or their jobs to pick up a sick child if need be. For the past three weeks Chamille’s 2 month-old son has had digestive problems. Because of her lack of transportation, trips to the doctor have become stressful. She explains, “I am so tired, and my mom is too. Every time we have to go to doctor, she [mom] has to get off work to take us.” Chamille may be experiencing mental and/or physical fatigue as discussed by Kelly (1980), as he stressed the importance of the well-being of the single parent as it relates to persistence. Thus, he concluded that general well-being of the single parent may be an important indicator of persistence.
In summary, lack of finances for gas, food, tuition and transportation can be barriers to persistence of educational goals for single-parent students. Findings of this study show that support from other sources (Department of Social Services, financial aid refunds, family) was necessary to assist in daily living. However, for some of our single parents, that support was just not enough.

Roles. A full-time employee is one who works 40 hours or more per week. A full-time student is one who is enrolled in 12 semester hours or more. A primary caretaker of a child is a full-time parent. Sometimes these roles collide and can be overwhelming.

Role overload is the sense of having so many demands or obligations that single parents feel unable to perform them all (Dill & Henley, 1998). Participants in this study report that even though they were students, their primary role is that of parent - making sure the needs of their children are met. Eve explained, “Being a student is hard, but being a single-parent student is harder. There are times when you have to make decisions between staying home with your sick child or going to class, and you know the child has to come first.” Chamille reports, “My son has been sick and I have missed a lot of classes, but I have to take care of my son first.”

Findings of this study illustrate how the parent role is dominant as participants contend with the issue of studies. Mina and Chamille convey that in order to complete assignments and study, the children had to be content. In other words, the children had to be fed, bathed, and in bed before the parents count achieve an atmosphere to concentrate on their studies. Mina reports, “After I take her home, feed her and bathe her, then I put her to bed. I actually get into bed myself for two hours. I wake up around 9:00 p.m. and study.” Chamille discloses, “After I feed my 2 month-old and put him into bed, I then feed my oldest son and get him ready for bed. Then it is time for me to study and do homework. It all depends on if my 2 month-old is still
asleep or not.” The same parents report having to leave campus (student role) and immediately pick up their children from daycare (parenting role). Eve reports, “On Mondays and Wednesdays, I have late classes. They start at 6:00 p.m., and he has to be picked up by 6:00 p.m. I leave campus about 5:00 p.m. to pick him up.” These findings indicate that the parent role takes priority over the student role.

An example of role overload is Leland. Leland says, “After everyone is at home, I have to make sure the kids have their dinner and stuff. My dad helps out on his good days, but I can’t really leave the kids on him because of his condition.” He further states, “I am on the philosophy that I am going to be a millionaire in five years, and some days have to be 20-hour days.” Leland reports that his days begin at 6:00 a.m. and end at 2:30 a.m. In addition to caring and assisting in providing for four children, Leland also cares for his ill father who lives with him. Working 45 hours per week is part of his plan to develop his new venture. Leland reports, “Last year I helped create a company – Platinum Music and Videos. We have a studio. At night I go over to our offices and try to finish up my duties there.” Leland serves as Vice President and Chief Financial Officer for the company. As you can see, Leland’s roles include parent, student, twenty-hour-a-day employee, caretaker, entrepreneur and more.

Role conflict occurs when single-parent students cannot fulfill demands or responsibilities of one role due to disagreement with another role. For the single-parent participants in this study, the parent role sometimes conflict with the employee role. Eve, Chamille, and Mina report having to miss work sometimes due to parenting responsibilities. Mina explains, “I have only had to miss work once because my daughter was sick, but my supervisor did not have a problem with that.” Mina and Chamille are employed on the university campus. They report that because their supervisors were aware of their single parenting status,
leaving their jobs to care for a sick child is not a major problem. Chamille says, “My supervisor has children herself. I guess she knows how it is to have a sick child.” Findings of this research conclude that on the job flexibility proved to be an invaluable support to single-parent students by easing stress in the job-related role. Support in the job realm seemed to be a necessary element for these single parents.

Cross (1981) contends that multiple-role students face time and priority pressures. For example, Tanner, who works full-time reports that he wanted to spend more time with his daughter. He explains how his employee role and his student role sometimes take priority over his parent role. Tanner discloses, “This is my life right now – school, work. I spend as much time with my daughter as I can, but right now – for a while longer – it’s got to be this way.”

Overall, however, participants note that being full-time students did not affect their parenting role much, but having children definitely affected their student role. In their research on roles, Schmidt and Scott (1986) and Kelly and Voyandoff (1985) posit that certain single women may be more vulnerable to role strain because of their life situations. They allude to mothers of younger children and their focus of study as being two determinants. Their findings are replicated here as two participants (Mina and Chamille) report being worried about their academic performance and their grades (student role). Chamille recently missed numerous days of class because of a sick 2 ½ month old child. She stated that some of her professors were “trying to be funny,” indicating that when she contacted them to make arrangements to complete missed assignments, they were not very cooperative or empathetic with her. Mina reported being worried because of her major requirements which dictated a grade point average of 3.0 in the science courses. Both participants have children 2 years old and younger. Mina has a 12 month-old child and Chamille has a 2 ½ month old child.
Loneliness. Tinto (1993) emphasizes that an important predictor of persistence is social integration – participation in the college social life of extra-curricular activities. The degree of loneliness experienced by the single-parent student may be a critical factor in student persistence or attrition. Some participants reported feelings of loneliness. Chamille reports a desire to “be involved with peers,” but because of her schedule she could not do so. She said, “I don’t hang out with my friends much because I am working and taking care of my children, but they are still my friends.” These findings indicate that this single-parent student is not as socially integrated as she would like to be.

In summary, single-parent participants discussed childcare, finances, time, roles, loneliness and transportation concerns as part of their experiences. These concerns correlate with situational barriers described by Cross (1981). She contends that situational barriers – those which arise from real life situations such as home and family responsibilities, need for childcare, job responsibilities and time constraints, all impact on the learner’s environment.

Tell me about your short-term and long-term educational goals.

Lack of formal education and/or job skills limits access to occupations that provide enough income for an acceptable standard of living. Education with a college degree is one way of bringing about positive change in a single parent’s life. College attendance may be the necessary step to advance earning power and guarantee the future economic survival of the single-parent household (Colbry, 1995). Participants respond to short-term and long-term educational goals in the following excerpts:

Mina: Short-term, I just want to get through this semester. Long-term, I plan to get my Bachelor’s degree, hopefully within the next three years. I am not sure if I want to go to graduate school or not yet. It all depends on how my job goes.
**Chamille:** I start working at Sodexho Food Services in the cafeteria. They are going to offer me on-the-job-training in food services. Because my major is Hospitality and Tourism, once I graduate they are going to offer me a job. I guess you could say my short-term educational goal is to learn the skills with Sodexho to help me advance on the job and earn more money. Long-term, I want to graduate with a Bachelor’s degree. Once I graduate and complete my training, they will offer me more money.

**Eve:** My short-term goal is to graduate in December. I just need to get a degree!! Long-term, I want to go to graduate school. I don’t know when I will go, but it will not be right away. I need to work full-time. I have a child to take care of. I have to make money.

**Tanner:** Short-term, I am trying to graduate in December 2003. Once I earn my degree, the company will pay me more money. Long-term, I plan to get my Master’s degree, part-time.

**Leland:** Short-term, I plan to eventually graduate – sometime in 2003 – probably this summer. If not this summer, then in December. After I graduate, I will work a couple of years in the industry. I have children and a family to support, so I will probably go ahead and work for a while and eventually earn my Master’s degree.

In discussing short-term and long-term educational goals, common issues that emerged were completion of goals (coal commitment) and finances. Research of Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) cite that students who complete a college degree, especially a bachelor’s degree, experience greater occupational and economic benefits than students who do not obtain a degree. Single-parent students have families to support. They work full-time and part-time and have childcare concerns; nonetheless, all student participants note the desire to earn the Bachelor degree. Participants seemed to be in agreement that obtaining a degree would increase their
earning potential. They expressed concern of the need to provide for their families. Eve explains, “After earning my bachelor’s degree I will work before getting the Master’s degree. I have a child to take care of now. I have to make money.” Leland reports, “Being that I have children to support, I will go ahead and work for a while and eventually earn my Master’s degree.” Chamille reports, “I start an on-the-job-training program with Sodexho Food Services next week. Once I graduate they are going to offer me a job.”

One participant just wanted to complete the current semester. Mina reports that her short-term goal is to “just get through the semester.” Before transferring to North Carolina Central University, Mina lived at home with her parents while attending a community college. Her parents cared for her child while Mina attended community college and worked. Then came the transition to North Carolina Central University. Mina has been a single parent the shortest length of time. Perhaps Mina is having difficulty in her adjustment from the community college to a four-year institution. Perhaps Mina did not anticipate the enormity of her combined roles.

Mina and Chamille report earning the bachelor’s degree as a long-term goal. Interesting enough, these two participants were sophomores. It could be concluded that because these participants have two or more years to completion of educational goals, they were confronted with dispositional barriers that only allowed them to visualize the bachelor’s degree as a long-term goal. Dispositional barriers, as held by Cross (1981), are those relating to attitudes and perceptions about oneself as a learner, such as “being tired of school,” and “not confident of academic ability.” Leland, Tanner, and Eve express a long-term goal of earning the Master’s degree.

According to Danowski (1983), despite the time and energy parenting responsibilities require, single-parent students ultimately earn their degrees. This finding is established in this
study as three participants, Tanner, Leland, and Eve, are ultimately earning their degrees and plan to graduate by December 2003. As Leland reports, “I have been here a long time, and I know everybody is ready for me to graduate. I am finally going to it [graduate].”

Findings of this study are consistent with part of Tinto’s (1987) theory of persistence, which maintain that persistence involves the commitment on the part of the student to obtain a college degree, and to obtain that degree at a particular institution. Leland has persisted toward his educational goals longer than any one of the participants. He explains, “Everyone is ready for me to graduate. When I tell them I will be graduating in December, they say, “We have been hearing that for twenty years”.

Walleri and Peglow-Hoch (1998) suggest that persistent students have close relationships and have specific career goals. Very specific and clear on his career goals, Leland reports, “I bring a lot of experience [music, videos] to the table, so after I graduate I will work in the industry.” Also clear on his career goal is Tanner who is a computer science major and an active member of National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE). Tanner works as a technical computer engineer with a company in the Research Triangle Park.

Tell me about your interpersonal relationships with your peers at the University.

Tinto (1987) suggests that a good fit exists between student and the university when students are involved academically and socially in the university community. Students who live on campus are likely to be involved in campus recreational and cultural activities. They are also more likely to be involved in clubs and organizations and have numerous relationships. What kinds of relationships do single-parent students have with their peers, professors and staff members? How are these persons instrumental in their academic success? Selected excerpts follow.
Mina: I don’t really have close friends at the University. This is only my second semester here. Everybody wants to do a study group, but I am not into that. I really don’t have time for friends on campus because I am working, trying to take care of my child and trying to get a degree.

Chamille: Because I have lived in Durham all my life, I have known my friends for as long as I can remember. My friends are not single parents. I don’t get to hang out with them much because I am working and taking care of my children. I don’t really know other students on campus – just the ones I go to class with.

Eve: I miss being able to hang out with my friends, but I can’t do that now. I have to say to myself my baby got to eat, my baby needs clothes. So I go to work instead of hanging out. I have a friend who has children who are older and she used to tell me that she had to go to bed hungry because she did not have enough food to go around. Now I can relate to what she is talking about. There are a lot of students on campus who have children. Most of them leave them [children] back home and they come to school to get an education. They bring their children on campus during the weekends, homecoming and CIAA for family bonding. Now that some of the guys know that I have a little boy, they don’t holler at me. Other guys don’t care. It [single parenthood] helps you differentiate people, because if they cannot accept me with my child, then they don’t need to be in my life – plain and simple.

Tanner: I know quite a few students here. The students in NSBE I probably know a little better than others. A lot of students work, so we really don’t have time to hang out on campus. When I see some of my friends on campus, it is just in passing. When I do come on campus, it is either to go to class, to go to a NSBE meeting, or to go to the
library, so like I said, I see them in passing. I guess we all have our own agenda, like jobs to go to or whatever.

*Leland:* I have this philosophy that I am going to be a millionaire in five years. Because of that, some of my days have to be twenty-hour days just in the studio. So, when I see my friends, it is in class. Half of my friends are single parents, so they know how it is.

How would you describe your relationship with your professors and staff at the University?

Studies focusing on the relationship between students and faculty have shown that faculty involvement with students contribute to measurable student success (Pascarelli & Terenzini, 1991). Tinto (1987) state that faculty-staff interactions, which include both formal classroom experiences and informal interactions, are crucial to the academic continuation of students. As student-faculty interactions are important to a student’s college experience, it is essential to understand the relationship between student participants and faculty/staff at the university.

*Mina:* My professors are friendly enough. They seem to be sincere about helping us. They always require that we go to a seminar or learning activity. I guess you could say they are even supportive. I have only had to be away once because my daughter was sick. Only two of my professors know that I am a single parent.

*Chamille:* Two of my professors are wonderful. They know what I have been going through, especially this past week with my son being sick. They told me not to worry about class and to take care of my son. They are working with me on getting my assignments in. My other teachers try to be funny when I miss class – like I don’t have a real reason. I had to get a note from the doctor and take it to the Dean because of the time I missed this past week with my son.
Eve: There are a couple of professors who know I am a single parent. So, if my son gets sick and I can’t find a babysitter I can call them and say that my baby is sick and I cannot make it to class. One time he [child] got sick and they called me from his daycare. I had to tell my professor that I had to leave class to go pick him up. That professor was not pleased, but stuff like that happens. What could I do? I had to go and take care of my child. I have to say that for the most part, if I need to bring my son to class, most of my professors don’t mind as long as he sits in class and is well behaved. They are lenient on what is going on at those times.

Tanner: I have a pretty good relationship with my professors. Most of them know me. They are my major professors. I am on time for class, do my work and make very good grades. As a matter of fact, my grade point average is 3.0. I don’t have problems with them and they don’t have problems with me.

Leland: I would say that I have a good relationship with my professors because of my personality. I don’t have any issues with anybody. When I first came to college, I was a different person. I was not as goal-oriented as I am now. I would sign up for classes and then drop them or just not go to class. They took it as me not being serious about school.

Single-parent students in this study discussed their relationships with peers, professors and staff at North Carolina Central University. Common themes that emerged were social separation and motivators. Findings of this study have indicated that single-parent students do not generally spend enough time on campus to become immersed in the cultural/social activities of university life. Leland, Tanner, Eve and Chamille report having friendships among peers at the university. Leland reports, “Half of my friends here [at the university] are single parents, and half of them are not.” Chamille says, “My friends here [at the university] are not single parents.
The only girl I know that is a single parent is in one of my classes.” Tanner reports, “When I see my friends on campus, it is in class or just in passing.” Tanner and Leland report that because of work, parenting responsibilities, and school, they could not “hang around” on campus to socialize, and only came to campus to attend class. Though both Chamille and Mina report working on campus, they work only between class times. Chamille reports, “I work on campus twenty hours a week. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, I have a 2:00 p.m. class. Before and after that class, I work. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I have class all day.” The majority of the participants report that their peer relationships take fourth place to jobs, families, and school. Mina for example, reports, “I really don’t have much time for friends on campus. I am working, trying to take care of my child.” She also relates that she “felt out of place because she had no friends at the university.” She reports not having found time to make new friends. Even though she had been invited to participate in a study group, she declined the offer. According to Loeb and Magee (1992), nontraditional students who often attend class but have little time to initiate friendships may feel somewhat isolated from the institution. Findings of this study seem to be in agreement.

Eve reported that she felt single-parent students should “stick together.” She and her friend, who was also a single parent would help each other occasionally. She reported, “When my friend gets sick, she will call me and I will keep her children for her. She does the same for me.” It seems that Eve believes the exchange of support of her peer, who is also a nontraditional student is important to her. This finding is consistent with research of Stone (1994) on single mother college students that indicates peers as one of the factors important to persistence and academic success.
Though participants felt that for the most part staff and faculty were supportive of their efforts, they also reported that not all faculty were aware of the parenting status of the participants. Mina reports, “Only two of my professors know that I have a child.” In Chamille’s case, all of her professors were aware of her parenting status. Some of them acted indifferently toward her when she missed classes because of her sick infant. Chamille reports, “Sometimes they [professors] try to be funny when I miss class, but I do have a real reason.” Some professors understand the plight of the single-parent student. Chamille reports, “Mrs. Roberts is wonderful. She said, “Don’t worry about class right now; take care of your child.” Some of the professors even allow children in class. Eve explains, “If I need to bring him [child] to class, they don’t mind as long as he is well-behaved. They are very lenient on what is going on.” These findings coincide with research of Walleri and Peglow-Hoch (1988) which suggests that being “understood” and “encouraged” by the faculty is an important element of persistence of the single-parent student. Staff members were supportive as reported by Eve. She said, “I take him [child] to the library to the computer lab. They [library staff] let him use the computer. I will pull up Microsoft Word and let him type his name a million times.”

Leland and Tanner report not discussing their parenting status with their professors. However, they both responded as having good relationships with their professors and staff at the university. Leland reports, “I don’t have issues with anybody. When I first came to college, I was a different person. They [professors] took it as me not being serious about school.” Leland explains that he is different now because he is more goal-oriented than he was years ago when he would register for classes, receive his financial aid refund, and then stop-out because of family issues.
Findings of this study conclude that for the most part, faculty and staff are supportive of the single-parent students. Findings also conclude that Leland has matured over the years. It could be that the demands and responsibilities of his life have facilitated his development. More research is needed to determine that.

In the above discussions, single-parent students discussed feelings of isolation, support and lack of support given them by faculty and staff. Findings of this research conclude that as diverse as the population is at North Carolina Central University, some faculty are not knowledgeable about the characteristics of the population they serve. Two decades ago, Hooper and Young (1980) stated that intra-university publicity of the plight of the nontraditional student could do much toward making faculty and staff more aware concerning the plight of these students.

*How have faculty and staff contributed to your success at the University?*

When asked this question, participants wanted to define success. Success is difficult to define. Most students had an idea of a successful person. Is success the attainment of a bachelor’s degree, a certain grade point average, or is success being able to persist through the end of the semester? College is not the central feature of the lives of single-parent students. It is just one of the multiple activities in which they are engaged every day. For some of these student participants, college is not even the most important of these activities. Work and family activities sometimes overshadow college. Does being successful as a parent make you a successful student?

*Mina:* I feel I have been successful so far because of my own determination to complete a college degree. For the most part faculty are really concerned about me as a person, and that helps, but you also have to have the mindset for yourself.
Chamille: Successful? When I graduated from high school, I had a 3.0 grade point average. Now it is a 2.6. It is kind of harder now to be successful because I have to put them [children] first. In a way, I feel like I am successful, but in another way, I don’t. I guess the fact that some of my professors are understanding of my situation has helped. Staff members that I know are supportive. If I need somebody and I can’t talk to my mom, I know who I can go to.

Eve: There are faculty and staff members on campus that remind me that with all the family problems, the male problems, and grading problems that I have had that I cannot just give up. They remind me that because I have a son, I have to stick with this and see it through. That support system is something I do not have at home and it is important in getting me out of NCCU.

Tanner: I would say that they have helped contribute to my success by accepting their roles as educators and trying to assure that we receive the best knowledge possible. I’m here to get an education. That’s what I am getting – book knowledge. The practical part, I pick up on the job.

Leland: I would say that faculty and staff have contributed to my success by putting up with me and just never saying anything negative about me. I have been here for a long time, and I know they are ready to see me graduate.

Common themes that emerged were support systems and self-confidence. Concerned faculty seemed somehow to motivate the participants. Chamille reports that one professor commended her for being such an attentive mother during the illness of her young son. Leland reports that faculty and staff contributed to his success by just “putting up with me for all these years.” This student had initially stopped-out four semesters because of family obligations.
Bean and Metzer (1985) and Cross (1981) suggest that attrition of nontraditional students can be controlled if environmental factors such as family responsibilities were lessened.

Though participants note that faculty and staff are instrumental in their success, three participants also attribute confidence in themselves as being beneficial to their success. Mina reports, “It [college] is hard sometimes, but if you have the determination and mindset, you can do it. Being a parent will not stop me from completing college – it only slows me down.” Leland reported that he had matured over the years and that he was proud of his ability to cope. Eve reported, “I made the decision to be a parent. The decision to be a single parent was not all mine, but it has been made. Now I have to suck it up and get on with it.”

For the most part, these participants discussed their commitment to receive a degree as being important to their success. Tinto (1987) discussed persistence as it related to commitments on the part of the student. He hypothesized the student must be willing to commit to earn a degree, and earn it at a particular institution.

One participant note that faculty and staff served as motivation for her by being the support system which was non-existent in her immediate family. This participant, Eve, reports having many problems and dilemmas over the years. Instrumental to her persistence is that she had faculty and staff in who she could confide and who she felt was a support system for her. Eve ended by saying, “That [support system] is important in getting me out of North Carolina Central University.”

The significance of support systems cannot be underestimated. Black colleges have a long tradition of being sensitive to the needs of African-American students. Astin (1982) agrees that for African-American students, perceived support and a positive self-concept in one’s ability is an important factor of persistence. Banks (1993) observes that black colleges and universities,
in effort to provide a nurturing environment for its students, often stress their orientation toward the African-American experience. A reflection of themselves in faculty/staff, leaders and other students helps minorities feel as if they are a part of campus life. Those positive reinforcers often motivate students and affirm their self-worth. He concludes that the most productive environment for learning is one that is consistent with the student’s culture and experiences.

Davis (1994) performed a study that supports this argument. His study examined perceived support and its contribution to student persistence between African-Americans at black colleges and white institutions. He found that black males attending black colleges got better grades and perceived their colleges as providing more institutional support. One explanation was that stronger perceptions of institutional support at black colleges and universities are largely responsible for African-American male students performing better at black colleges.
CHAPTER V
Discussion

Summary

The purpose of this research is to explore the academic experiences of single-parent undergraduate students at the university. Five student participants were interviewed regarding their experiences and relationships at the university. The nontraditional students who participated in this study attended school full-time (12 to 18 semester hours); worked 20 – 45 hours per week, and were full-time caretakers of their children. As single-parent participants persisted toward completion of educational goals, some experienced difficulty moving forward. Their experiences consisted of duties and responsibilities unlike those of traditional college students – those who are not parents. They wore many hats -- they were parents and employees as well as students. For some, matriculation has been lengthy, and they encountered barriers along the way. These barriers – time, finances, transportation, child care, home responsibilities, job responsibilities and housing are identified in the literature as situational barriers (Cross, 1981). The factors impeded the academic progress of the single-parent participants as they attempted to keep up with the daily demands of their lives. Though dispositional and institutional barriers hindered the progress of the single-parent participants, situational barriers proved to be more prominent in this study. This finding indicates that there is a need for students to have assistance with management of family demands in order to alleviate some of the situational barriers as experienced daily by student participants. Whereas, situational factors such as finances, family, and lack of time interfere with persistence, it appears that the commitment to the institution and determination of these single-parent students superseded the external factors. A component of Tinto’s (1975) model of student retention calls attention to the
“commitment of the student to complete a degree at a particular institution.” That element of his model is supported in this study.

This study shows that single-parent students were so engaged that even time to interact in the university setting with other students is limited. College should be the foremost priority in a student’s life; however, for these participants, family and, to a lesser extent work sometimes overshadowed it. Cultural activities and social events were recollected and friends were discussed, which indicates that single-parent participants experienced friendships at the university. However, spending time immersed in the campus environment was not an option for these single parent students. More important were the central features of their lives – childcare, family, and work expectations. Findings of this study conclude that single-parent students are not as socially integrated into the campus environment as they would like to be. External responsibilities prohibited integration into the social community for the single-parent students. Tinto (1993) posits that the student’s initial level of institutional commitment will determine the degree to which he or she interacts with peers and faculty outside of class, join organizations, and interact with peers. As Tinto’s model considers traditional students who live in on-campus housing, an amended model should be projected when considering social integration of single-parent students, taking into consideration “external responsibilities” of single-parent students. Though the participants discussed their lack of campus “student life,” it did not seem to be an important factor in their educational persistence. Perhaps the participants would have more time for social integration in the campus environment if they were enrolled part-time rather than being enrolled full-time. Empirical research, in the future, should investigate the importance of social integration on persistence for this population.
Findings of this study also conclude that not all faculty were aware of the parenting status of the participants (by no fault of their own). As a result, certain perceptions and misconceptions were derived by the faculty about the students. Participants developed positive relationships with certain faculty, perceived those who would be supportive, and then chose faculty with whom to share their parenting status. Those perceptions support the positive impact faculty can have on student persistence and academic integration. Reflections of some of the student participants replicated the opinion that faculty were not sensitive of their different issues. These reflections reinforce the importance of helping faculty and staff understand the characteristics and experiences of single-parent students. Future research should investigate channels by which faculty should be educated to certain characteristics of the students they serve, and how those faculty can assist in persistence and retention of this population.

Though student participants seemed to be aware of the local and state resources for single parents, this study concluded that as a result of one of the participants being “displaced” and moving into the campus dormitory, there is a need for university “family housing” on or near the campus.

The support of family, friends, and other single parents was found to be important to the persistence of single parents who participated in this study. For these participants, family and friends were accessible daily and provided camaraderie and companionship and seemingly served as motivation to complete educational goals. Perhaps the interpersonal relationships shared with family and friends of the participants provided the “social outlet” that these single-parent students could not achieve on campus. It could, therefore, be concluded from this study that such support facilitated the progress of single parents students.
One can also conclude that without such regular support, feelings of loneliness and isolation can occur. As one single-parent participant was separated from her immediate family and reflected that she did not have friends in the environment, she seemed to have a more difficult time in her acclimation to the institutional environment. Coming from a community college to a four-year institution, future research could focus on the adjustment to the new environment. Perhaps the fact that she was separated from her family, could not seek their daily support, and did not have peer relationships at the university strengthens the assumption of the importance of family in the persistence of single-parent students.

Lastly, this research finds is that all participants value a college education. They believed that a college education would provide them with better jobs, financial rewards, and more opportunities for satisfying careers. They pictured it as a chance to get ahead – a means to self-sufficiency. Student participants also had altruistic motives for completing their goals – making a better life for their children. Future research could investigate other motivation factors of persistence of single-parent students.

What I observed through the experiences of the participants was financial worries, sick children, lack of housing, lack of transportation, work responsibilities, role overload, family responsibilities, loneliness and school responsibilities. These emerging factors challenged the ability of the single parents in this study to complete their educational goals, yet the participants in this study have persisted in their educational endeavors. Supportive family, positive motivation of faculty and staff, confidence in their abilities as learners, and determination to complete their goals guided them daily toward their aspirations.

Finally, we are now aware of the experiences of the traditional aged single-parent undergraduate student at North Carolina Central University. Do the students feel they fit in the
university? As three of the students in this study will graduate by December 2003, and two will move forward to the status of juniors the next academic school year, the findings suggest that these single-parent students were capable of adapting to academic life in spite of their demands and responsibilities. They were, therefore, able to reach their educational goals. In other words, academically, they fit. As far as social fit is concerned, findings of this study suggest that for the most part, the single-parent students did not have time for social integration in the campus environment.

Tinto predicted that if “either goal commitment or institutional commitment is low, the student would withdraw from the university in an attempt to cope with incongruence between the self and the environment.” When questioned about their academic goals, all participants voiced the goal of earning an undergraduate degree. Three participants noted a long-term goal of earning a graduate degree. The fact that Mina, who seemed to have low institutional commitment, voiced a goal commitment of earning an undergraduate degree strengthens the findings that overall, for the single-parent students in this study, the goal commitment to complete an undergraduate degree proved to be sufficient to justify persistence.

Recommendations

One of the challenges of attending college for these single-parent student participants is that daily life situations hindered persistence of their educational goals. In 1995, Strivin’ and Survivin’ Single Parent Program was established at North Carolina Central University. The goal of the program was to ensure that each single parent graduated from the university. As the student participants in this study never made reference to Strivin’ and Survivin’ or its services, it can only be concluded that they were unaware of the campus resource. Therefore, this researcher recommends further research to explore why this program is not marketed university-
wide. If the program is serving single-parent students, research should also investigate the retention and graduation rates of those students.

In the event that Strivin’ and Survirin’ is no longer available to serve single-parent students, a similarly aimed program is subsequently recommended. The new program should be comprehensive in that it would assist single-parent students to obtain self-sufficiency. Some of the student participants in this study are dependent on services of local/state agencies. Becoming independent would serve to reinforce their self-confidence and esteem. A program of this kind should also provide assistance to enhance parenting skills, act as a resource to the community, assist with financial aid, and offer support from faculty, and other single parents. The most important aspect of this program would be a support group for single-parent students. This type of support would assist in social integration of the single-parent student.

The inability to meet childcare needs can undermine the single-parent student’s ability to complete educational goals. Therefore, another recommendation is that the present university daycare should consider flexible, affordable daycare for the single-parent student population.

Professional development training for university counselors is also recommended. This training would inform and update university counselors of the concerns of the single-parent student population and of special resources and supportive services in the university and community. These counselors, working in conjunction with ‘Strivin and Survivin’ would coordinate concerns of service for single-parent students within the community. Traditional counseling programs may offer services that do not fit the real life situations faced by single-parent students. For example, programs that emphasize problems of time management, financial hardship and childcare concerns have specific value but are not always seen as important by traditional students.
As North Carolina Central University has major construction and renovation efforts underway, this researcher also recommends that consideration be given to a residence hall for single-parent students and their children. On-campus housing would assist in lessening situational barriers related to housing.

Consideration should be given to the process for transitioning single-parent students to college when they initially make application to the institution so that students’ expectations of the institution when they enroll may be closer to reality. Flexible orientation programs for single-parent students may well be a component of the transition process. Faculty members and single-parent peer mentors should also be involved in this orientation, thus providing a sense of connection to the university for the single-parent student.

Last, given the diversity of students at four-year institutions, further research is recommended to determine if single-parent student experiences differ by characteristics such as gender, age, race and income.

Limitations

No research endeavor is without its limitations, therefore, a number of restrictions exist in this study that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The first limitation is that this research was limited to single parent students at a four-year, predominantly African-American institution in North Carolina. For that reason, conclusions cannot be made about single parent students at other institutions, such as those serving predominantly white or Latino students, or tribal colleges outside of North Carolina.

The second limitation is that revealed experiences all come from the African-American single parent perspective. Though the intent was to gather racially diverse student participants,
African-Americans were the only respondents. A likely explanation could be that students of other racial/ethnic groups did not wish to divulge information concerning their personal lives.

Third, qualitative studies like this one have the advantage of providing rich, thick descriptions. In this study, the experiences of single-parent students at North Carolina Central University were explored. Therefore, as the main objective of this research was to give voice to that particular group of students, the findings cannot be generalized to another population. However, future research can explore transferability concerns.

Fourth, while this study provides rich experiences from single-parent students as they persist toward degree completion at the university, it does not include interviews of university faculty, staff, and administrators.

Last, as the focus of the study was to secure experiences of younger single-parents who had not been in a dual parenting relationship, those students over the age of 26, who were not primary caretakers were excluded from this study.
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APPENDIX A

Single Parents in the University

Students,

My name is Joan Vann-Johnson and I am an academic advisor here at North Carolina Central University. I am also a doctoral student at North Carolina State University, and am currently recruiting participants for a research study that focuses on the experiences of single-parent students in the university setting. There is an expanse of literature on single-parent students, but little of it is focused on the experiences of single-parent undergraduate students in the university. Information in this area will create an awareness of the perceptions of single parent students as they embrace multiple roles of parent, student and employee.

As part of this study, participants will be audio-taped in a one-on-one interview. All information will be kept strictly confidential and participants will not be identified by name or other identifiable characteristics. The total time required for the interview will be one to two hours.

If you choose to participate in this study, please contact me at work (919) 530-6129, by e-mail at jvjohnso@wpo.nccu.edu or feel free to come by my office in 139 Alexander-Dunn Building. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Joan Vann-Johnson
APPENDIX B

Single Parents in the University

Background Data Questionnaire

Name_________________________________________________      Age_____  
Address________________________________________________________________________
City________________________________________  State_____________________________
E-mail Address__________________________________Telephone (Home)______________
Telephone (Work)_____________________________ Telephone (Cell)________________
Race: (Check one)____African-American    _____White   _____Hispanic    _____Asian-Pacific
_____Other (please specify)____________  Gender:   Male_____        Female_____  
Classification: (Check one)        _____Freshman        _____Sophomore   _____Junior
_____Senior
Are you a single parent?:   _____Yes     _____No     Number of children________  
Have you always been a single parent, or were you in a dual parenting relationship?
Always a single parent_______                ______Was in a dual parenting relationship
How long have you been a single parent?___________
Are you the primary caretaker of your child(ren)?   _____Yes     ____No
Enrollment Status:  Check one:  Part time:  (less than twelve hours)_____
                        Full-time: (twelve to eighteen hours)____
Are you employed? _____Yes   _____No    Hours worked per week_______
Are you willing to be interviewed as part of this study?   _____Yes   _____No
APPENDIX C

Single Parents in the University

*Interview Questions*

1. Describe what a typical day is like for you.
2. Tell me about your short-term and long-term educational goals.
3. Tell me about your experiences as a single parent enrolled at the university.
4. Tell me about your interpersonal relationships with your peers at the university.
5. How would you describe your relationship with your professors at the university?
6. How would you describe your relationship with staff members at the university?
7. How have faculty and staff members contributed to your success at the university?