ABSTRACT

BARRETT, CATHERINE ELISE. Educational Experiences of First-Generation Women Community College Students of Nontraditional Age. (Under the direction of Barbara Sparks and Audrey Jaeger.)

This dissertation reports the results of an ethnographic study done at a technical community college in the southeastern United States. A qualitative research methodology was employed to record current issues surrounding the educational experiences of first-generation women community college students of nontraditional age and understand in greater depth, daily experiences as well as the degree to which norms established within a group’s culture, class, and race affect educational attainment. This study discloses the challenges, motivation, and personal aspirations of the identified group of participants who engaged in this research.

This research demonstrated the positive transformations education made in the lives of participants, their children, and their communities. Successful learning experiences in adult education programs at the community college resulted in increased self-confidence, a greater sense of independence for all participants, and cultural mobility. School became a place where first-generation women of nontraditional age found self-worth and a sense of identity. First-generation women students of nontraditional age who had tremendous familial support and found significant motivation from family, community, and children persisted in academic endeavors and reached their intended goals in spite of great adversity.
EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION
WOMEN COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS
OF NONTRADITIONAL AGE

By

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Biography

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Elise began her career teaching middle school in Savannah Georgia and later moved to Chicago Illinois where she also taught middle school for six years. Elise also taught elementary school in Durham North Carolina for one year before accepting a position as the Program Director of the Teacher Associate program at Durham Technical Community College. During this time, Elise became interested in the various challenges and obstacles first-generation women community college students of nontraditional age experience, and much of her current research reflects this interest.

Elise lives in Durham North Carolina with her husband Patrick and is employed as the Literacy Program coordinator and Assistant Clinical Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She teaches literacy courses in the Middle School, Elementary, and Master’s degree programs within the school of education.
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Chapter One: Context and Background

Introduction

First-generation women of nontraditional age who attend community colleges tend to have greater risk factors than college students of traditional ages between 18 and 22 years that contribute to leaving postsecondary education. The most substantial risk factors identified include delaying postsecondary enrollment by more than one year, engaging in part-time enrollment status, being the sole source of monetary income, having children or dependents, being of single parent status, working full time, and entering the community college with a General Education Diploma or GED (Bradburn, 2002). In addition to these risk factors, gender roles within a capitalist patriarchal society and oppressive social structures such as racism can present added complications for women who seek educational attainment, particularly for those students of nontraditional age who have the added responsibilities of family and work. The degree to which women are affected by socially constructed gender roles and social structures varies according to the norms established within a group’s culture, class, and race and may have a significant impact on the level of educational attainment achieved (Katz, 2002).

This study seeks to understand in greater depth, the daily experiences of first-generation college women of nontraditional age, and to better understand the degree to which norms established within a group’s culture, class, and race affect educational attainment. The theoretical framework of this study uses a combination of cultural capital and post-structural feminist theories to guide the research, and is intended to contribute to what is known about women’s access to and attainment of a college education by listening to the stories of women who are currently engaged in
postsecondary education. The majority of this group attends community colleges, and therefore, we can hope to learn how their interests, concerns, difficulties, and desires influence access and educational attainment (Phillipe & Patton, 1999).

**First-Generation Women of Nontraditional Age**

The term first-generation refers to students whose parents did not attend college, and therefore, they are the first in their families to attend college. Typically, first-generation women of nontraditional age who attend community colleges do not live on campus, are older, have families, work full or part time jobs, and have little interaction with campus life beyond attending classes Cohen and Brawer (1996). Complications that arise from a student’s additional life roles and responsibilities often result in early departure from college, and according to Cohen and Brawer, “Students give varied reasons for leaving. A change in work schedule is often cited, along with such personal reasons as health problems, difficulty in obtaining child-care, [and] financial burdens...” (1996, p. 63). Extensive responsibilities beyond the role of the student distract and remove focus from the learning experience, and such extenuating factors, as well as an overall absence or lack of involvement in campus life, such as attending socials and participating in clubs, organizations, and student government contribute to higher rates of attrition.

First-generation students are typically more at risk of leaving college during the first year for several reasons. Inman and Mayes, (1999) found that first-generation students are characteristically under prepared academically to successfully take college level courses, and in addition, commonly have lower high school grade point averages, lower SAT scores, and typically did not participate in high school honors programs.
In addition to being under prepared academically, psychological factors have also been identified as potential barriers. “In general, first-generation students have a lower sense of self-efficacy and lower self-esteem than students whose parents attended college” (Inman & Mayes, 1999, pp. 3-4). Whereas most students continue to see their parents as the primary source of reference, first-generation women students of nontraditional age are unable to seek advice about college from their parents because their parents lack the requisite college experience. As Inman and Mayes (1999) found, parents who did not attend college themselves did not understand the rigors of taking college courses while working, and could not provide guidance in terms of general education core requirements.

Inman and Mayes (1999) also found that familial and cultural influences could be very powerful forces for first-generation students. Negative rhetoric towards college and college graduates by family members whose culture may value one’s ability to perform physical labor versus performing academically creates an intense inner conflict between education and family. Some first-generation students viewed becoming a college graduate as a direct rejection of family and community or cultural values, while some reported intense pressure from family and friends encouraging them not to attend college. In addition, as Luttrell (1997) found in her research, School Smart and Mother-wise, working-class families tend to value practical knowledge related to doing work versus the abstract knowledge of academia. Therefore, first-generation students may be acutely aware of the need for an education; however, when perceived as a choice between family and college, family is usually the clear choice.
Socio-economic status is also a large factor in educational attainment. Most first-generation women students of nontraditional college age were found to be from lower socio-economic family backgrounds and consequently, were geographically constrained to colleges within close proximity of the home (Bradburn, 2002). The cost of tuition, books, and supplies often overwhelm students whose limited education confines them to lower paying positions with inadequate incomes. While college graduation does not guarantee financial security, students whose parents attended college found socio-economic factors to be much less of an issue (Inman & Mayes, 1999).

The National Center for Education Statistics, NCES (Bradburn, 2002) examined all college students in 1999-2000, and found that those with three or more of the previously identified risk factors, were in serious danger of leaving postsecondary education without obtaining a degree or credential. Mature women attending community colleges typically have three or more risk factors (Bradburn, 2002).

Delaying post-secondary education is a primary cause of attrition among students. Over time academic skills may languish especially if students are not in careers that support the further development of math and communication skills. When an individual decides to return to school, she must begin the process of rebuilding diminished skills. Students who delay entry to college usually evidence a need to participate in numerous levels of a developmental curriculum either through failure in coursework or poor scores on preliminary placement tests. This process can add additional years to earning a college degree or credential and greatly increases the likelihood of early attrition.

Skills may weaken over time from lack of use, and many first-generation students do not take the necessary college preparation courses initially in high school. This may
be the result of secondary vocational tracking, poor advisement, or students opting for a General Education Diploma. Vocational tracking intentionally guides students into what are considered blue-collar careers, where students take courses that are strictly related to the vocation. Students seeking a GED often meet minimal graduation requirements and also avoid taking the more rigorous college preparation courses. Research conducted by Warburton, Rosio, and Nuñez (2001) demonstrates a direct correlation between academic preparation in high school and the degree of college achievement. Therefore, the level of coursework taken in high school is essential to post-secondary success, and students who take the more arduous secondary courses in high school are much more likely to be successful in college.

In addition to being under prepared academically, part-time enrollment status can have a significant impact on early departure from college. This is due largely to the extensive time commitment necessary for completion of adult education programs within community colleges. For students seeking a two-year degree, it can take an average of five years to complete the degree if attending part-time. Given the additional expenditures of childcare, transportation, tuition, as well as time away from family, and commitment to homework, the extra time spent attending college on a part-time basis can become too great.

Financial independence or having to be self-supporting financially has also been identified as a risk factor for early attrition. Working more than 20 hours per week has the potential to compete with over-extended schedules and add tremendous stress to home, work, and school environments. Working full time has been identified as an individual factor that places college students at risk of leaving post-secondary education.
In addition, women with children or dependents, who are single parents, are also more likely to leave college without attaining a degree or reaching their academic goals (Bradburn, 2002).

_The Role of the Community College_

The community college as an institution is important to this research in so far as this is where large numbers of first-generation women students of nontraditional age can be found. These institutions have evolved into entities that address many of the needs of nontraditional students and provide services that four-year institutions do not. As a result of the type of services provided, community colleges tend to attract students with more risk factors that will lead to early attrition.

The evolution of the community college has generated local campuses that are located near the home or work of most citizens in the United States, and as the name implies, community-based. Courses are offered at developmentally appropriate levels so that students can upgrade languished skills or attain skills not previously acquired in high school. Schedules at most community colleges have been designed to meet the needs of working individuals as well as traditional students. These institutions are also more affordable than most public or private colleges and universities. Finally, the community college as an institution has an open door policy, which allows open access to all by averting set entrance criteria such as SAT scores or specific high school grade point averages.

Community colleges have a high percentage of students at risk for leaving college without reaching their goals, and the greatest percent of these students are women of nontraditional age. Countless adult women who attend the community college must do so
with the additional responsibilities of family and employment (Phillippe & Patton, 1999). Gender roles acquired through cultural experiences frequently translate into household responsibilities that do not lessen upon returning to school. Existing life schedules that include working in and outside the home, mothering, tutoring, and nurturing children must be rearranged to accommodate attending college and to provide time to study. Women are also more likely than men to be a single head of the household (Bradburn, 2002). Such tremendous demands have the potential to unsettle the most academically prepared students. In fact, the average community college student in the United States has numerous obstructions that hinder educational attainment (Inman & Mayes, 1999).

According to Rendon (1994), many community college programs are erroneously designed to address the needs of middle-class white males under the age of 25, attending college full-time, who were recent graduates from high school, and whose parents also attended college. However, current facts from the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) (Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2002) indicate that 46 percent of the community college population is over 25 years of age, 58 percent are women; and the average student is female and 29 years of age. In addition, the majority of community college students is financially self-reliant and has been away from formal education for five to seven years. Community college students typically work full-time, have families, and many are single parents.

**Nontraditional Women Community College Students**

The term nontraditional has been generally considered an age criterion definition that refers to students who are 24 or 25 years old or older (Sundberg, 1997). However, in addition to age, other factors have been identified as criteria to define nontraditional
students. Using student background information and demographics has proven necessary to provide a more inclusive characterization of nontraditional students. For example, Rendon (1994, 2000) includes, within her definition of nontraditional community college students, those who are first-generation, low income, and employed outside the home.

By expanding nontraditional to include additional characteristics such as first-generation, employment status, school, family, and culture, a broader understanding of competing demands becomes apparent to policy makers and researchers. An age criterion definition is far too limiting and fails to adequately characterize nontraditional students. Therefore for this research project, the term nontraditional will encompass an inclusive definition.

Women and Learning

Much of the research on women and learning discusses the impact of K-12 education on future learning. Negative experiences that damaged self-esteem during this timeframe often lead to self-doubt and apprehension towards future learning experiences, and may significantly damage self-esteem. According to Hayes and Flannery (2000) “much of women’s learning has to do with women’s identity and self-esteem, even though these concepts are not often treated explicitly in discussions of women’s learning” (p. 54). In this context, identity refers to who women perceive themselves to be and this self-perception determines how they define themselves. In the same context, self-esteem refers to the personal assessment of one’s identity. A woman’s identity, personal assessment, and self-esteem are directly connected to learning, and because of this high correlation, there is strong evidence that adult women of nontraditional age may also
have to address personal confidence issues, which manifest themselves when they recognize academic shortcomings.

Deciding to attend college often culminates in a highly stressful undertaking, and many factors will influence this decision. Tuition and the added cost of attending college cause financial stress for the family, as do the multiple changes in personal and family scheduling. On a more personal level, the stress of engaging in formal learning after skills have languished is often excruciating. During this demanding process, these women must find ways and means to sustain themselves psychologically, physically, emotionally, and academically. This proposed study seeks to more specifically define the challenges nontraditional adult women face as they attend community college classes and identify the contextual and cultural factors that sustain women as they persist in this process.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of the study is to understand in greater depth, the daily experiences of first-generation nontraditional women both inside postsecondary education and within their daily lives. By listening to the stories of women who are currently engaged in community college education we can learn about their interests, concerns, and aspirations in order to contribute to what is known about women’s access to and attainment of further education.

**Research Questions**

Women in the United States have made significant social, economic, and political advances over the last twenty-five years; however, a disproportionate percentage of U.S. women continue to live below the poverty line. Demographic statistics confirm that while women outnumber men in the United States, they continue to experience higher
poverty rates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2002). Women who live in poverty do not have the same choices or opportunities as women who live above the poverty line. For instance, women who receive public assistance must live within the educational and training boundaries, regulations, and limitations of the program while supervised by a caseworker.

Educational attainment is essential for women, because obtaining a college degree or credential improves income and economic status. In addition, educational attainment is essential to bridging the wage gap between those with degrees and those without. This disparity has steadily increased over the last 25 years with wages of the least educated workers falling significantly over this time frame. Notably higher relative earnings by those with educational attainment reflect the increased need for more highly skilled educated workers and a decline in the demand for workers without skill and education. Other contributing factors to the widening wage gap include the decline of labor unions, more textile and production jobs moving overseas, and a lower minimum wage in terms of constant dollars (Caiazza, 2003).

Current data clearly demonstrates the increasing need for, and the growing financial benefits of attending college. Community colleges may hold the key to preparing more women to move into the workforce and out of poverty. First-generation college women of nontraditional age have vast obstacles, which often impede their progress in completing and attaining their educational goals, and therefore, it is essential to encompass all aspects of the women’s experiences as they engage in community college curricula. Research questions that will guide this study follow.
• How do first-generation, nontraditional women perceive and describe their first year experiences in a community college degree program?
• What are the multiple challenges women encounter and how do they describe them?
• How do these women manage the contextual challenges and complete their first year in the community college degree program?
• What educational interventions are helpful to first-generation, nontraditional-age female community college students?

The investigation will begin with how the women come to decide they need or want an education and what factors influence their decisions. The proposed study will also address the social, cultural, and economic challenges encountered throughout the first year of college, the mechanisms and strategies utilized by the women to cope with the numerous obstacles.

Qualitative Genre

For this project, an ethnographic qualitative methodology approach was selected to gain insight from the various experiences of the participants. In order to conduct further analysis of first-generation women of nontraditional age who attend community colleges and understand the context of their experiences as they complete their first year and reach their educational goals, it is necessary to hear the individual participants’ stories. Essential to this research project is the need to engage the individual participants in one or more interviews where the researcher will facilitate the interview process and encourage participants to share the personal experiences from their decision to return to college through the first year of their college experience.
Interviews were conducted within the community college setting and were critical to gaining current information and perspectives while the participants were actively engaged in the learning process. “In education, qualitative research is frequently called naturalistic because the researcher frequents places where the events he or she is interested in naturally occur” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 3; Guba, 1978; Wolf, 1979a). The data for this research project was gathered from “people engaging in natural behavior: talking, visiting, looking, eating, and so on” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 3; Guba, 1978; Wolf, 1979a) relevant to the research questions. Furthermore, a qualitative research approach allows the researcher to go into the field as both practitioner and researcher with the potential for positive outcomes for practice and research. It is important to note that participants were selected from programs where the researcher had no contact or power to avoid any risk factors.

Significance in Research and Practice

The significance of this study to current research is to provide the first-hand perspectives of first-generation women of nontraditional age who attend the community college through their own voices and experiences. By better understanding how first-generation women of nontraditional age at community colleges experience their first year in a degree program and face multiple challenges, this research has the potential to expand the discourse on the significance of this process among this group of women and illuminate the social and political forces that impact this group’s learning experiences. In previous research, (Rendon, 1994, 1995, 2000) major attention has focused on the culture within the community college with less consideration given to external forces, such as one’s cultural capital, that can have a significant impact on students. Human
beings often need to make meaning of their experiences. “The justification of much of what we know and believe, our values and our feelings, depends on the context—biological, historical, cultural—in which they are embedded” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 3). The participants in this qualitative research create a distinctive study by bringing their own beliefs, values, and feelings, from their unique biological, historical, and cultural contexts.

This research seeks to clearly define the multiple challenges of female first-generation community college students of nontraditional age as they attend college for the first time. The findings of this study are intended to inform adult education practices by helping community college instructors to develop a more in-depth understanding of the students they teach and by providing community college instructors, administrators, and policy-makers greater insight into the context and nature of the first year experiences of first-generation women of nontraditional age who attend community colleges. The results may broaden discourse and attention and encourage administrators and policy-makers to be more creative in providing additional resources for childcare, tuition, books, and essential living expenses.

Further implications may include the development of improved advising strategies such as helping students identify, and subsequently address, serious obstacles as well as establishing overtly specific criteria and expectations of the academic process. The open dialogue between students, instructors, and advisors builds trust and rapport that may assist in dissolving some of the barriers that often prevent students from seeking assistance. Improved overall guidance throughout the education experience could increase retention and help more women in this group increase their overall standard of
living. Educational attainment for women is not only critical for personal development and higher quality of life overall, but given the fact that more single women have children or dependents to support, it is also essential to the quality of life for future generations (Katz, 2002).
Chapter Two: A Review of the Literature

Introduction

One approach to investigating the experiences of first-generation women community college students of nontraditional age is to explore the role that gender, class, ethnicity, and culture perform in shaping familial values and attitudes towards obtaining a college credential. Within this research, both cultural capital theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and post-structural feminist theories (Smith, 1987, 1990; Hill-Collins; 1990) are useful theoretical concepts to frame the narratives of the participants and provide a conceptual foundation by which we can gain greater insight into the participants’ daily lives. This chapter will consecutively define both theories and related concepts, present a review of the seminal research, and review relevant secondary applicable literature and authors.

Cultural capital theory is useful to establish a correlation between culturally acquired beliefs, behaviors, and values and the role each plays in educational attainment. This theory also demonstrates how those without power, wealth, and socially legitimate cultural capital inadvertently reproduce circumstances that limit gains in education and status or create significant challenges to educational attainment unaware of the greater underlying system of capitalism that ensures such social reproduction for the purpose of creating a labor force (Katz, 2002). A review of the literature will begin with principal research and move through the education continuum from theoretical application in elementary education, secondary education, postsecondary, and the community college.

Post-structural feminist theory was also used in this research to extend and critique cultural capital theory by presenting an examination of how societal structures
subjugate and leave women without monetary, social, and cultural capital. Seminal research on post-structural feminist theories will be presented along with critical perspectives. These theories are also useful for understanding how social structures perpetuate inadequate socio-cultural resources for first-generation nontraditional women community college students living in the United States, as well as examining the structures that assist this group with overcoming significant obstacles in their daily and school lives, on the path to educational attainment.

*Cultural Capital Theory*

All people have some form of cultural capital, and the cultural capital an individual possesses can directly influence educational attainment. In addition, the position of post-structural feminists (Biklen and Pollard, 1993) suggests that gender differences are another factor that should be taken into consideration because patriarchy and capitalism are manifested in power disparities between women and men and in the gendered division of labor. Black feminist thought (Hill Collins, 1990) further extends the argument by stating that race must also be a consideration when looking at cultural capital because in addition to patriarchy and capitalism, racism is also a significant factor in western society.

While all people have cultural capital, those with socially legitimate cultural resources, which are determined by the dominant culture to have merit, such as dominant language, professional skills, behaviors, manners, and knowledge, are more likely to succeed in the dominant culture. This concept emerged from the seminal research of French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1977) on social reproduction in education, society, and culture, and is broadly used to explain the cultural
differences of the dominant and subordinate classes, which reproduce social and class division.

Social and class divisions are the stratification of society based upon monetary and cultural resources. According to Bowles and Gintis (1976) such stratifications are maintained largely through public schools where students are socially prepared for their future occupational levels.

The structure of social relations in education not only inures the student to the discipline of the workplace, but develops the types of personal demeanor, modes of self-presentation, self-image, and social class identifications which are the crucial ingredients of job adequacy. Specifically, the social relationships of education--the relationships between administrators and teachers, teachers and students, and students and students, and students and their work--replicate the hierarchical divisions of labor. (Bowles and Gintis, 1976, p.131)

Children from working-class families are taught to be more submissive, obedient, and are subject to more discipline, while children from professional families are taught with more progressive methods and learn to be more self-disciplined and use highly developed linguistic skills to express themselves (Anyon, 1980). The social reproduction theory in education has been widely criticized largely because it fails to consider such cultural analysis as student resistance (Strike, 1989).

The overarching theory of social reproduction asserts that social classes who hold power and wealth remain in power and maintain affluence by passing on economic capital or wealth, and more notably, by assuring that their offspring acquire the necessary cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Cultural capital and social capital are terms
Bourdieu developed by expanding Karl Marx’s term *capital* to encompass more than just material resources. By adding the distinct categories of cultural capital and social capital, Bourdieu explains that factors other than wealth help to reproduce an individual’s position or status in society, and certain socio-cultural resources provide a distinct advantage to the high status group. Therefore, according to cultural capital theory, traditional college students whose parents attended college have a distinct advantage over first-generation women community college students of nontraditional age. This advantage is due to the fact that college educated parents will generally pass on cultural and social capital such as upper status language skills, appropriate social skills, sound advisement on secondary course selection that will adequately prepare the child for future college curricula, and the explicit expectation of college attendance. Providing such experiential resources will help to increase the likelihood of college participation and success (Warburton, Rosio, & Nuñez, 2001).

Similarly, social capital is also a powerful asset that refers to a network of social associates essential for connecting with future, often powerful, individuals and groups who are linked to those who maintain significant positions of power. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) concluded that for the affluent, cultural and social capital are critical elements for preserving and maintaining upper class status for progeny.

Bourdieu (1977) also developed the concept of habitus, which refers to an individual’s attitude, outlook, preferences, and predisposition, in conjunction with social reproduction and cultural capital theories. According to Bourdieu, an individual’s habitus, or an individual’s habits, are socially acquired. Habitus can also refer to the
condition of the physical body, including: personal appearance, hygiene, temperament, and emotional state.

This concept asserts that there are limitless options that never occur to a person based on the experiences they may or may not have, and therefore, certain possibilities are not really possibilities because they were never conceived. In this research habitus is significant, because college attendance may not appear as a viable option to a parent whose habitus lacks the experience and exposure of college attendance; therefore, the necessary college preparation during K-12 education is not a consideration. It is important to note however, that habitus does not have fixed automatic outcomes, and therefore, each situation is different. Further, people rely on knowledge, such as believing a vocational occupation is the only employment option, and scripts acquired from their culture and environment that provide an individual with a view of the world and perceived acceptable behaviors within that world.

Habitus is culturally acquired and is responsible for developing propensities towards how an individual classifies, judges, and assesses others and the world. It is exhibited or manifested in one’s attitudes, beliefs, viewpoints, and opinions. Habitus is also physically apparent in a person’s demeanor, walk, posture, and so forth. Bourdieu does not incorporate character or morality in his interpretation as with the Latin meaning, but views habitus as that which underlies physical, emotional, and cognitive human characteristics. It therefore allows for limitless possible variations in an individual’s habitus given historical and cultural settings and exposures (Bourdieu, 1990).

Although habitus stems from cultural conditioning, Bourdieu does not think of habitus as a fixed primary nature that responds to stimuli with predetermined emotional,
cognitive, or behavioral outcomes. He also rejects rudimentary notions of human action as passive spontaneous responses to conditioning stimuli. Habitus refers to the whole environment of an individual that contributes to the forming of ideas and is consistent with post-structuralists who challenge the concept that humans were developed by enlightenment thought and idealist philosophy. Rather, the feminist post-structural view as well as the view held within Bourdieu’s habitus concept maintains that people are culturally and indirectly structured, shaped by interaction as situated, symbolic beings and are thus able to act (Bourdieu, 1990).

Habitus is the symbolic reflection of cultural conditioning, and a primary agent of cultural conditioning in education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Education culminates and expands cultural habituation, and therefore, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) closely examine pedagogic authority, or a teacher’s influence on students, the authority of language, the influence of the language used by teachers in institutions of learning, and its role in inculcating a legitimate culture or a culture of high status. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) the power of language is particularly evident in the high status speech of university professors. Bourdieu and Passeron refer to this speech as magisterial or arrogant language. Magisterial language uses highly obscure words in delivering lessons that are used in confusing semantic patterns. Students who can reproduce such words and patterns are viewed as superior. Magisterial language is what Bourdieu and Passeron refer to as a powerful distancing tool used to create the illusion of preeminence on the part of the instructor. Bourdieu suggests this language creates a “semantic fog” (p.108) that students accept, because they assume that if the language is more difficult to understand, it must have more value.
The dilemma with the use of upper status, obscure language and semantic patterns by teachers is it has the potential to alienate through confusion those who do not come from upper-class backgrounds where exposure to high status language is limited or absent. Because the upper class is responsible for setting many of the standards, dominant groups make the general assumption that knowledge of and involvement with certain exalted art forms and languages creates a more sophisticated individual. Within the social structures of educational institutions veiled curricula reproduce the values of upper status cultures in essence and implies superiority over other cultures. Such assumptions are often highly evident in art, music, and literature curricula, where the values and preferences of upper status cultures often dominate and determine what is deemed to be of importance thereby placing a strong emphasis on the acquisition of this knowledge (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Educational institutions have total power in the education process and often reproduce the values of the dominant culture at the expense of those in lower status cultures. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) conclude that teachers will most likely assist in this process because after all, they are the most finished product of the reproduction process.

Societies, either overtly or inadvertently, often use language to stereotype, discriminate, and maintain class. In Europe, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) cite arrogant university systems that use language which seems to have more of a concern with “perpetuating the Christian reinterpretation of the social demands of an aristocracy” (p. 115) than truly transmitting professional empirical knowledge. And therefore, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) maintain that students from the privileged-class or upper class who have early exposure to high status language are more likely to be successful with
correctly spelling or identifying obscure words than their middle and working class peers. They will also perform at higher levels on standardized tests, which frequently use more obscure language than the vernacular.

In addition to language, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) assert that professors erroneously scrutinized students’ linguistic and gestural behaviors when observing oral examinations in French universities. It has been noted that how a student uses grammar, accent, tone, delivery, gestures, as well as physical appearance, or how much the students have conformed to the stereotypical dress style of the faculty and culture, affects how they are graded. Further, they assert that class decides which type of verbal achievement will be acquired in early childhood. Upper class children acquire language from a scholastic approach often from within their families, where children of other classes usually acquire language solely from the colloquial speech of the family circle. The acquisition of scholastic language gives upper class children a distinct advantage in most societal realms that serves them well in education and beyond.

The seminal research on cultural capital and reproduction in schools found in Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron’s (1977), *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, concludes that students are rewarded and valued on the basis of the cultural capital they bring to school. Bourdieu and Passeron found that participation in the upper status cultures represents a type of cultural capital inculcated during the first part of childhood; and therefore, students from upper status cultures begin school with a discernible advantage over those from middle and working class cultures.
Cultural Capital and K-12 Education

Jean Anyon (1980, 1981) conducted an extensive ethnographical study of curricular, pedagogical, and pupil evaluation practices in five elementary schools. The purpose of Anyon’s research sought to apply cultural capital theory to determine if indeed, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) suggested, schools and teachers who educate advantaged social groups promote knowledge and skills that lead to social power and reward. Anyon asserted that many of the skills associated with upper status are withheld from the working-class students, and instead, working-class students receive a more practical hidden curriculum where they learn industrial and clerical skills.

Anyon (1981) defined social class as being beyond occupation and income level adding it is also the way a person “relates to the process in society by which goods, services, and cultures are produced” (p. 68). She notes that in a capitalist society, a person has a direct relationship to the system via private ownership of capital that is then used to produce more profit, and more capital. Capital can also be symbolic in a variety of ways. For example, it may be inside knowledge acquired, via social capital that is not from college coursework, but from empirical applied knowledge passed on from experienced individuals within a family or corporate organization, who provide deep insight as to how the internal production process works to produce optimum financial, managerial, or technical outcomes. Other forms of acceptable symbolic capital are, linguistic, cognitive, or analytical skills that allow an individual to produce the dominant and legitimate artistic, scientific, cultural, or technical products. The ownership relation, as it is referred to within this framework, is definitive to class as is the relationship that exists between the physical capital and the owner. The owner is referred to as the
capitalist and belongs to the capitalist class or the upper status class. In the United States, the capitalist must participate in the ownership of at least part of the system of production, and it is worth noting that the capitalist class has relatively few members overall in the United States.

At the opposite end of the continuum is the worker. Working class people in the United States do not ordinarily own great physical capital that builds monetary wealth. They work to earn money and in turn, their work makes the capitalist class more money. According to Anyon, (1980, 1981), approximately 60 percent of the population in the United States belongs to this group. In the middle is the middle class or workers who may possess attributes of both the capitalist class and the working class, for example, some may be more like the working-class in that they have little control over their work; however, they may own stock, a characteristic of the capitalist class.

Anyon looks at two working-class schools, one middle class school, one upper middle class school, and an upper status, elite school. Her research concluded that as the social class of the community increased so did teaching materials available in the classroom, teacher preparation time spent planning lessons, prestige in terms of education institutions attended by teachers and principals, higher status social background of teachers and administrators, increased parent expenditure for the classrooms, higher expectations of student ability by parents, teachers, and administrators, high performance expectations of students by teachers, positive attitudes by teachers on potential career choices, an increase in the children’s acceptance of classroom assignments, increased connections between the subject areas by students and teachers, and increased similarity between school and community.
The deeper implication found in this research is that schools tend to reproduce social class in terms of physical capital, behaviors according to authority and control, and individual productive activity. This can be both positive and negative depending on the school and what it is reproducing. Within the elementary setting, one of the earliest opportunities for education, Anyon observed potential social class relationships developing. For example, she observed children in the working-class schools developing a conflict relationship with the structure of capitalist society, or what will become their future employers. The curriculum is consistent with preparation for routine and mechanical jobs where as laborers they will work to profit others. In the industrial setting, a great deal of conflict arises over wages, work place conditions, and general control. In the workforce, workers employ resistance strategies that include moving more slowly, and taking more time to carry out a task. The general goal is to sabotage production efforts in various work settings. The students in the working-class schools are not learning to be docile or obedient. Instead, given the conditions of the schools, these students develop skills of resistance similar to that of the workforce. Within the working-class schools, the development of resistance skills becomes debilitating as students fail to learn the knowledge and skills that will lead to a productive life, and within industry, these skills are also very debilitating not only to the production process itself, but to the worker who is never promoted or compensated for positive work habits. The methods of resistance these children develop in school provide only temporary solutions and create larger dilemmas both in school, and in future work settings.

The children from the middle-class school tended to develop different potential relationships to capital, work, and authority. In this setting, Anyon (1980, 1981) observed
schoolwork that was appropriate to developing white-collar or middle class workers where paperwork and technical work are prevalent. Workers in this scenario are not rewarded for being creative or analytical thinkers, but instead, know how to access information to provide answers such as knowing the correct regulation, technique or procedure.

The affluent upper middle class school provides their students with an education conducive to developing a relationship to capital that is expressive and instrumental with a strong ability to negotiate terms. These children acquire symbolic capital such as refined linguistic skills, artistic form, scientific expression, and creative expansion of ideas into material forms. The skills developed in this school environment will transform these children into future artists, intellectuals, lawyers, judges, scientists, professors, and other professionals.

In the elite school, Anyon (1980, 1981) observed curriculum and methods different from all the other schools. The children at this school were given the opportunity to learn, practice, and use the highly prestigious grammar, math skills, and language skills necessary to control a production system. Students learn to analyze society and develop expertise in analysis and planning that will be critical for their future place in society as owners of both physical capital and companies responsible for the production of various types of capital.

Anyon concluded that the hidden curriculum in American schools implies a different set of standards for each social relationship to capital, which systematically reproduces social structures. Separate curricular, pedagogical, and student assessment practices emphasize different cognitive and behavioral skills that contribute to the
development of relationships to physical and symbolic capital, to the process of work, and to authority. Educational attainment is therefore, directly connected to cultural capital. Anyon found consistencies with Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) and Bourdieu (1988), in observing that teachers are able to communicate more easily with students from upper status cultures, tend to pay more attention to these students, and perceive them as being more intellectual in nature than students who lack similar cultural capital. According to Anyon, teachers provide additional assistance to and display more patience with students of upper status cultures.

Absent from this research with the exception of some speculation is how cultural capital continues to impact students into secondary education and college. In addition, this research does not address other ways parental education levels translate into educational attainment and student motivation specifically. Also, this research does not consider the impact of gender on education and cultural capital.

**Cultural Capital and Secondary Education**

Secondary education in the United States can be a significant predictor of how well a student will do in post-secondary education, and according to cultural capital theory, students whose parents attended college typically benefit from their parents experience. Paul DiMaggio (1982) examined the impact of cultural capital on U.S. high school students and how cultural capital affects school success in terms of grades. He argued that conventional measures of family background fail to sufficiently encapsulate cultural elements of status that make a difference in school relations and more specifically, high school students’ grades. The research used cultural capital as a
framework to define resourceful cultural elements and focused on assessing the impact of cultural capital and participation in high status culture on high school students’ grades.

DiMaggio (1982) created a cultural reproduction model that contends students from high status cultures will have the highest grade point averages based on the resources they received from cultural capital. In contrast, he also created the cultural mobility model, which asserts that in the United States where students can take advantage of a strong education system, cultural mobility will have a greater impact on the grades of the less advantaged because possessing and attaining prestigious cultural resources, such as high status language and skills, may significantly assist in upward class mobility. DiMaggio examined elements of high status cultural capital, for example, high levels of involvement and interest in art, music and literature because these are generally perceived to be the most prestigious art forms. DiMaggio further suggests that participation in art forms such as art, music, and literature relies on sophisticated cognitive skills, which lend an advantage to children inculcated with these interests. DiMaggio also notes that fully developed art and music education have been historically diluted or absent from standard American curricula with the exception of affluent school districts, and are generally viewed as expendable in elementary and secondary schools where there is limited funding. Therefore, only children who have familial resources have had access to these cultural resources outside the education setting in the home, a private venue, or within an affluent school.

A composite measure of cultural capital was found to have a significant impact on student grades when compared with students of similar ability and nondominant family backgrounds. Noteworthy differences appeared in the results of male and female samples
in the relationships between family background and returns to cultural capital. Daughters of women whose fathers graduated from college demonstrated the greatest benefit from cultural capital in terms of having higher grades. Daughters of fathers who were high school graduates had slightly lower grades, and the daughters of men who did not have a high school diploma were even lower. In sharp contrast, males from high status cultural capital demonstrated little benefit from cultural capital in their grades, and males from the other two less educated groups had substantial returns in terms of higher grades, which DiMaggio believes comes from the lower status males placing value on the acquisition of higher status knowledge and skills. In females, the cultural reproduction model appears to confirm the greatest gains come from those whose fathers had the greatest education. In males, the cultural mobility model was more applicable in demonstrating that males without the greatest cultural capital were motivated by the opportunity for cultural mobility, as they attempted to acquire the prestigious cultural resources of higher status groups; their grades were also significantly higher.

DiMaggio (1982) clearly demonstrates at least two relationships between student performance and cultural capital theory. First, females with fathers who had higher levels of educational accomplishment had better grades during post-secondary school than female students whose parents did not attend college, which is consistent with cultural capital theory. Second, consistent with DiMaggio’s cultural mobility model, males without high levels of cultural capital recognized the need for acquiring high status cultural capital through education and achieved at higher levels than those males with cultural capital. DiMaggio used exclusively, the male parent’s education level to determine cultural capital in this research, assuming that the degree to which the patriarch
is educated has the greatest impact on a child’s cultural capital without consideration for the mother’s influence. The exclusion of the mother’s education level and other cultural capital contributed by the mother limits this research by excluding female gender-related influences connected with educational attainment.

Also problematic is the fact that composite measures in vocabulary were used to determine student ability as well as the inclusion of class status. Language, and particularly its lexicon, is also a form of cultural capital inculcated during a child’s upbringing that does not always adequately or fairly assess an individual’s sum ability. According to Howard Gardner’s (1983) theory of multiple intelligences, human beings have at least eight modalities of intelligence that are not limited solely to the verbal linguistic. Further, while this research addressed differences between genders at the secondary level, it removed all minority children from the research sample making their presence and participation in secondary education invisible or insignificant to the research. Absent from DiMaggio’s (1982) research are all factors that assist in shaping an individual’s attitudes toward education such as cultural and family influences, gender, level of socioeconomic status, age, and elementary and secondary education experiences. DiMaggio’s research fails to encompass all socializing agents.

High school has serious implications in shaping the path to college and as previously mentioned students who receive relevant cultural capital during high school have an advantage entering college. A recent statistical examination of census data funded by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), *Bridging the Gap: Academic Preparation and Postsecondary Success of First-Generation Students* (Warburton, Rosio, & Nuñez, 2001), found that students whose parents attended college
were more likely to take more rigorous college preparatory courses than students whose parents did not attend college. This factor can strongly affect a student’s attitude and ability towards college both in the short and long term.

Warburton, Rosio, and Nuñez’s (2001) analysis of census data illustrates that the journey through secondary education is a critical period for students whose parents did not attend college. One reason for this may be found in the attitudes and perceptions of secondary teachers and counselors who, based on their own habitus, fail to validate and develop student capabilities by directing students away from college and into a vocation. This is extremely significant because in many cultures, it is assumed that educators and counselors know what is best. Such perceptions may be difficult to change because people are usually not fully aware of their own cultural habitus since it is part of their intuitive unconscious, and therefore in this case one’s habitus may prevent parents or students from seeing college as a viable option. In fact, the family’s habitus may lead to the support of a vocational track that provides workforce preparation unaware of the limitations this kind of education will present for the high school student. Vocational tracks often mean avoiding the more demanding college preparation courses that will ultimately restrict future education options.

Cultural Capital and the Community College

Laura Rendon (1994, 2000) has conducted extensive research on community college students. Her research has demonstrated the significance of parental expectations on students’ attitudes towards attending college. For example, students whose parents attended college recalled persistent mandatory parental expectations of college attendance, which inadvertently provided indoctrination with the college process. Many
of the student’s whose parents had these expectations began college immediately after high school. In contrast, for first-generation students, the research found that parental expectations for college attendance were usually optional at best, and typically, college attendance was not an assumption. For many first-generation students, college attendance comes after entry into the work force and a long absence from high school.

In Rendon’s (1994) study, over 100 community college freshmen were interviewed as to their perceptions on their educational experiences. Participants who were identified as first-generation community college students had a much different perspective than students whose parents attended college. As one first-generation community college student commented: “The problem is a lot of people have to recognize that we are coming from a community where education is not a priority” (Rendon, 1994, p. 2). In addition, external perceptions shaped by the dominant culture can greatly disadvantage children within the K-12 environment. For example, in Rendon’s research a young first-generation male Hispanic student was identified as gifted in elementary school; however, by the time he entered high school, the counselor did not recommend that he attend college. Without reviewing this student’s academic history, she made assumptions based on the family’s background of vocational employment and placed the student on a vocational track.

This research concluded that community colleges must help first-generation students navigate the transition to college, fill in the gaps that a student’s family may lack in terms of cultural capital or experience with the general college processes, find ways to engage nontraditional students in campus activities, and validate student capabilities. The primary focus of this research was on academic persistence taking into account that many
students come to the community college needing far more than campus activities to help them persist. It also recognizes that nontraditional and first-generation students have very different needs from their traditional counterparts who come indoctrinated with college expectations and have the benefit of parents who advocate for them during high school and ensure adequate college preparation.

This research does not address issues associated specifically with gender, nor does it address the aspirations and experiences unique to first-generation women at the community college. This research also neglects to raise many educational issues of mature nontraditional students, such as requisite experience with academic vocabulary, admissions, and process.

In more recent research, Rendon (2000) noted that for families within the dominant culture’s group, children acquire a working knowledge of the “right” cultural capital early in life. Values and traditions of educational institutions are passed on early in the child’s socialization process so that when the child begins school, culturally appropriate behaviors are evident to teachers and school administrators. Rendon (2000) states that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds as well as those who are not from the dominant group lack cultural capital such as language and school behaviors deemed appropriate by the dominant culture and cultural traditions, which give children of the dominant culture a distinct advantage in the educational setting over first-generation Hispanic students and other multicultural students outside the dominant culture.

Consistent with Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) research, Rendon (2000) asserts that educators have a tendency to label children who lack such cultural capital as
underachievers who are not interested in academics or social and career mobility. A consequence is that students will most likely emerge from high school without taking the needed courses or performing at the necessary levels to qualify for college admissions limiting educational access and ultimately affecting educational attainment by creating a gap between knowledge acquired in high school and the knowledge required to be successful in college.

Rendon’s (2000) research focused specifically on students from cultures other than the dominant White culture and concluded that multicultural students must feel validated by the culture within the community college. Therefore, in order for these students to be successful, instructors must provide validation or make students aware of their capabilities thus validating the college experience on a personal level. Further, this research concluded that community colleges should be more inclusive and avoid social reproduction of the dominant culture within the college. For example, colleges who operate from the principles of multiculturalism and democracy would be more inclusive for students from outside the dominant culture. “The monocultural college fosters assimilation and sameness…” (Rendon, 2000, p. 4) and reproduces dominate conceptions of education.

Findings of this research also suggest lower status groups would be better served through stronger relationships between community colleges, K-12 institutions, and four-year institutions to create better transitions and transfer options. Stronger relationships between K-12 institutions and colleges could assist in indoctrinating students from non-dominant cultures with the idea that college is viable by way of the community college with the option to transfer into four-year institutions.
In addition to Rendon’s (2000) work, much of the work of Carlos Alberto Torres (2002) comments further on damaging social structures of capitalism, and the current affects of the neoliberal economic philosophy which rejects all government intervention in the economy, focusing instead on free-market and fiscal austerity at the expense of social programs. Tendencies within this philosophy allow the randomness of culture to disqualify many children of diverse non-dominant cultures and of lower socioeconomic levels whose parents cannot afford to pay for the technology, reading materials, real estate, or schooling that will ensure higher learning.

Torres calls for a return to liberal notions of education, which included: enlightenment, empowerment, emancipation, and an understanding of education as a worthy cause and greater good that should be a responsibility of the state. In the current climate, Torres (2002) believes that many schools will fail to recognize a true respect for the rich textures and properties of diversity, and states, “lacking a true understanding of… the conversion of public responsibility into private goods constitutes a fundamental threat to the progress achieved through education in the twentieth century and to the liberal vision of education” (p. xi).

Under the neo-liberal economic philosophy of capitalism, the government reduces taxes especially in the corporate sector and systematically reduces all investments in social capital. According to this philosophy, the market will arbitrarily determine the distribution of wealth and power. The resulting reduction of expenditure and investment in fragile social areas in need of such support limits investments in women like those described in this research.
David Shipler (2004) author of *The Working Poor: Invisible in America* confirms Torres’ commentary on the effects of capitalism, free-market, and fiscal austerity at the expense of social programs. He recently reported similar findings about millions of working Americans who work full-time, but exist at or slightly above the poverty line with little hope of elevating themselves from this cycle. Shipler’s comments share a certain affinity with the women participants in this research.

Most of the people I write about in this book do not have the luxury of rage. They are caught in exhausting struggles. Their wages do not lift them far enough from poverty to improve their lives, and their lives, in turn, hold them back. The term by which they are usually described, ‘working poor,’ should be an oxymoron.

Nobody who works hard should be poor in America (p. 1).

Economist, and author of *How Economies Grow* (2003), Jeff Madrick reminds us, the pressures of inequality on middle and working class Americans are now quite cruel. According to Madrick, the tension on working people and on family life, as wives have gone to work in massive numbers, has become significant. While electronics and televisions have become less expensive, the prices of higher education, health care, public and private transportation, drugs, housing and cars have risen faster than family incomes creating great hardship on the average American family. The majority works harder yet life has become less serene and secure for most Americans, by any standards. Future research that reaches and raises awareness among mainstream America is necessary, and critical.

In conclusion, most of this research fails to address the high level of student motivation needed to overcome the challenges presented to students from nondominant
cultures and lower socioeconomic levels. It also fails to adequately discuss the context and nature of the tremendous desire necessary to achieve educational attainment, and what these aspirations mean to an individual’s personal growth, and subsequent generations.

**Post-Structural Feminist Theory**

The second theoretical concept utilized in this research to understand how social structures may assist in limiting women’s potential is found in post-structural feminist theories (Smith, 1987; Hill Collins, 1990, 2000). Throughout the history of feminist theory, there are two generally accepted perspectives that conceptualize feminism. One perspective underscores the commonalities of gender and the understanding that gender connects all women. Carol Gilligan’s work on moral development, Nel Noddings work on caring, and Mary Belenky’s work on women’s ways of knowing can be classified within this perspective (Biklen and Pollard, 1993). The second perspective recognizes gender as a unifying characteristic among women, but also emphasizes race, class, and ethnicity as profound variables that position women in society (Anyon, 1980; Smith, 1987; Hansot, 1993). It is important to note that both groups of feminists agree that without understanding the everyday experiences of women, the world cannot be fully understood. From the latter group, post-structural feminist theorists have sought to understand the social structures that add to women’s oppression as well as address the unique position of women in society according to the relationship of societal structures and gender (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Post-structural feminist theories are highly effective for the purpose of this research in understanding how societal structures overpower and limit options particularly for those without monetary, social, and cultural
capital. More importantly, these theories demonstrate how women resist and produce new structures, positions, attitudes, and responses that defy the parameters of oppressive social structures.

Post-structural feminist theories challenge Louis Althusser’s determinist views that people are powerless to change their destiny beyond the context of the form of thought they live within. “People do not dream up the ordering of their relations and then put them into practice. That ordering is an effect of people’s practical activities in the context of their actual material conditions” (Smith, 1990, p. 38). The post-structuralist position rejects the notion that individuals are permanently confined within the constraints social structures. Instead, the post-structuralist position views this as a two-way process where individuals react and respond to social structures through resistance and the production of different structures.

The seminal work of two primary researchers, sociologist Dorothy E. Smith (1987, 1990) and Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill-Collins (1989, 1990) are central to further understanding post-structural feminism and describing associated oppressive societal structures. Within post-structural feminist theories, three social structures, patriarchy, capitalism, and racism are particularly useful in this research to explore how women are oppressed (Smith, 1987; Hill-Collins, 1990, 2000).

*The Social Structures of Patriarchy and Capitalism*

Dorothy E. Smith (1987, 1990) a pioneer in feminist sociology has been instrumental in developing a sociology for women that contends women’s contributions and perspectives have been excluded. To remedy this situation, Smith argues that a separate sociology for women is necessary because women are simply outside the frame,
which men have created based on their relationship and participation in the ruling of society. “Sociology is an organization of practices that structure our relation to others in society of whom we speak and write, concerning whom we make assertions, into whose lives and experience we inquire, who are the objects of our study, and whose behavior we aim to explain” (Smith, 1987, p. 72). Therefore, it is important to understand that the world and the established sociology in which women live, have been almost exclusively designed by males with only marginal consideration given to females. In addition, because women have not been allowed to create an intellectual mechanism with which to interpret the world, they have been unable to fully and comfortably express their everyday life experiences using the language and objectified knowledge created by men (Smith, 1987). Smith has given the term, “line of fault” (p. 49) to women’s inability to comfortably express everyday experiences.

Smith (1987) asserts that the patriarchal sociology established in North America has existed for approximately the last 70 to 100 years and is responsible for providing us with our perception of society, how people and ourselves should look, act, dress, and so forth. It is also responsible for how we come to think about social relations, our homes, and our inner-selves. Sociology also generally assumes that we can step back and observe ourselves from outside particular subjective experiences, which of course we cannot.

Smith further argues that the established social consciousness has been constructed from the perspective of men that rule or govern and dominate society. “To learn how to know sociology…is to take on the view of ruling and to view society and social relations in terms of the perspectives, interests, and relevances of men active in
relations of ruling” (Smith, 1987, p. 2-3). According to Smith, this is not sexism or prejudice, but full exclusion of women from creating what becomes women’s culture. As women were silenced in this process, what is constituted as language, art, music, political principles, psychological conceptions, medical models, and so forth is determined by males and passed on through the dominant culture. This is done in such a subtle manner that the sociology appears to be universal, generalized, and unrelated to a particular gender or position, when in fact it is biased, limited, and saturated with special interests.

Incorporated in, or interrelated to this sociology is what Smith (1987) refers to as, “relations of ruling,” or the intersection of the establishments which organize and regulate society with hidden assumptions about women and gender. These relations function from the premise of a gender division of labor; that is, males will conduct the vital and principal operations and women will have their place in subordinate roles. In this context, ruling or governing refers to a collection of organized practices that include government, business, financial management, professional organizations, educational institutions, and law as well as discussion from within and between organizations.

The organized practices of the established sociology are also great sources of power and pervasive authority. The practice of ruling Smith speaks of permeates the everyday world in what she calls forms of text such as paper, computer, discourse, the media, or people’s actions. “It is an ideologically structured mode of action – images, vocabularies, concepts, abstract terms of knowledge are integral to the practice of power, to getting things done” (Smith, 1987, p.17). The goal is to keep women in their places, subordinating, thinking, and expressing experiences from the male perspective, feeling completely objectified even to themselves as women. Smith associates this concept with
the grand ideology of Marx and Engels whereby “those ideas and images through which the class that rules the society by virtue of its domination of the means of production orders, organizes, and sanctions the social relations that sustain its domination” (Smith, 1987, p. 54).

The societal structure of patriarchy is the social construction of society based on male principles, male power, and male authority. According to post-structural feminist thought, patriarchy is one of the primary causes of women’s oppression. It is the systematic exclusion of societal resources to one group by another group in a society (Hill Collins, 2000). Patriarchy is located in institutions of the military, government, business, the media, and hierarchal organizations of power, and Smith (1987) as well as other feminists view patriarchy as a gendered organization that approaches ruling with what is perceived as rationality. Obscured beneath the male subtext are the deliberate fundamental impersonal procedures of ruling that detach, depersonalize, and justify the oppression and exclusion of women from the practices of power and relations of ruling for the sole purpose of retaining the power to rule. Within the existing framework of patriarchy it is implicitly assumed that men are more rational and possess greater capabilities to govern society. “Women are generally means to the enterprises of others, or means to the enterprise built into an organizational process. They hold a piece of the action, sometimes a piece essential to the action, but they are not at its center” (Smith, 1987, p. 66). Smith also incorporates De Beauvoir’s description of the social construction of gender as being created for men, by men who have arrogantly claimed as masculine or neutral principles that are the factual, tangible, and objective while women are confined to the subjective.
The domestic work of women is often overlooked within the patriarchal frame as
the subordinate work of women. Since the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s,
expectations for women have increased significantly as women are expected to mother,
maintain homes, as well as hold full or part-time jobs, and in some cases, attend school.

According to Smith (1987) there is a direct correlation between the current
patriarchal form in the United States and capitalism, or the forceful progress of capital
within a society. Within the post-structural feminist framework, both patriarchy and
capitalism directly affect women’s status in life as well as the quality of an individual’s
life experiences. Post-structural feminists have generally viewed capitalism as a social
structure that leads to classism, or oppression based on one’s class. A major goal of post-
structural feminists’ research has been to stimulate change in overarching social
structures. This work has been instrumental in bringing attention to the reproduction of
power relations in the workforce as well as demonstrating how the division of labor is
maintained between women and men in a variety of settings such as the home, classroom,
and workplace. It has also revealed that such division is sustainable because power is
essential in restricting resources from a group within society.

Capitalism is a prominent source of the current gender division of labor. Smith
asserts that domestic work was once common to both men and women, but over time, the
capital market place has created delineation between the public arena of work and the
private domestic arena. As this delineation has progressed, the domestic has become a
less important and limited isolated realm restricted to women as appropriated and
continually influenced by men. As the domestic realm has been lessened, men have
constructed the meanings of knowledge, judgment, and will in the public realm, which
are then conveyed over time from individuals to “the governing process of capitalist enterprise, to the practices of bureaucratic administration, to the extended social relations of textually mediated discourse, and to the productive and market processes of capitalism that incorporate what was formerly the exercise of skill into the use-value of the product” (Smith, 1987, p. 5).

Capitalism is the vehicle that creates external relations outside the local realm. A network of unknown buyers and sellers create a new set of social relations composed by the market process (Smith, 1987; 1990). Through capitalism, men create an extralocal network that connects their gender and agendas through common market and political goals. “These extralocal, impersonal, universalized forms of action became the exclusive terrain of men, while women became correspondingly confined to a reduced local sphere of action organized by particularistic relationships” (Smith, 1987, p. 5). Therefore, as the women’s movement propelled women into the workforce, the diminished value for women and their work or product has shifted from the domestic arena into the labor force where the gender division of labor is for the most part ubiquitous.

In exploring the underlying perspective of patriarchy and capitalism, we begin to understand the social structures that have critical implications for women’s lives and choices. Although many positive changes have occurred since the women’s movement began, we can also begin to see how these structures subtly continue to permeate society, especially as these structures correlate to educational achievement and its role in raising awareness of gender and class oppression. It is therefore critical to understand the effects of social structures such as patriarchy and capitalism on the experiences, aspirations, and educational attainment of first-generation community college women of nontraditional
age, many of whom are most at risk for subjugation by such social structures. It is equally important to understand the social structure of gender and its effects on learning and educational attainment.

The Social Structure of Race and Black Feminist Thought

Hill Collins (2000, 1990) asserts that the oppression of Black women has been uniquely shaped by the convergence of race, class, and gender as developed in U.S. slavery. The early slave relationships established between Black women and U.S. society have produced all ensuing relationships that women of African decent have experienced, and continue to have an effect on employment, family, community relationships, and on relationships with each other. These relationships and their origins born of slavery are also the political context of Black women’s intellectual compositions.

Hill Collins (2000) describes oppression as the systematic, long-term situation where one group unjustly withholds the resources of a society. Many races and both genders have been denied such resources throughout the history of the United States; however, the primary focus of this research is women from multiple races, and therefore, the research of Patricia Hill Collins (1990, 2000) is useful to provide a greater understanding of the impact of racism and the intersection of race and class in structuring gender. Although the concepts are presented from an African-influenced and feminist consciousness of Black feminist thought; this body of research extends and addresses situations of oppression that have often been denied by White feminist organizations. “…African-American, Latino, Native American, and Asian-American women have criticized Western feminisms for being racist and overly concerned with White, middle-class women’s issues” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 5). Despite more recent attempts by White
feminists to develop a multiracial feminism, some concerns remain. This research is essential to understanding the impact of race as a social structure that impacts an individual’s cultural capital.

Black feminist thought has produced a new sociology from the perspective of Black women’s oppression; however, it has also produced an awareness of societal structures omnipresent and effective in creating oppression for all women. Black women in the United States have produced social theories to assist Black women and other socially oppressed women with resisting, coping with, and surviving oppressive social structures. According to Hill Collins (2000), feminism is a quest for women’s empowerment and emancipation from oppression and subjugation that continues to permeate social structures around the world.

Hill Collins (2000, 1990) asserts that there is a rich hidden history of Black women intellectuals silenced or forgotten by their subordinate position in society. The suppression of Black women’s intellectual tradition according to Hill Collins has been an intentional attempt to suppress Black women’s knowledge and rich tradition to maintain the status quo by those who rule. “ Suppressing the knowledge produced by any oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because the seeming absence of dissent suggests that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization” (p. 3).

The absence of available writings and works of Black women adds to this censorship; however, in spite of all efforts to silence Black feminist thought, Black women in the United States have managed to do intellectual work that has gained attention.

Oppression of Black women has three interdependent dimensions according to Hill Collins (2000, 1990). First, there is the exploitation of Black women’s labor, which
is critical to U.S. capitalism. Iron pots and kettles have come to symbolize the
ghettoization of Black women in low paying service occupations. This aspect of
exploitation represents the economic dimension of oppression that has created an all-
consuming struggle for basic for survival among Black women. Current high levels of
poverty among Black women living in housing projects in inner cities across America
demonstrate the extension of earlier types of Black women’s economic abuse and
exploitation in slavery (Hill Collins, 2000; Brewer, 1993; Omolade, 1994).

The second dimension of oppression is through the denial of societal rights and
privileges that are customarily given to White males. For example, the historic exclusion
of Black women from voting, holding public office, holding public positions in
disproportionate amounts, and withholding equitable legal services in the criminal justice
system all authenticate the political inferiority to which Black women have been
relegated. Hill Collins (2000) also indicts educational institutions with contributing to
the political disenfranchisement of Black women. From early slavery Black women were
denied literacy, and presently in inner cities and rural areas poverty prevents Black
women from graduating with full literacy. The problem has been exacerbated by means
of inequitable funding practices, and the fact that institutions of higher education for
Black women are either limited or generally under funded. Practices such as these ensure
the continuation of the political dimension of oppression for Black women.

The third dimension of oppression is the negative image or ideology of Black
women perpetuated in the United States. In the U.S., certain ideologies become
hegemonic or seen as natural, and these ideologies or assumptions are often used to
justify oppressive practices. “From the mammies, jezebels, and breeder women of
slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, and ubiquitous Black
prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative
sterotypes applied to African-American women have been fundamental to Black
women’s oppression” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 5).

All three dimensions of oppression have been collectively instrumental in creating
an immensely effective social structure of control that keeps African-American women
subordinate. This subordination according to Hill Collins (2000) goes beyond race and
intersects with gender and patriarchy. For example, Black male-run organizations have
typically ignored Black women’s issues, and even among progressive Black
organizations gender discrimination is prevalent. Ella Baker, a civil rights activist, ran
the entire Southern Christian Leadership Conference and organization, but was forced to
relinquish decision-making to the males of the organization (Hill Collins, 2000;
Canatrow, 1980). Other Black women have expressed similar sexism within
organizations, even among such radical organizations as the Black Panther Party.
Another civil right activist, Septima Clark stated she found in her visits to the South that
men had the final word and women were generally silenced and subordinated by Black
men, “what ever the man said had to be right” (Hill Collins, 2000; Brown, 1986, 1979).
Such gender discrimination illustrates the suppression of Black women’s ideas and
talents within the boundaries of race, and the patriarchal practices of the dominant culture
spilling into other races.

From the teachings of Black feminist thought, Juanita Johnson-Bailey (2001)
speaks of Black women’s persistence in overcoming poverty and vast obstacles to attain
an education; “Making a way out of no way means not letting anything stand in your
way when you are discouraged” (p. 95). Within Johnson-Bailey’s experiences as a middle
class Black female, women were expected to attain a college education. In her culture
excuses were not allowed. Mothers preached to their Black daughters that after the
tremendous oppression and abuse that Black women had endured to survive throughout
the history of the United States, attaining a college degree was something Black women
could achieve. From this perspective, cultural capital may be extended to include the rich
strengths of an individual’s or group’s culture that provide a unique variety of cultural
capital defined by the resilience and stamina to endure through the challenging college
experience as a nontraditional student. This specific type of cultural capital provides
necessary support structures relevant to the current circumstances of first-generation
college women of nontraditional age.

of No Way*, she explores the experiences of nontraditional Black women graduate and
undergraduate students who return to college after a lengthy absence from school.
Johnson-Bailey provided intimate details of the women’s experiences at home, in the
classroom, and at work. This research found the experiences of Black women in the
United States are undeniably unique from those of White women and Black men, because
Black women are simultaneously affected by gender and race. And subsequently, racism
and classism have the deepest impact on Black women because they are at the bottom of
the social, patriarchal hierarchy. Evidence of this is apparent in the higher rates of
poverty experienced by Black women and their children as well as by a history of high
mortality rates and low educational attainment. “Black women have neither their race,
gender, nor class status on which to trade in a world that grants entitlements based on
each” (p. 103). According to Johnson-Bailey, it is this position at the bottom of the hierarchy that makes Black women vulnerable and unable to acquire power and privilege. However, she asserts that the pervasive feeling of being at the bottom of the heap may be responsible for generating an intense determination to succeed and overcome. Among Black women, confirmation of the determination and resolve that is produced through great adversity is evident in more recent statistics for African American women that demonstrate this group, “consistently outperform[s] all other subgroups in college enrollment, retention, and graduation, despite bearing great disadvantages” (Stevens, 1997, p. 41).

Further confirmation is also found in Johnson-Bailey’s (2001) research as she describes the many experiences of African American women who overcome tremendous obstacles, but successfully obtain a college degree. One particular case within the research tells of an African woman who went back to college in her thirties; her secondary and elementary school experiences were characterized by exclusion. From early childhood adversity was accepted as a part of life. The woman was fatherless, poor, and spoke of teachers who made her feel inferior and never spent time with her. She approached the world through a veil of deprivation; however, her mother consistently provided unconditional love, encouragement, and clarity in terms of oppressive social structures. Because of her mother’s support, she developed a fierce determination and positive attitude towards educational achievement. Adversity became a means to reinforce her strong commitment to academic achievement and fostered determination.

From this research, we can acquire an intimate view into the world of African American women and their unique position within the social structures of race and class.
This research falls short, however, in identifying more specific descriptions of cultural and social capital that is passed on to Black women from their families and culture, which may help support the development of intense determination found in African America women who overcome diversity and succeed in educational attainment.

*The Social Structure of Gender*

Sandra Harding (1996) has done extensive research on the influences of gender on learning. In an analysis of *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, (Goldberger, N., Tarule, J., Clinchy, B., & Belenky, M., 1996) Harding presented, “The Epistemological crisis of the West” (Harding, 1996). The original research on women’s ways of knowing provided a holistic view of women’s perceptions and attitudes on education and learning based on 135 interviews conducted in a variety of settings (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, 1997). The research acknowledged the gender-based silence women experience within a patriarchal society, and defined what comprises knowledge from various individual perspectives. Five perspectives on women’s learning and experiences were identified from this influential research. These perspectives are categorized as silence, the absence of voice; received knowing, knowledge is received via an authority; subjective knowing, knowledge comes from within; procedural knowing, knowledge is recognized as separate constructs from an analytical perspective; and constructed knowing, truth and knowledge are sought in didactic exchanges of ideas.

Harding explores gender as a system of social and cultural relationships that are, as Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) discovered, uniquely affected by class resources, violence, and deprivation. Each of these factors has an effect on the way women come to know, and each individual’s situation is unique. In addition, how
women come to know and value knowledge is commonly held to be related to where a 
woman is situated in life; however, most current dominant epistemologies fit male 
standards and have much to do with power relationships.

According to Harding (1996), gender is the relationship between men and women. 
It is not specific properties society attaches to either gender, but it is the affiliation 
between the two genders. Gender is produced by social structures and their culturally 
individual meanings. She explains: “Gender relations are fundamentally structural 
relations of the social order and symbolic meanings of “discourses” (religious, scientific, 
legal, and other institutions and their practices, cultures, and ways of thinking)” (p. 435). 
These structures are not developed and transmitted by individuals. Instead, they are 
transmitted through symbolic systems and social structures to individuals, and therefore 
gender identities are not innate. Gender identities are created and maintained through the 
various social structures with which an individual engages, and gender identities change 
over time as symbolic systems and social structures change. For example, in the United 
States the acceptance of women in the workforce had dynamic implications in social 
structures, symbolic systems, and perceived gender roles over the last several decades.

Structural gender is achieved through the assignment of social behaviors and 
careers to gendered groups. Harding uses as an example, the production of science as a 
traditionally male behavior, and housework, daily household maintenance, and care of 
relatives as traditionally assigned to females. This type of symbolic gender has been used 
to give meaning to the relationship between men and women, but has nothing to do with 
the two genders within the context and role of sexual reproduction. Instead, by assigning 
tasks such as governing and producing science as high achievements and housework and
other such duties as mere culturally natural behaviors, power relationships are established as value is assigned to one and not the other. This is also true of moral virtue, rationality, and objectivity. Individuals become gendered through positions they are assigned, and cultures and moments in history can create gender assignments that are subject to change at any time given varying circumstances that have the potential to generate change.

According to Harding (1996), within the context of gender exist gender cultures such as the masculine culture of the military, or the masculine culture of sports. For females, feminine cultures can be found in elementary schools or in careers such as modeling and fashion design. Different feminine or masculine cultures shape women and men’s experiences. How a gender culture shapes an individual’s experiences aids in the development of different skills and the acquisition of certain knowledge, abilities, and cultural capital. As Harding indicates, women generally have more opportunities to interact with children; while men have more opportunities to interact with the mechanics of automobiles.

Gender interactions lead individuals to develop different interests as well as different approaches to solving problems and different skills and concerns. In similar situations, men and women approach circumstances differently given their prior knowledge and experiences. In addition, culture, ethnicity, geography, and a variety of influences also shape gender relations. What is considered womanliness or manliness is always irrefutably joined with class, race, ethnicity, religion, and all symbolic systems that arrange culture uniquely. Therefore, what men and women do in terms of gender roles will always depend on the particularity of their situation and how those meanings are structured to maintain class, caste, ethnicity, race, sexuality, or social relations within
the community. Women in the privileged dominant culture are not immune to race and
class specific positions within gender relations and such positions are not unique to poor
women or women of minority races.

Men and women are consistently engaged in struggles brought about by the
dynamics of social change, which constantly takes place in society. Classes, races, and
ethnicities clash to manipulate meanings during social changes because the risks at stake
are high. For example, during social change, prior training or knowledge can become
obsolete as new training and knowledge takes the forefront. The gender assigned to the
new technologies and fields creates advantages for the chosen gender. In the end, social
changes are so vulnerable because at the core of gender relations and social change, is
power. When sparse resources shift, either symbolic or material, due to social changes
the result is a struggle for equitable distribution between genders, classes, and races.

The social construction of gender as defined and shaped by its relationship to
patriarchy and capitalism is essential to understanding the roles unique to women with
regard to family, home, and education. Evidence of these social structures and their
influence in the United States is obvious through the historical absence of women in
positions of power, and presently evident in the relatively smaller numbers of women
represented in governing positions and positions generally gendered as masculine.
Female gender as socially constructed within a patriarchal capitalist society subtly and
not so subtly continues to exert powerful influence over women and education in the
United States through historically male epistemologies that determine what knowledge is
regarded as valuable in society.
Social Structures and Working-Class Knowledge

Wendy Luttrell (1997) published, *School Smart and Mother-Wise: Working-Class Women's Identity and Schooling*, and through this research, Luttrell collected life stories of working-class women in an attempt to gather perspectives and perceptions of knowledge of those other than White, middle-class females. The participants were adult basic education students who returned to an Adult Basic Education program to acquire a high school diploma. The women’s narratives characterized their experiences with education and described what knowledge they regarded as valuable as well as the different values they identified for different types of female intelligence. The women shared stories about their teachers, mothers, and childhood ambitions. Two settings were used: a rural setting in the South and an urban setting in the Northeast.

Luttrell found that school was a place where the working-class women formed opinions about themselves and their social worth. The women shared stories of overwhelming circumstances and ambivalent relationships between themselves, and teachers, other students, and their own mothers. Many narratives expressed feelings of extreme isolation and exclusion during the women’s school experiences. School was also identified as the setting where the women first began to think of themselves as inferior to others.

From this research, Luttrell concluded that for the majority of working-class women, school becomes a place where they lose their self-worth. The women’s stories support the notion that women come to school with various cultural capital; those fortunate enough to have socially legitimated cultural capital within the context of American society are well rewarded and accepted within education institutions.
A common theme from this research was the notion of the “teacher’s pet.” The women participants commonly labeled students in their classes who were obedient, quiet, and generally submissive, as teacher’s pets. They believed that the teacher’s pets possessed the knowledge teachers wanted them to know, had analytical skills, spoke with appropriate language and linguistic codes, displayed a positive attitude and pleasant disposition, and had appropriate cultural tastes. Teacher’s pets were given more attention and talked with teachers more on a peer level. In essence, the teacher’s pet possessed what Rendon (2000) referred to as the right cultural capital.

Over time in education institutions, the women came to doubt themselves and their abilities as a result of frequent criticism from teachers and school officials for their speech, dress, skin color, and lack of knowledge. Observing the gender appropriate traits of the economically advantaged White, middle-class behaviors, feminine behaviors and appearances, light skin, obedient submissive behavior, nice clothing, and physical attractiveness, often validated the women’s low perceptions of themselves. The experiences of the working-class women confirm the significance of gender and its relationship to cultural capital within the context of elementary and secondary education.

A problem generally associated with feminist work is that it fails to adequately represent perspectives other than that of middle-class White females. Luttrell’s research represents the perspectives of working-class women of multiple races and ethnicities as well as of women from both urban and rural settings. While this research is very comprehensive, it is limited by its exclusive focus on students attending Adult Basic Education programs. It is also limited by its sample that includes only working-class
women, and although it includes multiple races, specific discussions on the impact of race is not addressed.

Bing and Trotman (1996) comment, “the portrayal of women and people of color in …feminist psychology is laden with problems and inaccuracies” (p. 175). The researchers cite the narrow view of people of color and women held by the dominant culture, a general lack of understanding in terms of the impact of a woman’s culture, class, and race, and the frequent inappropriate assumptions used to study women’s differences by psychologists. Bing and Trotman believe that psychology has generally failed to value people of color, and provide a place to understand, hear, and scrutinize the voices of women and people of color. Both also believe that while much progress has been made in terms of sexism, racism, and classism in psychological research, much work remains.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, cultural capital theory and the post-structural feminist position on oppressive social structures are useful in helping us understand the situation of the women in this study. Cultural and social capital have the potential to influence the actions and decisions women make with regards to educational attainment as well as the level of success they experience. However, cultural and social capital does not exist nor are they produced in a vacuum. Many other factors contribute to the existence and production of cultural capital. Post-structural feminists suggest that when considering cultural capital, it is also essential to include the constructs of patriarchy, capitalism, and racism that create power differentials between women and men and greatly assist in shaping culturally transmitted ideologies.
Changes in women’s roles and social standards over the last several decades have led to a significant increase in the number of adult women who are attending community colleges; however, there continues to be a limited understanding of the daily lives, aspirations, and experiences of these women as they engage in this process. To fully understand these experiences, it is imperative to have experiential knowledge of the role cultural capital, gender, and other social structures have contributed to the formative process of first-generation women community college students of nontraditional age. This research seeks to gain a broader understanding of these issues among this group of women.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Qualitative Research and Ethnography

Listening to voices of first-generation college women of nontraditional age as a means of coming to understand how these students’ think and develop the perspectives they hold is critical. A qualitative methodology explicitly recognizes the voices of participants as being central to gaining profound understanding of the specific research group involved, and allows the researcher to go into the field as both practitioner and researcher with vast potential for positive outcomes in practice. Qualitative methodologies embrace individual experiences and therefore, qualitative method is both appropriate and essential to this body of research.

Many forms of qualitative research exist, which embrace various practices to study people in their natural settings. Ethnography is one form of qualitative research. “Ethnography is both a product—the book which tells a story about a group of people—and a process—the method of inquiry which leads to the production of the book” (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 1). Ethnography is used as an investigative process to study human behavior, and variations of this model exist so that researchers can use an assortment of techniques to collect data. Such flexibility found within this model is derived from the historical origins and influences of educational anthropology, psychology, sociology, and educational evaluation.

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) describe characteristics of ethnography as being strategies that are conducive to cultural reproduction, representative of the participant’s world view, and structured by participant constructs, which are empirical, naturalistic, holistic, and eclectic. It is the re-creation or narrative depiction of a cultural landscape or
group that has been observed, analyzed, and interpreted by the researcher. The primary goal of ethnography is to precisely represent the beliefs, values, practices, behaviors, and experiences of a group of people. The primary goal of the ethnographer is to observe, listen, and record, in nonbiased detail, aspects and characteristics of a single phenomenon occurring within a small group of people or social processes. The ethnographer is responsible for reconstructing a detailed depiction of the cultural phenomenon.

Overarching questions used to guide the study, were as follows:

- How do first-generation, nontraditional-age women describe their first year experiences in a community college degree program?
- What are the multiple challenges these women encounter as they attempt to complete their degree?
- How do these women manage the contextual challenges and complete their first year in the community college degree program?
- What educational interventions are helpful to first-generation, nontraditional-age female community college students?

These questions formed the basis for developing interview protocols and guided my efforts to gain clear, nonbiased data from the participants in this research.

Further, the interview protocol questions were developed and framed to identify the specific impact of cultural capital, gender, and perceived influences within the context of the participants’ experiences from the following categories or life aspects: social aspects, economic aspects, cultural (such as parental values and expectations of college attendance) aspects, gender aspects, and academic aspects. Questions addressed what students encountered, how students dealt with obstacles, and how students perceived and
then managed their situations in each of these categories. Responses were sought as to the participants’ reasons for returning to college, and the issues surrounding this decision and subsequent actions.

**Site Justification and Participant Sampling Procedure**

Durham Technical Community College was chosen as the research site for several reasons. First, this particular community college has no clear racial majority and provided a rich sampling of diversity. Also, over 68 percent of the students attending this community college are female with an average age of 30. The student population is predominately mature females according to demographic facts obtained from the college’s business office and *Fact Book, 2002*, a compilation of factual data specific to the research site (Bowen & Mustillo, 2002). Second, the college, founded in the 1960’s, is located in the southeastern United States and has roots as an industrial education center. In the 1980’s, the college became an inclusive technical community college that adopted a university transfer mission. It is one of the largest community colleges in the state of North Carolina and serves, in some capacity, over 18,000 students annually. The college offers a wide variety of curriculum programs that lead to college transfer, basic skills instruction, continuing education courses, life-long learning courses, and curriculum associate in applied sciences programs. The curriculum, programs, and course variety offered at this college provided a broad cross-section of interests to select a diverse sample. I was a faculty member at this institution at the time this study was conducted. As an insider, access to participants was viable, and a high level of familiarity with faculty existed to build further rapport.

Participants of this study are first-generation nontraditional age women, and each:
• was female, 25 years old or older
• was currently enrolled in community college course work
• had successfully completed a minimum of 15 credit hours of course work
• was first in her family to attend college
• worked more than 20 hours outside the home
• had children or dependents living at home

The criteria took into consideration nontraditional aspects of the participants, community college enrollment, and first-generation prominence. A minimum of 15 credit hours completed reflects the slower pace and part-time status many nontraditional women students must maintain to complete coursework because of added life responsibilities. Prior to initiating the sampling procedure, an Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research, (IRB) Interview Protocol, and Informed Consent Form was filed with the North Carolina State University review board, and approval was gained in advance of contacting potential participants and conducting interviews.

The sample population and selection criteria consisted of the following process. First, a faculty focus group was conducted that engaged faculty members in a discussion on the challenges of first-generation women community college students of nontraditional age who they teach. All full-time faculty members from the social sciences, humanities, and Nursing program were contacted and invited to participate in a single focused discussion. Faculty members were given an abbreviated overview of the research project and sample criteria, and were selected from these areas because they teach course offerings within nursing, the humanities and social sciences. Such courses often raise issues that are relevant to this research and immerse students in reflective
thought about their lives to date. Humanities and social science courses are also electives in a majority of the programs offered at this college and supplied a broad cross-section of participants. Nursing faculty and students were also considered potentially good participants because program cohorts are predominately female with many students of nontraditional age.

**Participant Information**

As students responded, provided contact information, and stated their willingness to participate in the study, I created a list placing potential participants in the order I received them. Approximately 20 students responded in total, and from the list of 20 students, the first ten respondents were contacted for interviews. Three of the first ten participants on the list missed their scheduled interview appointments. One of these interviews was successfully rescheduled, but the other two were unable to reschedule because of limited time in their schedules. From the initial list of 20, the next two subsequent student names on the list were contacted, and a total of ten interviews were successfully conducted.

The first ten qualified student respondents were asked for permission to view transcripts, and to complete an anonymous data record that included detailed demographic information about each individual such as income, gender, age-range, employment, marital status, first-generation college student status, and number of children or dependents present in the home. The data record assisted with verification of criteria in the selection process, and assisted in developing a comprehensive student profile. One limitation of this research is the fact that several qualified potential participants were unable to take part in the research because of time constraints and
responsibilities given their current situations. This fact both limits and illustrates the scope of the research.

Seven of the ten students who participated in this research were enrolled in the Nursing program, and the remaining three were enrolled in the college transfer program. The college transfer program allows students to complete 64 credit hours of general college core requirements, and then proceed to a four-year college where a bachelor’s degree of choice, such as psychology, or education can be pursued.

Participants signed an informed consent statement contained within the IRB in advance of the initial interview, and confidentiality was ensured to all participants. Each participant was encouraged to remove herself from the project if at any time she became uncomfortable with the interview questions. Students were informed that a pseudonym would be assigned to protect individual privacy and that tapes would be stored in a secure location until their destruction at the end of the project.

The household income of the participants varied in range between $15,000 and $40,000 annually, and the ages of the women ranged from 26 to 51 years. Race and marital status of the group included five Black females, of which two were single, two were married, and one was divorced, four White females, of which three were married, and one was divorced, and one married Middle-Eastern female. One half of the participants had at least one or two children and the other half of the participants had three or four children. The following student profiles provide a general overview of the participants who are introduced in chapter four.

- Aubrey is a 32 year-old White female. She is married, has one child, and lives with her husband who works full-time; she works part-time and
attends school full-time in the nursing program. The combined household income is approximately $42,000.

- Destiny is a 51 year-old Black female. She is divorced, and her living arrangement is contingent on her work as she is the full-time caretaker of an elderly person who owns the house in which she lives. She has one child who also lives with her. She attends school full-time within the college transfer program. Her household income is less than $15,000.

- Claire is a 42 year-old native of Pakistan. She is married with three children and lives with her husband who works full-time and three children; two of her children also work on some level. Claire works full-time in a nursing home for elderly and incapacitated people. She attends school full-time in the nursing program. The family has a combined income of approximately $25,000.

- Mya is a 30 year-old Black female. She is single with three children, and she and her three children live with her mother. Her mother works full-time and Mya works full time as an apartment manager. She attends school full-time in the nursing program. The combined family income is approximately $32,000.

- Brooklyn is a 28 year-old Black female. She is married with two children. She works full-time and her husband works part-time so he can devote more time to their children while she is in school. She commutes approximately 80 miles round trip to work each day and attends college
full-time in the nursing program. The family’s combined income is approximately $38,000.

- Kyra is a 33 year-old White female. She is married with four children, she and her husband work full-time. She does in-home care for an elderly couple, and attends college full-time in the college transfer program. The combined household income is approximately $29,000.

- Desiree is a 26 year-old White female with two children. She is divorced, but she lives with her fiancé who works full time and contributes to the household. She works three 12-hour shifts at the hospital as a certified nursing assistant over the weekend staying up all night so she can attend college full-time in the nursing program. The combined annual household income is approximately $40,000.

- Joanna is a 34 year-old White female who is married with two children. She and her husband both work full-time, and she is a full-time student in the nursing program. They have a combined annual income of approximately $38,000.

- Elondra is a 34 year-old Black female who is married with two children. She and her husband work full-time in a group home. She attends college full-time in the college transfer program, and they have a combined annual income of approximately $28,000.

- Mikayla is a 28 year-old Black female who is single with four children; she lives with her sisters and an aunt. She is a full-time student in the
nursing program, and they have a combined annual income of approximately $30,000.

Data Collection

Interviews, Discussions, and Field Observations

The use of formal in-depth interviews with participants, a formal focus group discussion with faculty, and focused observations in the context of the educational setting, or in the setting where the phenomenon occurs have been selected as data collection instruments. Marshall and Rossman (1999) support in-depth interviewing as an appropriate tool of qualitative research, “Qualitative researchers rely quite extensively on in-depth interviewing…an interview is a useful way to get large amount(s) of data quickly” (p. 108). Interviews reflect individual experiences expressed through the voices of those who participate in this study.

The central purpose of the interviews was to collect data that detailed the first year, and in some cases, the second, third, or fourth year experiences of first-generation college women of nontraditional age as they moved forward to reach their intended educational goals at the community college. Initially, I assumed that students completed a two-year associate’s degree within a two-year period; however, none of the women represented in this research completed a degree within a two-year period given their circumstances.

Interviews were either conducted at a convenient location within the college or at the participant’s home for expediency. During the interviews, participants were asked a series of questions with regards to the challenges encountered since they began school. Individual in-depth interviews were one and one half to two hours in length and
incorporated the tenets of qualitative research. Participants shared their perceptions and challenges. They also further explained how they managed each day and provided some recommendations to other students in similar situations. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim and made available to each participant. A second follow-up session took place where participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts for clarification as needed.

During the interviews, questions were sometimes repeated for clarification, and I periodically checked for understanding if I sensed any confusion. In most cases, the language used to present questions was clear to all participants, and the follow-up member check helped to verify the accuracy of the data collected by giving participants the opportunity to make clear all information presented in the initial interview. In addition to the member check, strategies of active listening were employed that significantly enhanced accuracy and precision and ensured a more accurate interpretation of the inquiry. At this stage in the process, I also clarified any misinterpretations. For example, when I was transcribing, Mikayla made the statement, “I have learned new vocabulary terms here at school, and I’m speaking what I learned here.” Initially, I assumed she was speaking of technical nursing terms that she had incorporated into her daily life; however, upon further investigation, she explained she was talking about the use of Standard English versus colloquial speech. Additions to her statement were included from our second discussion to further clarify her intentions. Final transcripts were read, and participants unanimously approved the contents.

Field observations were conducted over a period of several weeks and approximately 42 hours were logged as I observed students engage in an average day at
school. Observations were primarily accomplished in common spaces, such as the public space in the nursing building where many students sat and talked during breaks from classes. I also observed students in the main cafeteria and in several humanities classes. The foremost purpose of these observations was to gain a greater understanding of the day-to-day experiences of the participants within the academic setting.

During my observations, I became acutely aware of the frequent crises nontraditional women experienced with their children as well as the considerable time and emotion they devoted to this life area. I frequently noticed symbiotic relationships between nontraditional students as they joined to address academic tasks, transportation issues, and class notes. Field notes also indicated that conversations between nontraditional women were generally pursued for further edification and rarely involved inconsequential topics.

Data was also gathered by engaging in natural behaviors such as talking and visiting. While doing field observations in areas where the participants frequently spent time, I had several informal discussions with some of the participants. These insightful conversations were recorded in detailed field notes, and data collected during this process was used for further analysis.

In addition to field notes, informal discussions, and interviews, an anonymous data record acquired during the sampling selection was used to determine specific and relevant demographic information about each participant. From this data, anonymous participant profiles were developed to more broadly understand each participant in a holistic context.
Focus Group

In addition to the student participants, instructors participating in the focus group were asked to read an overview of the study and participate in a formal audio taped focus group discussion. Instructors were then asked to describe their perspectives and insights on working with this group of women. They were also asked to identify perceived challenges of first-generation women community college students of nontraditional age experience. From the focus group, interested faculty members were asked to make an announcement at the end of a faculty designated class period, and to avoid intrusion into class time, I introduced a brief overview of the study to the class and provided a sign up sheet for students interested in participating in the study. Faculty participants assisted in identifying student participants by providing time for the project overview and a sign-up sheet. Faculty also contributed to the discourse on this topic during the focus group discussion.

Many of the faculty members who participated in the focus group were also first-generation women college students, and several were of nontraditional age when they pursued degrees. All of the faculty participants were White females ranging in ages from 35 to 58. The first faculty participant teaches various sociology and humanities courses within the University Transfer program and has a master’s degree in sociology. A second also teaches sociology and psychology courses in the University Transfer program and holds a master’s degree in psychology. A third faculty member participant teaches anthropology and humanities courses and has a Ph.D. in anthropology. She was the first in her family to receive a doctorate. A fourth faculty participant teaches foreign language courses and has a Ph.D. in Spanish. She also has an infant son who requires childcare. A
fifth faculty participant teaches within the nursing program and is a senior administrator for the Medical Technologies department. She was a first-generation woman of nontraditional age with children when she returned to school. The sixth faculty participant teaches developmental and regular English courses and has a master’s degree in English. The final and seventh faculty participant teaches child development and psychology courses and has a master’s degree in psychology. She was the first in her family to receive a graduate degree.

Prior to student interviews, these seven faculty members engaged in the initial focus group, which spanned approximately two-hours. Faculty participants signed a consent form and were made aware that responses from the formal discussion would be used for the purpose of identifying potential challenges, social capital, cultural capital, or impediments that the participants may not be able to recognize. Transcripts from the focus group were incorporated into the research as additional data and made available to faculty members.

**Data Analysis**

Interviews were conducted, transcribed, analyzed, interpreted, and coded. Throughout the analytical and coding processes, distinct relationships began to emerge between the data and the theoretical framework such as the cultural and social reproduction of psychological barriers and the bearing of capitalism on the women’s lives. It also became clear that the participants matriculated in spite of some culturally acquired attitudes at least in part because they realized the value of an education and needed to break previous cycles that did not include higher. An audit trail was
maintained through field notes, journaling, transcriptions, and relevant literature to closely monitor and assist in the analysis of such aspects of the research.

Codes were assigned and recorded as they emerged from the data and named according to a related conceptual description. In order to ensure a comprehensive analysis, I enlisted a colleague and experienced ethnographer with a Ph.D. in Social Anthropology to read the transcripts as a secondary analyst and independently assign codes. Subsequently, we engaged in several in-depth discussions of the transcripts and comparison of our independently assigned codes. When the two sets of independent codes were compared, similar concepts were present. This process helped to verify the comprehensiveness of the codes I had previously assigned and further ensured the integrity of the research and the coding process.

As the research was conducted a constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze the transcripts. This method uses inductive categories where data is compared concurrently to identify social phenomena. LeCompte and Preissle (1993) state,

This means that as social phenomena are recorded and classified, they also are compared across categories. Thus the discovery of relationships, or hypothesis generation, begins with the analysis of initial observations, undergoes continuous refinement throughout the data collection and analysis process of category coding (p. 256).

New data were constantly compared with events that happened previously; therefore, allowing new categories to emerge and permitting novel associations or connections to be made to existing data. The interview data was further analyzed within the context of the
research and theoretical framework to generate new theoretical categories and broaden existing theory (Glaser & Straus, 1967).

The purpose of data analysis is to accurately interpret that which has been collected so that the participants’ story can be characterized in vivid detail. The data analysis process was both time-consuming and labor-intensive to ensure the integrity of the analysis process. Such diligence was necessary to make sense of the data and organize it accordingly.

**Triangulation**

To triangulate the research, several strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness. During the initial interview data was constantly checked and re-evaluated for accurate interpretation. Notes were taken during the interviews and used to verify the participant’s intentions. Participants read a duplicate of the final interview transcript, and verified the data. Triangulation occurred once during the interview and a second time several weeks after the interview as the participants verified the transcripts. Access to individual student transcripts was a requirement and validated initial criteria. Review of such documentation was useful to supplement the interviews and triangulate participant criteria.

In addition, as with any reliable research, reliability standards were employed. In this study, LeCompte and Preissle’s 5 criteria of trustworthiness were utilized:

1. *Objectivity* - “Fairness, the balanced representation of the multiple realities in a situation” (p. 324).

2. *Novelty* - “Ontological authenticity, a fresh more sophisticated understanding of something” (p. 324).
3. **Meaningfulness** - “Educative authenticity, a new appreciation of these understandings” (p. 324).

4. **Applicability** “Catalytic authenticity, courses of action are supported by the inquiry” (p. 324).

5. **Availability to the public** “Tactical authenticity, potential benefit of the inquiry to all concerned” (p. 324).

To ensure objectivity, I attempted to address personal biases and identify the nature and source of any of my own preconceptions and in order to take them into consideration throughout the study. At times, I had to clarify the intentions of various participants to avoid making conjectures based on my own experiences in areas related to gender, socioeconomic level, and race. I also had to actively approach what seemed familiar as though it was new and unfamiliar to prevent making incorrect assumptions. Keeping detailed notes from the beginning assisted in determining the focus of the study, and also helped to establish clear trends and common themes as they began to emerge. As the interviews progressed, I focused on data that supported or altered emerging themes, and explicated examples of such findings. This process was vital in writing the final product.

Ontological authenticity, or novelty of this project was ensured as the result of an extensive review of the relevant literature, which revealed an ostensible absence in the described challenges of women who fit the sample criteria. In addition, the unique circumstances and experiences shared by the participants lend a new appreciation to the topic addressed in this research. I aspired to provide a more developed understanding of the first-generation women community college students of nontraditional age.
The meaningfulness of this research resonates through the voices and experiences of the participants who provide fresh insights as to the conditions, stresses, and needs of first-generation women community college students of nontraditional age to Adult Education policy-makers, administrators, advisors, and instructors. This research will also provide a new understanding of the comprehensive academic process to other first-generation women of nontraditional age.

In terms of applicability, this research promotes and informs recommendations for the identified group within the context of adult education and uncovered numerous issues that deeply affect the success of first-generation women community college students of nontraditional age. This inquiry yielded substantive support for such recommendations.

Further availability of the findings to the public will be viable as they are published and shared with Adult Education constituents and policy makers via journal articles and conference presentations. Future potential article topics include such issues as the importance of making the academic process and terminology unambiguous and explicit to first-generation students as well as the significance of support in meeting challenges and improving ways to help students develop significant support systems where none exists.

*Ethical Considerations*

My role as researcher at the research site was that of program director for the Teacher Associate program as well as coordinator for curriculum development, and therefore, to avoid any conflict of interest or possible issues with power between researcher and the participants, I excluded all potential participants who had taken or who planned to take any education courses at this institution. My own biases include working
very closely at the same institution for five years with women students who were very similar to the participants, and because of this close relationship, my compassion and empathy for first-generation women community college students of nontraditional age is considerable. Therefore, I made a point to guard against being overly presumptuous during data interpretation, thus having students read the transcripts and report any misinterpretations.

During the research, I worked in a parallel capacity with faculty members to accomplish college-wide curriculum development objectives, and therefore, it is important to note that I had no power or authority over the faculty members who participated in the focus group.

In all situations during this research, I attempted to be responsive, considerate, compassionate, and display utmost integrity with regards to ethics, the participants, faculty members, confidentiality, the site, and the research process. Throughout the entire process, I have maintained great respect for the rights of the participants, and have been committed to upholding all responsibilities and obligations of this project.
Chapter Four: The Women Who Succeed

Aubrey

*If at first you don’t succeed, try; try until you get that degree!*

Aubrey is a 30-year-old White female married with one child. She has two part-time jobs working as a veterinary technician on weekends and as a mentor and tutor for new and potential nursing students weekdays. She returned to college at 28 after two previous attempts where she found it too difficult to work full time and go to school without significant support. Aubrey explains her situation.

At 18, I went for a couple of years and almost graduated, but it was too hard, and that’s when I said there is no way I will ever do this, but I graduate in May. At first, I’m like I’m not doing this anymore, then I met… my husband, and it was his words of encouragement. …I failed twice before, so I’m just a failure. If it hadn’t have been for him, I wouldn’t have gone back …He said, you *can* do this! And then, I finally said I *can* do this! …I love nursing! I am helping people.

(Aubrey)

Immense support on several levels has led to academic success for Aubrey.

The first hurdle for Aubrey to overcome was the fear of failure. She explains how she overcame the fear that subdued her previous attempts.

I know that, I was scared … I was scared that I was just going to fail! It was like I have done this twice before; what makes it different this time? I kept telling myself that I was older, that I knew a lot more, and I just kept saying that. … I started telling myself you can do… I am just studying like crazy now. (Aubrey)
This attempt was different because Aubrey took a positive proactive approach and received extensive support. She was also provided with consistent positive reinforcement.

Initially, the registration process was difficult and created a sense of isolation with its long lines and few advisors making the process impersonal and confusing. “Registration …the lines will kill you. There are so many people, you know, students, and I don’t think there are enough advisors to see everyone. [The faculty] It’s like bare bones” (Aubrey).

In spite of such frustrations, academic success is attributed to working hard and meeting the instructor’s expectations. Some of the most significant knowledge gained initially was to closely adhere to the unique requirements of each instructor. “Every instructor is different, and you learn what every instructor wants. You just listen; you pay close attention, and whatever they want, you do it the way they want it” (Aubrey). As a new student mentor, Aubrey advises and assists novice nursing students as part of a mentor/mentee program at the college. “I said the worst thing you can do is go to the instructor and say, that’s not the way that I was taught before” (Aubrey).

Enrolling in the program-appropriate courses, including prerequisites requirements was one of many incorrect assumptions Aubrey made about the role of her advisor.

I remember waiting on my advisor to do everything for me. A lot of people have that expectation that the advisor will do everything for them, and I think especially at the community college, advisors have a hundred advisees… My mentees think that their advisors are going to sign them up for the appropriate
classes to help them get all the classes they need to get them on the waiting list.

(Aubrey)

In her role as mentor, she has found that such assumptions are prevalent with first-generation students primarily because they lack information and experience with the process.

Financial difficulties have persisted for Aubrey and her family since she began college. “Money is an issue… I mean our savings account right now is really sad” (Aubrey). Additional expenses place significant restraints on what the family can now afford, and the income generated from Aubrey’s part-time jobs is essential, because this often covers the cost of groceries each month.

Albeit frustrating, Aubrey believes her situation is better than most of the women she mentors who succumb to financial pressures and abandon their goals. From a mentor’s perspective, she shared the following insights.

They, my mentees, women in the nursing program, have to work. They go to college full time… have to work 40 plus hours a week to bring in money to feed their family, and then they can’t get help cause they are bringing in too much money… And then, most of them don’t make it. …Women that come with all this motivation, and yet they can’t win. …They’ve got a husband at home who is working, but they need her salary too! …The husband will do the best he can sometimes, but he’s got the night shift, and she’s got the day shift. It’s like a no win situation. (Aubrey)
Substantial support is necessary to achieve success, and one of the most vital needs is available, affordable quality childcare. Childcare is among the most difficult challenges for this group of women. Aubrey explains.

For one thing, there is all this stuff, tuition, books, supplies, but the biggest, the biggest cost for us right now, and the reason we are in such debt right now is daycare. We were having no problems until we had to put our son in daycare. Mind you, we are putting this [$332] on a credit card every two weeks because we have no other way of paying for it… We have no choice but to put him in daycare if I want to graduate.

Affordable, quality childcare would reduce the growing emotional and financial pressures on Aubrey’s family.

Aubrey believes fatigue is a serious issue for older students with children, which makes it more difficult to comprehend and retain information after studying.

For me, because I’m so tired it takes me longer to incorporate things, or to grasp something now versus when I was younger, a lot longer definitely. Younger students [pause], for one they have more energy [she laughs]… I am just worn out all the time now. They [younger students] don’t have to worry about the responsibilities… the responsibilities of children. Most of them still stay at home, so they don’t have to worry about finances. They can finish in two or three years, where as older people like myself, maybe have to finish in three or four or five years… (Aubrey)
The chronic fatigue Aubrey experiences is a direct result of overwhelming responsibilities that deplete her of physical energy and cognitive stamina. She notes that this level of exhaustion is a contributing factor to the attrition of many of her classmates.

Oral and written communication can also be a major obstacle according to Aubrey. Converting from colloquial speech to Standard English and incorporating new vocabulary can be a significant impediment. From the perspective of a mentor, Aubrey explains her experiences.

I can think of more than a couple of women that struggle because of their language or dialect… Well, I think that it’s more about language… What I am trying to say is with people who don’t’ speak English or who are having a hard time speaking regular English, they have a lot of barriers, a lot of barriers! People are impatient with them… Some of them are White and some different races, but they have a lot of trouble.

As a mentor, Aubrey states it has been difficult for many of her mentees who speak English as a second language or speak with Non-standard English, or colloquial dialect.

Each day presents its unique challenges; beginning at 5:30 a.m., she dresses her son, prepares breakfast, takes a moment to look over her assignments, and leaves around 7:40 a.m. for lab. Her husband works evenings as a restaurant manager, and when possible, helps with their son and does most of the housekeeping. Aubrey attends class until 1:00 p.m., and then works at the college mentoring, tutoring, and advising new nursing students. She returns to class, leaves school for the day around 4:00 p.m., and has 30 minutes to study before picking up her son from daycare.
The evening consists of eating, bathing, and sharing a 30-minute television show with her son. She has multiple roles and tasks to accomplish. Around 9:00 p.m., she prepares her son for bed; the routine requires close supervision. The remainder of the evening she spends studying and preparing for the next day’s class. On weekends, Aubrey works as a technician in a veterinary clinic.

Throughout this process Aubrey has been able to persevere through the tremendous support provided by her husband and parents; however, the added responsibilities carried by her husband are the source of great stress.

This is where most of the stress is coming into my home. The house wouldn’t be clean if it wasn’t for my husband. That’s a lot of stress coming cause he’s like I do everything, and he does! I do have the responsibility of making sure the bills do get out on time. He works 50-60 hours a week. (Aubrey)

Aubrey’s husband contributes immensely to the daily household chores so that Aubrey can study and provide care to their son. She laughs explaining that the woman’s work in her house is now a shared responsibility. Assistance with home, parenting responsibilities and emotional support has been essential to managing challenges and maintaining motivation.

During the first year, it was especially critical to establish a stable routine and employ a viable support system. This support extends beyond the collaboration provided by her husband and includes her mother and father who provide childcare most weekends so she can work and study. Her mother also provides support through daily phone conversations.
From childhood, Aubrey’s father stressed the importance of attending college and embedded a connection between education level and social status. “Now that I look back, I can remember thinking the worst things about people who didn’t go to college. I can remember thinking, God! These people are nothing! I can remember thinking that” (Aubrey). She later stated that this ensconced connection between education and social status stimulated a deeply intrinsic determination to complete college.

A sincere reverence for formal education is prevalent among Aubrey’s family and community. “I definitely get a lot of respect… and I think one of the benefits is that it will help me with my children if they decide to go to college. That will be a major benefit. I will be able to support them as well” (Aubrey).

Aubrey graduated six weeks after our initial interview with her nursing degree. She contributes her success to a strong support system that includes her husband and parents.

Joanna

“She taught the class like we already knew what we were doing.”

Joanna is a 34 year-old White female married with two children who often wonders what life would have been like if she had parents who valued education to the extent of providing financial and moral support.

My mother’s main goal in life was to have a man. She kept me away from my father until I was 16... And, I guess you would say my half brother and sister were brought up right [because] my stepmother [my half brother and sister’s mother] is a teacher, and they had that presence [a teacher’s presence] in the house, you know, that education is important! Now I look at the difference between what my
brother and sister had… Would I have had the same opportunities that my brother
and sister did? Both my brother and sister graduated from college; it was just
expected. I didn’t get anything… One thing that really let me down was when I
found out, I was ten or eleven that there was this account that she kept for me to
go to school…. I was graduating from high school, and I really didn’t know what
I wanted to do, but I had got accepted at the University of Kentucky in the
English program. I thought, that will be great! I love English, and I told her [my
mom] that I had got accepted, and she said well that’s great! How you going to
pay for it? And I said well, I thought you had a college fund for me, and she said,
oh no! When I married Sam, I helped him pay off all his bills with that so you
don’t have any money. And I didn’t have any financial aid set up or anything,
and I didn’t know how to get it, so um, that really limited me, as to what I could
do. It was sad. I felt like I couldn’t join the club, college, because I could not pay
the dues to get in, and it made me feel less than everybody else… (Joanna)

Although she had been a good student, she did not qualify for an academic
scholarship. Financial uncertainty forced her to refrain from college creating perhaps the
greatest disappointment of her life. As an adolescent in rural North Carolina, most of her
immediate family and surrounding community did not value education.

I lived in a rural, rural, area. I don’t think there’s a lot of education out there to be
perfectly honest with you. I’m not going to lie to you... I don’t think they know
what it is? College! There’s nothing there, nothing! It is just not on anyone’s
mind, okay. (Joanna)
This prevailing communal attitude confirmed Joanna’s decision to move forward without pursuing a college degree after leaving high school.

Joanna met and married a man who was active in the armed forces. Frequent moves associated with life in the military again delayed her pursuit of further education until their life became more stable. Then, pregnant with her second child, she became very sick, and the experience changed her life.

I became ill with Krohn’s disease; I was in the hospital for four months; I was pregnant at the time and had a premature daughter… I didn’t think that I was going to make it, and I didn’t want to see my daughter because I was afraid I would get attached to her just like my son…. I just knew she was going to die, but we both came home eventually… I learned a lot of medical things... Just seeing what they did for my daughter and me, and how they helped… my whole family… So I decided I had something I could understand… Being a nurse and being on the other side of the bed and helping a patient and the patient’s family. This experience… made me decide to go to nursing school. (Joanna)

She had been away from education for over 12 years and found many aspects of going to college as a first-generation, nontraditional woman extremely difficult. She also discovered there were few services available to assist such students with challenges.

Scheduling, childcare, being back in a scholastic environment it is so hard, and also, I think feeling inadequate because there were some people who were just out of high school in my classes, so things were still fresh for them. Just that whole outsider feel, and that is what it was! I mean you are an outsider… You know kids …that are about the same age range, and have the same likes, cliques... And then
you have those older folks. We older folks don’t have time to congregate. So we’re kind of left out in the cold… I mean you are an outsider. (Joanna)

According to Joanna, the college environment felt very cold and inhospitable to older students.

At the start, she felt those who should have helped her with learning the application process, registration, and advising were unmoved by her situation.

Going out and getting your high school address so you can get a copy of your high school diploma, cause your diploma that you get from the school isn’t good enough. Just learning where you find everything for the application. You go to a new place and you’ve got to find the registrar’s office, admissions office, figure out testing… figure out what you know…learning your way and finding out, whom you need to see. Did you get a person who cares, ha? Financial aid, filling out all that lovely paperwork, just becoming acclimated to being made to feel like a kid again, like you are incapable of making your own decisions, because that is how they treat you. It’s a pretty humiliating experience, or condescending more than humiliating, cause it’s like, well, you should know this! No, because if I did know, then I wouldn’t be here asking these questions, now would I? As for advising, I probably pestered the crap out of my advisor… No one I know has ever done this before. (Joanna)

The first year, she learned the importance of instructor expectations. “It is very necessary to learn what an instructor wants from you… because knowing what your instructors wants, how they act, and how they respond is a big issue on whether or not you will get through the class” (Joanna). Also important was adapting to instructors who
moved quickly through materials. “She taught the class like we already knew what we were doing. That made it very hard” (Joanna). Developing skills to meet such challenges was critical. She also had to develop her own unique approach of addressing both academic and nonacademic tasks in order to survive.

At first, you don’t juggle. Jugglers can keep the balls in the air, and I can’t juggle, literally or figuratively. I can’t juggle! I had a whole bunch of balls lying around on the floor, and it was pick up and see what this ball is, and where do I put it? And I am still trying to devote the time to my family and have me time, which I don’t have a lot of, still. It’s tough. (Joanna)

Joanna would rather refer to her experience in a way that minimizes guilt for what she calls, “ignoring her family.” She prefers to maximize the positives through inspiring her children to go to college. By framing her experience from the context of a mother making personal sacrifices for her children, she is able to defend and disassociate some of the guilt she experiences.

Her unique perspective on gender roles and expectations within the household embraces a team approach, and it is this approach that makes success possible.

When it comes to our children, I don’t think that there is anything that is really off limits... I have been away so much, I see a trend now; cause if they have a question, they both go to daddy first. That stings a little bit, cause I gave birth to them, but we have to share responsibilities. We are a team. And generally speaking, I think there’s a big difference between women and men in our society, cause women are looked on as being less, regardless of your race, or your culture, and that sucks because this is the United States… (Joanna)
On the positive side, Joanna has developed the ability to think critically about life and societal issues, and knows her children have benefited from her education.

I think I have more of a big picture view of why the world works like it does, and I think sometimes it’s hard for people who never went to school to step outside their local situation and see the bigger picture. Now when I talk about different issues, my reasoning is pretty different from other peoples and that can offend people. College has made me question myself… I think there are only 25 of us left in the program out of 36, so almost one third have dropped out now in eight weeks. It is tough, but it has made me more focused, more determined. I not only expect a lot out of myself now, but I expect more out of my family, especially out of my kids… I have gone from looking at everything on a very spoon-fed, simple way, to analyzing everything in a very distinctive way, and you start looking at everything that way. (Joanna)

This process has not only increased Joanna’s ability to think critically, but it is also influencing the way she communicates with her children, thus affecting the development of her children. They have also learned to think more critically as she now works with them from a different cognitive level of inquiry.

The endeavor of education is challenging. The combination of going to school, working, and having a family is exhausting over time.

Well the first challenge is getting up… I will get ready to get the kids up, that usually takes about ten minutes to get them fully awake, and while I’m doing that my husband’s fixing breakfast. He’ll fix them cereal or something that they like… My husband leaves around 6:30 a.m., and then I’m still, did you do this;
did you do that? Did you brush your teeth; did you comb your hair; did you clean your ears; you know that sort of thing, put on your deodorant? Sometimes the bus comes, and sometimes it doesn’t so, if it doesn’t come, and I have to take the kids to school, which makes me late. I’m speeding about 75 mph to get to school on time. I do my classes, and then I do my tutoring job, and then I go home and try to catch up on things that I haven’t been able to do around the house… Then my son and daughter come home from school and my husband comes home. We’re on my son constantly to do his homework. Hopefully, I have taken something out in the morning to have for dinner… We have dinner and the kids… they like to read a lot, so that gives me some more time to do some studying or homework. Then the kids are usually in bed by 9:00 or 9:30 at the latest. It is with a little fussing, because my son is ADHD and we’re usually in bed by 11:30 or 12:00.

(Joanna)

Joanna’s day moves rapidly with studying at the core of all activities. As she described it, “if I’m not studying, I’m trying to think about studying” (Joanna).

Mothering and childcare are challenging issues, because as Joanna notes, “children get sick,” and childcare is a constant challenge for nontraditional students.

Either single or married mothers, and fathers too, have to answer the question each day of what am I going to do with the kids? And I don’t think anybody addresses that especially well in a college setting. Those individuals who are our elected officials, and are mostly male, they are making the decisions, and for them childcare is not an issue. I guess you call it trickle down education, that there are some that don’t have a problem paying for it all, and if you have a problem, oh
well, to hell with you! That’s the sad new philosophy of our society today, to hell with you, to hell with education. (Joanna)

Attending college classes which includes buying books and supplies as well as maintaining a home and family is very expensive. Joanna and her husband often find the financial responsibilities overwhelming.

We have to pick and choose what bills we are going to pay. We pay the necessities, and then call and tell them the car payment is going to be late.

Supplies related to school such as uniforms, technical equipment that we have to have, and God, the price of books are, I mean, I spend $700 on books each semester. A lot of educational costs if paid for would really help, and then it’s just our basic bills. I got a small Pell grant, but it didn’t even cover all my books. (Joanna)

Joanna’s husband takes on responsibilities beyond traditional gender roles to ensure she has enough time and energy to prepare for classes the next day. She explains.

I’m very lucky because I have a wonderful husband that realizes the stresses that come along with going to nursing school and working part-time tutoring, so he’s really good about keeping up with the laundry…. Because he does so much, it gives me a little time to decompress and go over stuff that maybe I didn’t quite get in class… We share kitchen duties, sometimes, he will do the dishes; sometimes I do the dishes. But, it’s a joint operation, and as far as getting the kids ready for bed, so he reads with my daughter every night. He reads with our son… They do this together, and again, this gives me more time to do whatever I need to do as far as schoolwork. I pay the bills because that’s military training… my
husband cooks more than I do …and he will do that for me cause I have a ton of stuff to do. My son also does chores; they are very supportive because this [school] takes so much away from family time. (Joanna)

Beyond working as a team to address daily challenges, Joanna receives inspiration and motivation from her children, church family and husband. She attributes this moral and emotional support with her success in the nursing program.

My husband knows me very well, and he knows the right trigger words or phrases to make me… just dig that much harder. My church family also, they say, we’re praying for you… My husband, he knows what to say to motivate me… he knows that I am just dead tired; When I just don’t want to do this anymore… he is real good at motivating me! And then, I’ll just get back in there and do whatever I need to do! He’s pretty great really! I would have to say my husband and my children are very supportive. (Joanna)

Joanna’s determination is remarkable. “I am the type of individual that if somebody tells me I can’t do something, I am going to prove you wrong. And if I have an instructor that rides me, I am going to work that much harder to prove you wrong” (Joanna). Unwavering determination that is an intrinsic part of Joanna’s persona helps her to manage the barrage of challenges she faces each day.

Joanna graduated two months following the initial interview and plans to further her education when her children are older.

Destiny

It’s never too late to fulfill your dreams and goals.
Destiny is a 51 year-old single Black female. She was married with two children by the time she was 17, and had a third child in her thirties. She is now divorced, with one son in high school, and has four young grandchildren. She works full-time as a live-in caretaker for an elderly person and makes a modest salary.

She took one course in her thirties then refrained from school until 2003 when she became determined to set an example for her family.

I first went to college in 1987. At that time I was interested in computer science so I took a course to help me get a good paying job. I did this until a couple of years ago, and then I decided it was time. I have always been the pioneer in that I have chosen to be a role model so they can look at me and see. I want them to know how I feel, and I feel like a sponge you know in all my courses; I am just amazed at what I am learning. (Destiny)

She is optimistic and hopes her children and grandchildren will discover the immense benefits and personal growth of an education. “I know that what a parent learns they pass it on to their children, and so if my parents had went to college, they could have told me about a lot of obstacles and more about what to expect, and what to look to achieve, so that’s the difference I can make” (Destiny).

Destiny credits her value of education and desire to be a role model for others to Dr. Martin Luther King. “Well, his speech, *I Have a Dream*, inspired me to become a role model, so that people can see that it’s not who you are, or what color you are, it is really your character” (Destiny). According to Destiny, education is “the key to freedom for most people; it is freedom that comes from having knowledge and being able to think and express thoughts on many different levels.”
As a developing child, she said she was not aware of the importance of an education. Her parents placed primary emphasis on working and making a home for the family.

Education was secondary to work and home life. Their priority was making a living. I don’t think my parents really understood the importance of an education. They could see the benefits of an education, but to them, the home life was more important. Now I know how important it is, and I want it! It’s not something that I am expected to do or pushed to do; it’s something that I want to do! I choose to do this. (Destiny)

In her community, education was associated with wealth, and because Destiny’s family was working-class, it took Destiny years to overcome some of the attitudes she developed in terms of wealth and education.

The importance of an education had some kind of relationship with the status of your wealth, and so if an extended family member had more money then they appreciated education more… If you have money to go to college, you have that luxury of learning. (Destiny)

Destiny had personal aspirations to attend college simply for the love of learning, but as her health declined, obtaining a college degree became necessary to improving her income. For most of her life she worked two jobs, which consisted of hard physical labor, and she cared for her parents until they died. After their death, her health deteriorated.

I got sick because I worked hard physical work, and it just finally took its toll on me. I had physically regressed with my endurance… you know
you have to do something so that you can live, and only have to work one job… for self-preservation. (Destiny)

With her health in jeopardy, she decided to rearrange her life and go to school to become a pharmacy technician. The position would provide a good working environment and eventually offer enough money to live without having to work two jobs.

Her life changed dramatically upon entering school when working full-time became a significant concern. She had to find one job that would provide enough income for her and her son, and give her time to study. Student loans were not available through the college because an unusually large number of students had defaulted on repayment of student loans at the college. As a full time student she needed to work part-time, but without additional financial assistance from subsidized loans to supplement the Pell Grant this was not viable.

A traditional work setting would not allow time for studying, so she sought alternatives to traditional employment. Eventually, she found a position as an in-home caretaker, where both she and her son could live rent-free and receive a small stipend for her services. She said she survives primarily, “by the grace of God and the Pell Grant paying my tuition and books, and my older children are helping me also” (Destiny).

Finding adequate financial resources was critical because to work and go to school was simply too much for her physically.

The only real challenge has been to get financial assistance, because to go to school full-time and to work full-time, I don’t think a lot of people can do either effectively. If you are serious about getting a degree you have to put all your
The financial burdens of having a child in school and having to pay essential living expenses made attending college a challenge. “I would say the homework and the financial situation [are the most difficult]; the responsibilities when you’re 20 versus when you’re older are quite different, running a house, groceries, children and so on” (Destiny).

Destiny also had to overcome her fear of the placement test and a general sense of being lost on campus initially. “Being lost! Yeah! Finding your classroom, distinguishing the buildings and the parking and that kind of thing without any help. It is kind of stressful, very stressful” (Destiny).

When Destiny began college, she was surprised by the amount of work required outside of class and did not understand the importance of her instructors’ rules.

My instructors, they pretty much tell you what is expected, but now when I first came here, this didn’t really sink in. To me tardiness and lateness and all that was secondary to getting a degree, and I thought if you go and if you know the material, that’s all you need! Also, I really didn’t comprehend how in depth and how much studying it would require to make the grade until the second semester. (Destiny)

Once she reached a level of understanding with regards to the level of attention required to academics, she was able to meet the challenges.

She has successfully completed 28 credit hours, and has grown to feel more comfortable with her younger counterparts.
I think with the younger generation sometimes, you know we all have a generation gap, but eventually we all come together; we don’t learn right off to respect those differences, but the longer you stay around a person, the more you get to know them, and the more you come to respect them, and this was the case with me and the younger students. (Destiny)

Academic success has increased her level of self-confidence, and she has also experienced profound personal growth as a result of education.

It has elevated my self-esteem, my confidence. I think it has made me a better person because I am able to relate and communicate with other people and I feel like now I can express …or I am expressing some of the very good things about life they don’t know. Sometimes I run into people, and they are bitter and angry, and I am like wait a minute. I have learned a lot of different ways to look at a situation, and that there is never just one side to anything. There is always a second side, a different side to everything. (Destiny)

Destiny now brings calm to chaos with this new philosophical approach to life. This approach to life that she attributes to education is the source of great fulfillment. She also believes college has been essential to the development of better interpersonal skills.

School has changed the way I relate to people, how I speak to them… and now, my family, they come to me for advice. That’s a big responsibility… If there is a question or something that they are unfamiliar with, I am the source. It’s like my dialect, it draws attention to me, which I use it sometimes to get a person to understand and listen to me. It’s what I give back. (Destiny)
Destiny uses her vernacular dialect to gain trust from her community and encourage others to better their lives through education. College has been the catalyst for tremendous personal growth, self-reflection, and community service.

When she is exhausted, she continues to receive inspiration from her children and grandchildren, who also provide moral and financial support.

I always tell them this [going to school] is an example for my grandchildren, I have four grandchildren, and so I enjoy telling them how wonderful college is, and how I want them to be a rocket scientist or an engineer, you know giving them big dreams so that they know they can achieve that. (Destiny)

Destiny attends three classes on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and takes a fourth class on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

What I have learned to do is to review what we went over in class, which is more to retain. Then, most of the time on Tuesdays and Thursdays I go to the library and I type reading stuff, reading journals, and get help from the learning center if I run into any problems like a formula in math I can’t get. Or, I do a proof reading of my essays, and after that you go home, and cook dinner, clean, give medications, take care of my child, and do my care-taking job. Then, I read some more and start all over again. I get up and make breakfast, serve it, clean up, shop, go to school, and do all that other stuff. (Destiny)

Although stressful, she says without hesitation that an education is worth the struggle.

Planning has been the key success in managing her new schedule. “I’ve learned to plan very well; I think it’s been the key to success” (Destiny). Every aspect of Destiny’s life is organized around college and studying, and she strictly adheres to the plan.
I don’t mind homework much or housework cause I schedule for that. I get up in the morning. I make my bed. I clean my bathroom after I take my shower, do my dishes, and in the evenings when I come home, pretty much do the same thing for the others. Uh, if I have to wash clothes, I wash them one day, and rinse them one day, and hang them out the next [Big sigh]. (Destiny)

Each day is long and very tiring according to Destiny, but time is precious, and she refuses to relent or she will fail to reach her goals.

My experience is probably much more stressful than a younger student who has no responsibilities, who is more or less free and more relaxed to receive or even take or leave the learning responsibility… They may not take it seriously, and they may not, but at my age, I take it very seriously. (Destiny)

Financial issues seem to be one of the most imperative concerns. “Well if there was a fund or something set up that when you went to college… I wish it were set up so you wouldn’t have to worry about this [money]. That would be a very good thing, but I don’t think that will happen” (Destiny).

Destiny plans to go beyond a two-year degree and obtain a bachelors degree.

Destiny openly espouses the virtues of education and places a large amount of faith in education’s ability to make the world a better place.

Claire

“I want to be a perfect mother, not just a good mother, a perfect mother! I cannot do that! I use to break down and I’ve learned that, they [her children] have to prioritize things and not everyday everything can happen…there are some things, which can never be done! ”
Claire is a native of Pakistan who moved to the United States 16 years ago. She is 42 years old, married, has four daughters, and works full-time at a nursing home caring for the elderly and people with severe physical injuries. In 1998, with three of her four children in school, she wanted to work; however, employment was often denied because she lacked a high school diploma from the United States.

Employers were asking me, did you get your high school diploma or GED? I said no! I did my matriculation in my country and I have my certificate and it’s not even worth high school because high school over here is twelve years; in our country, it is ten years. So… they showed me the way, and I went there.

The first day I went there, [the community college] I got it! I just loved school, especially math and science, the only problem I had was English and history, because the history of America is very different from the history of other countries. (Claire)

She completed her GED in five months, and was offered a free college course at the community college. Excelling in math and science, she opted to take a college-level biology course. “It was like General Biology, and it came so easy to me. It was like I know this stuff…” (Claire). She again demonstrated a strong aptitude in science, and her peers encouraged her to enter the science laden Nursing program.

In 2000, Claire applied to the Nursing program. “I had no idea how tough it would be…and I don’t know when I will be graduating, but it’s worth it… I want to help… be a role model, cause if I can help… that’s worth it” (Claire). The emotional elevation she receives from academic success is often tempered by the challenges.
Claire’s perception of educational attainment is twofold. She receives deep personal satisfaction from intellectual engagement.

I think when you start school at my age you really want to do it right because we want to do it for ourselves, not doing it for anybody else, not our parents… not for a career even, but because it’s a very different kind of fulfillment; it’s like you’re getting some place. You don’t need anything like clothes or money or anything… I can’t describe it; it’s very fulfilling. (Claire)

For the first time, she is appreciated for her intellectual contributions. “School is really exciting, stimulating; like, someone is appreciating my mind over here, because at home, you’re just a mom, a cook, a wife” (Claire).

Intellectual stimulation and increased confidence have been a source of motivation through the difficult times. “The studies, course work, give me that thing, okay? I can do this, and I can learn this, and I am doing well, and when you see your grades, it’s just so fulfilling... It keeps you coming back” (Claire). Education has had a serious impact on how Claire feels about herself. She has shifted from being completely dependent on her husband to driving a car, attending classes, analyzing and commenting on world events, and feeling an increased sense of self-worth and confidence.

I can do it… I am more confident and see things in a different light. I have something to look forward to now. Education has just opened so many horizons… You are more patient, more concerned about things in the world and your community. You think deeply, not in a philosophical way, but in a different light. What is the more important thing here, you know money, or time, this or
that, tomorrow, today? Tomorrow will come, but what about today… what you do today will affect your tomorrow. (Claire)

Unfortunately, on the other side of this satisfaction, exist some stark daily realities.

I wanted to be a good mother, wanted to be a perfect mother, not good, but perfect mother! I cannot do that! I use to break down and I’ve learned that, they [her children] have to prioritize things and not everyday everything can happen…there are some things, which can never be done. (Claire)

Claire regularly feels inadequate as a mother and experiences separation anxiety as she spends significant time away from her children.

She also finds parenting in America is unusually stressful in contrast to her native culture. In her country, she felt life was much simpler without the influences of television and a materialistic society on her children.

You don’t’ even know who your neighbors are. You don’t send your kids outside to play… those kinds of stresses. The stress of television… you don’t know what they are watching? The last two months, I was having the hardest time with my 13 year old… showing all those negative attitudes. She had to stay home 1 to 2 hours [after school]. …I had to really… sit down with her; talk to her; let her be involved… just listen to her, listen to what she really wanted to say because if you are so busy you don’t sit with your kids and really listen? It’s quality versus quantity of time… it’s so hard for you to bring that time back… then the regret is so hard, and the guilt, you cannot do anything about it… It is sad. (Claire)
Claire is conflicted, as she yearns to develop her intellect yet she feels that she does so at the expense of her family. To counter this negative she thinks of the many ways her education benefits her family.

I am alert now when they are doing their homework. I can teach them. If I hadn’t been to school, my children wouldn’t look up to me. They would think I’m not important because I would just be a mom, a mom who doesn’t know what’s going on. The respect they give me now! I can help them be able to more understand how tough it is to be in college with a second language. (Claire)

Claire believes that her level of education is critical to the success of her children and derives deep satisfaction from acquiring knowledge.

Money is not the big thing for me now. It is the satisfaction, and the way things are now. My husband has to work; when he came he didn’t have a choice. …He didn’t have the time or that kind of energy to go and study and work. Not everybody can do it. So, I am not going against him, he is the breadwinner of the family. So I am there [with the children], and I have kids who are from high school, middle school, to elementary school age, … it shows me what kind of problems my children are facing at school, and I can help them now. (Claire)

One of the biggest misconceptions Claire had initially was the role of her advisor. She had to extinguish the myths associated with advising, such as believing her advisor would do everything, and learn the facts. For example, assuming there were no prerequisite courses was costly in terms of having to wait an entire year before entering the nursing program.
I didn’t know how to register for a program or what advising is? And when they
give you an advisor, sometimes it doesn’t work. I had a bad experience. I
thought it was the advisor’s job to tell me and to look at my paperwork and I had
to wait another year... I really thought it was the advisor’s job to tell me! I had
finished everything, but nobody told me, and I took all the blame myself, because
I didn’t know… Now if I see somebody from another country trying to get in, I
would let her know. (Claire)

Unknown factors such as advising, registering, prerequisites, and instructor expectations
were frustrating. According to Claire, her peers regularly abandoned school over
inadequate advising, a general sense of feeling lost in a world of unknowns, and
misunderstood instructor expectations.

The teacher… you just have to learn the way she needs you to be. You should,
just learn what she likes; just learn what her needs are, so just learn what she
wants you to do, and just do it! Pass this class and move on. (Claire)

Many of her classmates struggled with this aspect perceiving it as a personal attack when
instructors upheld standards and expectations.

If I had taken it personally, I would have stopped coming. I know it’s hard to
understand my accent sometimes, or understand what I really want to express. I
have to go back and forth to the dictionary or the thesaurus if I want to do this
thing right, but I knew I had to learn right. Fellow students have this attitude and
it is hard for them to understand, or they don’t have that kind of mental
background, so they take it personally, take it as racism, and this will just hinder
you, and it won’t be good for you. I didn’t find any discrimination towards me, but you have to learn right. (Claire)

According to Claire, learning to speak so patients can understand and learning to write in the standard format, using the correct terminology are an essential and clearly defined expectation of instructors.

Raising children, working, going to school, and simply trying to exist within the norms of a new culture are exhausting. “Community, church, you want to be in a community; if you have some relatives, then you have to follow those holidays, and those holidays are too much. You have Christmas; we have Ramadan” (Claire). Time is a critical dynamic permeating every aspect of life as she tries to balance school, religion, and family. “There is not enough time in the day to do everything… School is not like a job that you will go, leave it, and come back. You bring your homework… and your mind is always with your studies” (Claire).

As Claire proceeds, language and formal communication are two of the most challenging obstacles for her to conquer. “The writing thing, I had the hardest time because of the way that essays are written. In our country it’s much different…” (Claire). The language used by instructors is also significant, and has been difficult to manage.

Especially from the cultural and language point of view, I’m telling you. The language thing is a big barrier, … the slang. Like, you might talk casually about something, and I have no clue what you are talking about… They [instructors] will go on and on, and will talk about football or what happened in this year, or about a television program, which I haven’t seen, which I haven’t an idea because I wasn’t there at that year… You feel what is the missing language you cannot
get, and you cannot get it from books... It is a big learning curve. When I was doing freshman English, I had the hardest time, because the teacher was so vague… we didn’t have a clue! What exactly is she pointing out about the North? Why are the North people like this, and the South people like that? (Claire)

In Claire’s case, instructors made instruction more complicated by making references to old television programs for which Claire had no point of reference. Also very difficult for Claire were discussions that made reference to the differences between people living in the Northern and Southern U.S. According to Claire, instructors who moved from another state would discuss the stereotypical behaviors of people from South versus the way things were done in the North. For Claire, such references had little merit, and it was exceedingly difficult and confusing to determine the relevance of such examples within the context of the instruction.

Claire found another student who spoke a second language, and the two developed a close bond working through each day, test by test. Both had difficulty understanding the full meaning of lectures. Claire’s study partner did not meet minimum grade requirements, and was forced to leave the program. Claire was devastated.

She is not here with me anymore, and I think I am just lost. I went to student counseling, and I talked to the counselor. I told him about my problem and he said why can’t you find somebody else? I said I can find somebody, but it wouldn’t be the same. It is a communication thing with women and the language. We talked about our experience, discussing, you’re discussing, just spilling; just saying whatever comes to you mind. (Claire)
Claire wakes before 6:00 a.m. She prepares materials, lunches, and the children, and then drives them to school. She spends two to three days a week in classes, and has arranged her schedule to work 30 hours at the nursing home. She works some weekends, most afternoons, and on weekdays when she does not have school. The demands of her schedule leave her exhausted and emotionally depleted.

Claire manages with considerable support from her husband and family. They have complete faith and listen to her when she is struggling.

That respect and faith in you from your family changes your inner self. That’s what I think, and when you know you have that kind of support system around you, then anything is possible. Like if they said oh, you are not going to make it… you might start thinking that way. But, if you hear encouraging comments… you know you believe it too, and you see that you can do it. (Claire)

Claire and her family struggle financially. They have no credit cards or debt, and managing the monthly bills is a serious challenge.

I don’t know how we manage? I’ll tell you, $1400 a month, that’s what we make. We live in an apartment, $650, and we just live day to day, and we pray. You have to work to get your insurance for the car, you have to get groceries; you have to pay for daycare. I say 10-15 years ago there were not those kinds of stresses… but it’s getting more and more. I don’t encourage people to come to America anymore. Car insurance, house, and all these mandatory things are three or four times the cost of everywhere else, and health care! I can work, my husband work, my daughter can work, my other daughter can do some babysitting, all work, and they bring money and there is nothing, no savings… It’s getting harder… (Claire)
Claire’s family works very hard, but many nights, dinner consists of a potato because the basic cost of living outstrips their income, and expenses typically exceed the money she and her family bring in. Both she and her husband make minimum wage.

Claire feels fortunate that her husband helps manage household duties, but she still feels women bear the heavy burden if they return to school and work. “Mostly it’s the women; women pay. My husband is a really supportive person, but you have to tell him…. clean up afterwards, and the way he cleans, it’s not the same as my cleaning” (Claire). Many things that she would normally do within the home cannot be done due to time constraints while she is in school.

Claire misses being a mother, and fears once she finishes school, she will be the sole provider, which means more work and less time to be a mother.

My husband, he is really proud of me. He has been bragging that I would be finishing this year… and he is ready to give up his job and retire… It’s not easy! I would like to stay home and wait for my kids to come home from school, and fix them warm lunches, and little snacks, and make some special treats for them. I cannot do it! And, I would like to, you know? [Claire is very angry and tears fill her eyes.] I would like to have a picnic. And I would like to talk to them about school, and help them with homework, fix their clothes… I cannot do it! And it’s fulfilling for you too, as a mother, as a wife… if you have a proper meal, a relaxed meal. It’s more fulfilling than just doing it in the microwave, or doing it in ten minutes. You don’t get satisfaction from that. (Claire)
In the end, Claire hopes this great sacrifice will result in a better life for her family, and that her daughters will have the opportunity and the guidance to go to college and avoid many of the consequences she experienced.

Claire believes that if more mothers had the time to be good mothers and teachers, this country would be a much better place to live. “I’m a fighter. I have come this far. I will make it” (Claire). She hopes to make a difference in her children’s lives and the lives of those she touches as a nurse.

*Mya*

*All together now, a college degree is on the line here!*

Mya is a 30-year old single old Black female with three children. She lives with her mother, and they both work full-time. Mya is the manager of an apartment complex, which provides flexibility while she is a full-time student in the Nursing program. Mya’s motivation was to improve the quality of life for her children, and to fulfill a life-long aspiration of becoming a nurse.

Mya was unable to attend college after high school, because she had a baby her senior year in high school. Over ten years passed, when at 27 she returned to college. When her dad had a stroke necessitating constant attention, Mya moved home to help her mother provide care. In return, Mya’s mother provided childcare while she was in school. The two women provide unconditional support to each other.

Returning to school was very exciting, but Mya soon found the traditional work schedule and going to school at night was exhausting. “My biggest problem when I first started back was working a full-time job all day, so I could only take a couple of classes in the evening. I didn’t get any sleep” (Mya). Mya found a job as an apartment manager,
which allowed her to respond to problems via email and telephone when she is not in school.

Registration was also perceived as one of the most difficult aspects of attending college. “I’m just starting to get the hang of the registering…[if you miss early registration] you have to come in and stand in really, really long lines. And financial aid… it’s just hard juggling things… I don’t have enough time in the day to do everything” (Mya). Because Mya is so overwhelmed, she has missed early registration on many occasions. Each time, her life becomes more complicated by having to be away from work to spend hours standing in long lines to register.

Mya values the opportunities education can provide, and recognizes that it has led to personal growth and improved self-esteem. “I feel better about myself, I know that I can do stuff on my own without anybody’s help. When I first started, I was getting married. I had a fiancé; I no longer have one” (Mya). Mya’s break up with her fiancé was very difficult, but she feels the confidence gained through success in college made her a stronger person making it possible for her to leave a bad relationship. “In the past, before I came to school, I might have stayed, but not now. I’m smart, and doing well in school. I feel worthy of a good relationship too, and I don’t have to settle for a bad one anymore” (Mya).

Mya’s grandmother was a nurse’s assistant and provided great inspiration throughout her life.

I watched her be a nurse assistant her whole life, and I really looked up to that.

She was always able to take care of herself. She didn’t have to depend on a lot of
other people for anything. You know, she was an independent Black woman in those days. (Mya)

Mya receives child support, but no financial provisions for college were made available by her parents. “They always said they wanted us to attend, but I never really saw either one of them really go to college or taking any classes, so to me, they weren’t really pressing the issue to go” (Mya). Mya’s parents made very little money, and most likely could not afford to save money for college tuition. They had no idea of the costs or challenges that accompanied attending school, and said she would have to get a scholarship or work. “But you can’t afford it, and if they didn’t go to school, they didn’t really understand that to work full time and to go to school is hard! It is really hard” (Mya).

Through her new career as a nurse, she hopes to save money and be able to assist her children with college. She wants them to go without having to work. “I’m constantly worried about how they [her children] are going to pay their tuition, how are they going to get books. But if they want to go, I want to be able to help them” (Mya).

Consistent encouragement and the presence of a positive role model help her children see the importance of education.

They see me going, and my oldest is like good mommy! Good on your test… I think that’s encouraging them to go to school too. I told them to go right after they finish high school. Don’t wait like I did, and please don’t get pregnant! Please! [She laughs] I mean cause that’s what really slowed me down. I had my first daughter when I was 17, before I graduated from high school, and my second by the time I was 19; that kept me from going to school right away. (Mya)
The majority of Mya’s friends are also nursing students. By closely aligning herself with other nursing students, she feel this provides a distinct advantage, because they share many of the same struggles and challenges, and therefore, her friends know how to be supportive.

As a Black woman, she is a minority in the program; however, she has received no special treatment or had any advantages because of her race.

As far as the nursing program, I do not see a lot of Blacks in the program. It’s like in my clinicals, the majority of them are White, and I’m the only Black. At first I’m like, is it something that black people don’t want to get into, but then when you do go out into the hospital, you do see a lot of Black nurses… and quite a few Black people have graduated from the program in the past… I didn’t get any scholarships that were for race. As far as I know, anybody can get a Pell Grant, so I haven’t seen any real advantages… Even when I was like a student assistant to Work First, they would worry you so bad, I finally said look, ya’ll keep your little money. I mean you just had to do so much! Filling out all these papers… You had to go to different meetings, and if you didn’t do this… then they would take a percentage of your money for not doing all this stuff while you’re trying to work and go to school, and I wasn’t even getting any children care assistance and that’s what I needed more than anything else… Finally I just said it’s not even worth all of this. To get a small check, it started affecting my schoolwork, so forget that. (Mya)

Such minimal temporary assistance was available for all single mothers of all races, and therefore, she received no special treatment because of race.
Time is always a critical factor. “I never have enough time in the day to do everything… I go to bed at night feeling like I didn’t get stuff done; I did a lot, but I just didn’t get the main things done that day” (Mya). She completes a full day of work and school, comes home to care for her children and father, studies, cooks, and cleans, but feels she has accomplished very little. “I feel like I really didn’t accomplish much some days, but I have done a lot” (Mya). The physical and emotional stress is exhausting, and she becomes very forgetful when she has no time for a small break.

Childcare is a major complication for Mya. She must rely on her oldest child to help the younger children each morning. Her mother and oldest daughter care for the two younger children each afternoon.

Last year, in the fall my kids were getting before and after school care assistance, but then the state ran out of money… My older one helps them get ready when I have to go to clinicals early, but then she has to leave by 5:55; so, she is there after school, and Mama’s there usually. There are just all these extra worries with kids and childcare. (Mya)

Both she and her mother are working or going to school, so it is very difficult to have childcare at all times when the children are at home.

Transportation is also a major source of anxiety and expense with public transportation being either unavailable or less than optimal. Mya explains.

I tried to make my car last until I get out of school, because I can’t afford a car payment… I was without a car cause I needed a motor in it… If it wasn’t for one of these girls here [a nursing student], I don’t know how I would have done it… we had the same clinical rotation and she came and picked me up… I would just
catch the regular city bus home. One of the sites is 45 minutes away, and I mean you have to go to clinicals every Thursday and Friday, all day, and I need to go to class on Wednesdays... Luckily, the car place let me pay on it. That’s where most of my scholarship went; it was to get my car out of the shop. Cause I mean it was $1800. I’m just saying to myself, Lord don’t let me dropout of school.

She frequently prays for the car, and remains highly committed to her education through arduous times because the consequence of dropping out is starting over. “If you stop, you got to start all the way over! I want to finish” (Mya). Transportation is a colossal challenge, and within this realm of expenses, the cost of parking at clinical sites is also an added costly expense.

Providing normal motherly care to her children creates obstacles that reach far beyond what traditional students experience. Mya shares the following example.

I spent last week at the hospital cause my daughter has Asthma. I was at the hospital from Monday, and she didn’t get out until last Sunday. So… I would spend the night at the hospital, come here for class, get my assignment, left from the hospital brought my uniform, went to clinicals, went back to the hospital, I mean I went a whole week going, staying at the hospital with her and just running back and forth checking on people [other family members]. I spent the entire week she didn’t get out until Sunday… She has been to PICU, pediatric ICU four times [this year] because of Asthma.

Children have health issues, homework, extracurricular activities, and various other needs. Such complications add immense pressure to complex circumstances.
The nursing program is rigorous and extremely challenging. “We’ve lost 14 people [dropped from the program] since we started in January. After midterms, it was a real gloomy day because all these seats are empty and you know people didn’t pass” (Mya). The clinical aspect of the program is also very laborious. “From like 6:45 a.m. until 12:30 p.m., we actually care for patients; I mean we do everything” (Mya). Stress also comes from the serious nature of the work. “If I have a personal problem, I have to leave it outside the door, cause I can’t be sitting there thinking about it, and give somebody the wrong medicine. I could kill them” (Mya).

Mya wakes at 5:00 a.m., packs lunches, makes breakfast, and signs papers as she leaves for school. She goes to class and then works until 5:00 p.m. She comes home, makes dinner, and returns to school for evening classes. Her evening classes usually end around 10:00 p.m. “Yeah, after class, I go home and if I had any homework, I would do some of it and then get to bed and then start it all over again” (Mya).

Constant support from her mother and her children is critical. “I have three children; I am divorced, and my mom, she does a lot of the cooking before she goes to her job, so that really helps” (Mya). Mya and her mother provide support to each other, which also means that Mya has acquired some additional responsibilities.

A lot of people depend on me for a lot of stuff. Their [her mother and her friends who carpool to work] car died recently, so one evening of picking them up from work has turned into every night, Monday through Thursday. I end up picking them up from work which takes away from time that I could be studying or doing something else. I have no time, but what are you going to do? (Mya)
In order to accomplish essential tasks Mya and her mother have to make sacrifices. Mya dreams of the day she graduates and is free of the many added responsibilities.

The father of Mya’s children provides some monetary support, but the responsibility of raising the children is completely Mya’s. She believes that for most women, overall responsibilities within the home are increasing.

I don’t know; it seems like we [women] get depended on more so for everything, and people don’t stop and think about what we might need. We need encouragement, we need somebody to do something for us sometimes, but we are always expected to do everything for yourself, and then some [society] try to make you feel bad when you don’t have time to do something and try to give you a guilt trip about your kids. …I mean I’m doing this to make life better for my kids. (Mya)

Mya would like to see more value placed on parenting and education, as well as more quality jobs that provide adequate income and benefits.

The Pell Grant provides financial support for Mya during her time at school. She receives approximately $2000 each semester to pay for tuition, books, and supplies. Books cost between $700 and $800 per semester, and she contributes $200 per month to her mother for living expenses. Without the Pell Grant, books, tuition, and the ability to pay a small portion of her living expenses would not be possible.

Going to college when you are older with children requires sacrifice, and as Mya explains, it is very difficult to sustain such sacrifice emotionally, physically, and cognitively for such a long period of time.
I have a child who is in the teen stage and she’s all into clothes and that’s where the majority of my money goes is keeping them in clothes and food… but I mean…I was going to get my hair done every week, now I go once a month if I’m lucky! There’s just stuff you can’t do; yeah, you have to sacrifice a lot (Mya).

Mya aspires to come back to the college where she received her associate’s degree and teach for the nursing program.

Kyra

So many children, so little time!

Kyra is a 33 year-old White female. She is married and the mother of four daughters. Her first child was born when she was 17. Although she had always intended to attend college, circumstances prevented her from attending for many years.

My oldest daughter is from another person, but my husband adopted her because her father died suddenly from a heart attack at 19. Her care and everything came from me, but it was just devastating… and if it wasn’t for my current husband… he is the main reason I wanted to go back to school. (Kyra)

As a child, Kyra’s mom underscored the importance of an education. “My mother stressed that we needed to go to school. She did the best that she could for us being a single parent” (Kyra). However, Kyra also felt like her mother’s relaxed attitudes towards education during high school did little to motivate her to attend college. “When I was in high school, she was a bit laid back. She didn’t push so, if you didn’t push yourself, it just didn’t happen” (Kyra). Her mother lapsed deeply into alcoholism as Kyra reached the critical latter years of high school when she most needed guidance and support, whether
it be financially, emotionally, or experientially. Without any of this, Kyra became pregnant her senior year of high school, and her options quickly diminished.

According to Kyra, the community provided very little support. She grew up in a depressed, inner-city area where education was out of reach for most.

My community was… It was a ghetto. Education wasn’t pushed; it wasn’t enforced. If you went you went, if you didn’t, you didn’t. You were considered lucky if you could go to school. You would have to play basketball for the school if you wanted money to go, so I guess I was young, dumb, and stupid at the time, and I had a kid. (Kyra)

Eventually, Kyra wanted more education and after 16 years returned to school. “I wanted a change of atmosphere; I wanted to be in a learning environment and have mental stimulation and a change of atmosphere from just children” (Kyra). Her long-term goal is to become a teacher, but for now, she must complete the first 60 hours of college core.

From the beginning, she has had an excellent advisor who has spent time explaining the process and making her feel welcome and worthy. She explains.

Registration wasn’t too hard because I have a wonderful advisor! She made sure I knew everything, and if I didn’t know something, she was always there to answer my questions. Credit to her! It’s not that way for most… The advisors here have so many people to advise, its crazy. There is a lot of room for error. I know so many people here who are spending an extra year because of bad advising, but I didn’t have those kinds of issues. (Kyra)
With the help of a good advisor, Kyra avoided many of the consequences first-generation women of nontraditional age experience in terms of taking prerequisite courses and avoiding additional time in college.

The level and amount of work required was a challenge, and initially she struggled through the classes that would bring her skills up to a college level.

The research I had to do to write my papers. I took developmental reading and English, and the amount of writing we did for papers and the amount of research we had to put into it, and then you have other classes too! You don’t realize how much you have to do for each class. (Kyra)

After several semesters, she reduced her overall course load and improved her grades.

Kyra has a vision, clearly understanding the goal and purpose of her education, and sincerely appreciates the opportunity.

I’m a little older than a lot of students… and I see how they don’t like school. Unlike myself… I cherish the moments I’m here because I’m learning more. I’ve become a little bit more responsible… It’s gotten me to move around a lot more and depend less on my oldest daughter’s help in the house. I kind of feel now that I’m more responsible where before I was putting a lot on her… I take care of it all now… She shouldn’t have to care for the children, and I think going to school has made me become more responsible and aware of how important raising your children is. (Kyra)

Education is now a priority in her family. “It’s like a competition now. I say you need to pick up your grades, and it works! Now I’m the one lacking, so we kind of feed off each other… School and grades mean a lot now” (Kyra).
College has changed many of her self-perceptions, and has taught her to look introspectively into core events that shaped her as an individual. Through self-reflection, she has replaced negative thoughts with increased self-confidence.

I am more confident. I have more self-esteem. When I first came back, I was always saying, I can’t do this! I can’t keep up. My mother always said I couldn’t keep up. I think hearing other people, especially people in the school environment say, you’re so smart, and you’re really doing well, and wow, that makes you believe it too. I had a couple of instructors who said you’re so smart, and no one at college had ever told me that I was smart before, and it made all the difference in the world to me… It makes a huge difference! I can see it too now. (Kyra)

With a new sense of purpose, Kyra has begun making contributions within her community by providing guidance and tutoring to neighbors. One neighbor has decided to return to school: “She wants me to home school her so she can get her GED. So, this summer, I am going to take that on…” (Kyra). Kyra understands the importance of helping others, and is willing to assist her neighbor achieve success.

Kyra receives some assistance from her husband with household responsibilities; however, there are extenuating health issues that complicate Kyra’s situation.

It’s always been noted that the woman takes care of the children… household items… the washing of the children, the washing of the clothes, the cooking and the daily cleaning. My husband is not as barbaric; he helps out when he can. If I’m too tired, he’ll pick up and if he’s tired, he’s not feeling good, and he is also sick, I will pick up. I can tell when it’s bothering him, and it took me a while, but with a brain tumor, it’s very difficult to understand what he’s going through. The
brain tumor is inoperable so on top of everything else I juggle; I juggle his health
care and his medications day-to-day… my daughter’s health isn’t perfect either.

(Kyra)

Wide-ranging family health issues complicate this demanding situation, and Kyra realizes
how important an education will be to the future support of her family, especially if she
should become the sole provider.

Kyra’s husband provides nontraditional support with childcare and household
chores when possible, and her mother-in-law also provides support with childcare.

I get up at 6:00 a.m. get the kids up at 6:30. I have three that are school bound and
one that’s at home and Head Start. I have one in the ninth grade, one in the first
grade, and one in pre kindergarten… They get dressed, have breakfast, get their
book bags and have their hair done. They are biracial, so the hair thing is a
challenge for me, and they are all girls. It’s out the door by quarter to 8:00. My
baby is in Head Start… and then it’s time to get her ready, and get myself ready to
come to class… get her washed, get her dressed, and get her situated for the
day… I come home. I cook dinner. I have another class that goes from 4:30 to
7:30, so I have my mother-in-law come over and take care of them on one night
and my cousin has them the other night, and dinner has to be cooked on those
nights so that it doesn’t inconvenience anybody else. My husband works from
4:00 p.m. to 12:00 a.m. And now we are going through night tremors where the
third one is up in the middle of the night. So sometimes my homework doesn’t
get done till maybe the next day, but I can’t do it until they are in bed. There are
days when I am so tired that I fall asleep before the kids and my oldest daughter
has to assume the responsibility to get everybody else to bed. Which makes me feel horrible, but when you’re that exhausted, there’s nothing you can do, and that’s an average day! I’m working on the weekends taking care of an elderly couple from 8:00 to 8:00 Saturdays and Sundays. Shopping gets done on weekdays. (Kyra)

Kyra’s days are exceedingly long, but the extra money she makes working is necessary.

Paying for household necessities is a challenge. “The only bills we have to maintain are house bills and the car payment. We get by, but we might not be able to pay a bill one week, or not eat very well for a week...”(Kyra). The family tries desperately to live within their income and does not accrue debt with the exception of some medical expenses.

“Transportation is a major issue” (Kyra). After having numerous issues with her previous car, she recently purchased a used vehicle.

I needed transportation. I needed a mini van with four children and that’s what I got. It’s used, so probably maintaining two older vehicles will probably be another issue. One may start breaking down, and gas prices are ridiculous! I don’t know? I don’t have any extravagant bills outside my $300 a month car payment. (Kyra)

Although the family has very little from an economic perspective, Kyra’s attitude remains optimistic, and she seems to possess a certain resiliency not allowing such issues to overburden her or block her path to success.

Language has been a challenge for Kyra, since her use of Nonstandard English dialect has created some serious complications with written communication in college.
I think one of my biggest issues when I came back was my time away from school and using street language. It was just kind of adapting to not speaking I guess what you would call proper English, and then when you come back, you are use to speaking that way… and then you write that way. I had to separate the way I spoke in the street or the way I speak around my family… from the way you speak and write at school. Everybody’s cultures are mixed now, and it makes a difference, cause your cultures they make up you! In some cultures you are allowed to speak this way. My kids are bi-racial; they get both worlds, and I’m trying to raise them to speak proper English cause it really affects how you do in school. Several of my friends struggle with trying not to write like they speak.

(Kyra)

Language difficulties with writing were prevalent, and several of Kyra’s peers could not become teachers because they repeatedly failed basic reading and writing tests necessary to entering a formal education program.

Moral support and praise motivates Kyra when she is overwhelmed. “My mother-in-law praises me! Left and right! That’s my daughter in law! She’s so smart, look, look, at her grades! It is just a totally different experience… you know, support versus none, my mother versus my mother-in-law” (Kyra). The high level of moral support helps Kyra maintain a sense of normalcy through serious daily challenges. “It’s like a carrot, that positive motivation” (Kyra).

Kyra believes it is significant for her to demonstrate the importance of an education to her own children. When she feels like giving up, she thinks about the message this would send to her daughters, and finds a way to continue. “It’s a man’s
world, and we’re trying to fit in… And if we raise our daughters with the mentality that they have to go to school, and they have to do it for themselves, it will change…” (Kyra). She places absolute hope and faith in the benefits of education for her children.

The Pell grant pays for her tuition and most of her books. As for childcare, she does not receive any sort of public assistance. The family has established a support system with several layers should one level be unable to respond. Within the system, her husband works nights, so he can care for the children most days. She works weekends and attends schools on the nights when her mother-in-law can care for the children. “I do have family members that step up” (Kyra). They have a combined income of less than $40,000 annually and with four children often struggle. “I’m not a single parent, so I don’t qualify for childcare… without my family, I wouldn’t be able to go to school” (Kyra).

Kyra plans to transfer to a four-year college to obtain a bachelor’s and a master’s degree in education.

*Mikayla*

Together we can do anything.

Mikayla is a 28 year-old single Black female with four children. She had fewer words than many of the other participants, yet her perceptions resonated similarities. Her responses were succinct, direct, and demonstrated her efficient approach to life. She lives with her sister and aunt while she is enrolled full-time as a Nursing student at the local community college. Her family quickly became involved providing support on many levels. Sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, and her mother have all contributed in some way to assist Mikayla in her pursuit of an education.
In addition, she believes none of her accomplishments academically would be possible without the love and inspiration she receives from her four children.

The most influential people in my life would have to be my four children. … And there are times when I don’t want to go to school; they motivate me. …I go home and look at my children. They are so young, and I say, okay, they are young now, but they are going to get older so, …I have to make a difference now… I want them thinking about going to college from the time they are very young… my mother and father, they were just like, as long as you finish high school or whatever, a GED maybe, and that was it! I wanted more. …Today, I just barely can get a job with a high school diploma, so you have to have some kind of college diploma behind you now. (Mikayla)

Mikayla’s family had no experience with higher education, and so she entered the endeavor, as she describes it, “blindly.”

Well it’s hard because when I first came back, I didn’t know how to register… You have a lot of people in one room all trying to see a few people. You don’t want to take too much time, but you have questions you need answered, but there just isn’t time. The place where you get advised, you come all the way down there with your kids, and then they say you need an appointment. Can’t somebody talk to you? When I finally got in my classes… I tried to sit down and really learn what each instructor needed from me… I also tried to find out what I needed for my program, and that was hard. …It’s very hard finding someone who can help you get the classes you need cause there are all these prerequisites, there’s a catch to it, and you better figure it out quickly. Advising is a mess cause there’s just too
many people needing help, and it doesn’t seem like there’s enough advisors.

Getting help is very hard... I think a lot of people give up right there. (Mikayla)

Mikayla’s mother, father, and community, “they just believed in going to high
school” (Mikayla). College was the ultimate dream, but not a realistic goal in the lower
socioeconomic community where she grew up. “I think by me going to college, it will
affect my children in a positive way, because right now they see me going to college, and
they tell me that they want to be just like me… going to school” (Mikayla).

College has been a very constructive experience. Family and friends praise her
decision, and understand the concentration, effort, and strength it takes to work full-time,
have children, and go to school. They provide consistent support, and show an increased
level of respect. The experience is also responsible for personal growth on several levels.
Mikayla explains.

College has changed me somewhat, because I am different now. I have learned
new vocabulary terms at school, and I’m speaking what I learned. My family is
like what are you talking about? They use a lot of slang and don’t always
understand what I am saying now. I talk using good English now instead of the
way I use to talk. And it’s just like putting them through a maze cause they don’t
know what I’m talking about, and I try to explain that it’s just normal English.
(Mikayla)

Mikayla quickly realized that her use of language was going to have to change if
she was going to be successful in school and in her new career, but the challenge of
internalizing an almost foreign language was extraordinarily difficult.
When I first came back to school, I had to learn English, and I mean I knew English, but I didn’t know the kind of English I was supposed to know, and I don’t really think there has been anything positive or negative in terms of my race, but I will say that the language I spoke before coming to college was a lot different, and it made it real hard to write papers, and read textbooks. I had to sit down with the dictionary and every five seconds I was looking up words. That is hard, especially when every reading assignment is pages and pages. It really slows you down, but I learned if I speak better, then it just makes it easier. I mean I didn’t know that the English you learn in school was the English you were suppose to use until I was in like the eleventh grade. (Mikayla)

Overwhelming daily responsibilities day exhaust Mikayla and make it difficult for her to focus and study. She shares her experiences.

I get up. I have to get the children ready for school. I have to cook breakfast and get myself ready for work. I go to work all day, and go straight from work to school. I am at school for several hours and, when I finish I have to go pick up the children. We go home. I cook, and after dinner, I help them with their homework as well as do my own homework. I have to get them ready for bed, taking baths, reading, brushing teeth, all that stuff. They typically eat dinner after they finish their baths, and then we read and brush the teeth. (Mikayla)

Quality, reliable, and affordable childcare is also difficult to arrange. Family support is available, but coordinating schedules to accommodate childcare presents problems. “I do not receive any assistance with childcare. Childcare would be very helpful; I have a lot of support, but if I had a consistent place for them where they could
learn too, that would be better” (Mikayla). Reliable childcare would reduce the stress of this enormous burden, and the children would benefit from being in a learning environment.

Mikayla feels fortunate to have a strong reliable support system, which extends well beyond most traditional family support systems.

My sisters help me with my children. They help them with their homework when I cannot… they will take them for me for a while until I get done studying, or reading. They help me clean up, and cook. My aunt does that too! She cooks and feeds the children… but as far as bringing home the money for bills, I go do it myself. I have four children, and I am single, so without help, there is no way. (Mikayla)

Mikayla has been very successful and enters her third year of college, next fall. She plans to pursue a bachelor’s degree when she completes her nursing degree, and should complete her associate’s degree within the next year.

Brooklyn

A little sleep can make all the difference in the world!

Brooklyn is a 28-year-old Black female who is married with two young sons. She works 34 hours per week and commutes over 40 miles each way to work five days a week. She has worked assisting people with developmental disabilities for seven years, but believes that given the current political climate, “there may not always be a demand for what I am doing now, so I need something that I know there will be a life-long demand for so I can take care of my family” (Brooklyn).
Ten years elapsed after high school when it became clear that she needed to increase her income; however, “I decided that I wanted to do something where I felt like I was helping people more, and so I talked to my husband about coming back to school” (Brooklyn). Nursing was the perfect fit. Salaries in the field are stable and higher than in many other human service oriented fields such as education, social work, or psychology.

The field of nursing is stimulating, and she believes that being older is an asset. “You are more mature, and you know this is not a game. This is serious. This is my life” (Brooklyn). However, the program and the challenges are very difficult, as a working mother. She shares her insights.

I do love it, but it’s hard; it is very hard. You know when I decided I was going to go back to school, I had to work and I am currently working 34 hours a week and I don’t know how I am doing it, by the grace of God? But, I have to work in order to take care of my house. It’s just hard to get people to understand, that it is hard. Nursing is a killer. (Brooklyn)

Day-to-day tasks are exhausting; yet she seldom considers relinquishing the pursuit.

Brooklyn’s parents were optimistic that she would attend college, and assumed she would do so by receiving a basketball scholarship. Education commanded great respect in her community where very few finished high school.

Well my community I grew up in, I don’t want to say poor neighborhood, but it was relatively. It was a very low-income neighborhood. Going to college was looked at as being this wonderful great thing because very few people came out that community and went to college, cause most of them didn’t make it through high school. So, it was looked at as being very, very, very smart, and you were
just on a pedestal because you decided to do something with your life rather than some of the other the alternatives, you know. (Brooklyn)

Her parents did not establish a college fund or any sort of financial provisions for college, and she was often told that she would have to get a scholarship for college.

My mom and dad were very adamant towards education… I played basketball, and I was really good in basketball. My dad just knew I was going to college and play basketball… I think they just kind of expected I was going to go to college because they thought that I was going on this athletic scholarship, and… I use to say… I am going to be the first woman in the NBA… and for obvious reasons things didn’t work that well for me… Support was there vocally, but not monetarily. (Brooklyn)

One of the most difficult aspects initially was learning how to study again. “I think retraining myself how to study and how to learn and how to remember how to apply and just becoming a student all over again” (Brooklyn). The adjustment took time, but eventually, she learned how to study effectively.

An enormous level of stress and tension resulted from modifying family life to accommodate school, and this stress has created difficulties in Brooklyn’s marriage.

The hardest thing with me was my marriage because we went through some trials and tribulations just because it’s hard on both people. You have this person that’s been doing all of this for all this time and then you [her husband] are taking on this different role that you are not use to doing so you don’t know how to do it as well as the other person who has been doing it for all these years. You [her husband] get kind of defensive when you’re asked questions like why did you
decide to this, and it was just really hard on my marriage at first. It was a total
adjustment period. My husband went part-time so that I could go to school part-
time and continue to work. The whole reason I decided to do this is to be closer
to my kids… Anyway, this was a big toll on my relationship and just having to
deal with school and still having to be a wife and a mother, and just learning to be
a student all over again, was really tough the first semester. (Brooklyn)

Learning the various processes such as registration, advising, and instructor
expectations was confusing during the first several semesters. Brooklyn shares her
experiences.

Registration was very challenging at first. You stand in this line over here and
then you’ve got to go all the way across the street and you’ve got to come all the
back over here; I mean it was just crazy. I mean I had to have an advisor sign this
paper, and maybe the advisor you needed wasn’t there, but they’ve got to approve
it for you to take these classes; you have to get permission. (Brooklyn)

Learning the different styles and expectations of instructors and advisors was also very
difficult. “It was so difficult learning the different instructors… This is still a challenge
right now, but you have to learn the different instructor styles and what they expect from
you, and then give them what they want and go on” (Brooklyn). This adaptation is
critical to academic success, and many of her peers have left the program because they
could not adapt to the various personalities, styles, and expectations of instructors.

The experience has been very positive, and she receives respect and admiration
from her immediate and extended families.
I hear my family say, if you’re in nursing school you know everything about anything medical, and I am like I’m a student; I’m not a nurse! But besides that, I have heard different ones in my family say things like you know you’ve changed? And, you know things are different, and it’s because of the way I think. Now, if you tell me that X, Y, and Z is going on, I’m going to look at the whole picture. And yeah, there might be a bad situation in there, but I’m going to look at the overall because I’ve got a different outlook on everything. I am the first one in my immediate family to ever go to college, and actually to ever graduate from high school on time. (Brooklyn)

College has helped her to be more open to understanding and accepting various situations and differences. She looks at all sides of an issue and approaches life differently, and attributes this personal development to her learning experiences in college.

I am very optimistic and try to surround myself with those kinds of people because if you don’t you will end up falling into this little hole. I am very comfortable with the person I have become, and I think I get along well with everybody… because you have to accept people for who they are, and accept people’s differences. I am really proud of myself when I look at my situation. I started to believe my family when I was 17 and pregnant… I think I started believing that I was stupid. I had to start thinking this is blessing, not a curse, and I want my child to see that when you have determination that you can make it anywhere in life. I have a second child now, and even though it’s hard, and there are days when I think, I can’t do this, I say just read two more pages, and I read another chapter… I wanted to give up several times, but I have not. (Brooklyn)
Brooklyn pushes herself beyond the normal limits each day to achieve her dreams, and motivation to maintain high levels of exertion comes largely from her husband, children, and the people with whom she works.

They are so encouraging… You hang in there! I know it’s rough, but you can do it! It’s a different kind of support, and it really helps me. They also tell me, I am so impressed with you… I’m really inspired by what you are doing because I don’t know how you do it? You are working all these hours, you’re here late at night, you get up early in the morning, you’ve got kids, you’re studying, your managing a whole unit here, and you’re on top of it, and your work, it looks good. It’ not like your work is lacking here… That’s the type of moral support I need.

(Brooklyn)

Brooklyn’s husband is also a significant source of inspiration and encouragement. He consistently provides immense support.

I called him after the second exam, and I was so torn up because I spent 27 hours studying for that exam, and I was like oh my god this was the hardest exam. I know I didn’t make it! He just has this unconditional support, and he was kind of right. I got a B. It was okay. (Brooklyn)

She sustains a very positive perspective by surrounding herself with people who provide constant encouragement. On days when she is ready to give in to exhaustion, the people in her life inspire her to continue.

Brooklyn draws strength from her upbringing in rural North Carolina, and believes she grew up during a time when greater opportunities were available to Black people. She shares some of her experiences.
I grew up as a very independent Black woman from watching my mom, and there were no expectations about when you finish school you need to get married, have kids, and stay home. When we were growing up, times were in the midst of change. There wasn’t a whole lot of negative. I mean cause my teachers were so supportive, both White and Black! There were no cultural or race barriers, as far as that goes; times were a changing and things were different. They expected more out of women then, because we were allowed to do more, and you just kind of do what you got to do. (Brooklyn)

During childhood, Brooklyn was infused with the belief that women can do it all. “Remember some of the old television commercials? That say women can cook, clean, be a great wife, have job, and take care of kids, all without breaking a sweat and looking sexy too, cause I’m a woman…. I used to believe this stuff” (Brooklyn). After beginning school she started rethinking the dubious, women can do the impossible, mantra. She now takes a more realistic approach as to what she can realistically accomplish and understands that there are limitations to what one individual can carry out.

Without familial college experience, there were many challenges, such as not understanding registration and making incorrect assumptions about academic advisors. Brooklyn shares some of her frustrations.

My mom or dad didn’t have a clue about college. If they had gone to school, I just think telling you about the general aspects, what to expect. My experience would have been a lot different, maybe easier? …Knowing you’ve got to study,
and you’ve got to be disciplined; it is not impossible, but it is very hard.

(Brooklyn)

Course work is rigorous and demands hours of preparation. Brooklyn experiences guilt as she strives to be a good wife and mother, and finds working full-time creates the greatest challenges while going to school. Work is not optional for Brooklyn and her family. She works out of necessity to provide the basic essentials such as food, clothing, housing, and transportation.

I live from check to check, and I save when I can because I know that another semester is coming up… I can make ends meet where I can, but it’s a struggle right now just to make sure all the bills are paid… I mean if I didn’t have to make a car note; if I didn’t have to pay daycare; if I didn’t have to spend $200 a week on food… and, there’s just four of us… but I mean if I could remove the basic financial expenses… (Brooklyn)

With the exception of the money Brooklyn borrowed to buy her car, the family has no debt; however, necessities and the cost of tuition, books, and supplies make their financial situation difficult.

Each day is long, and Brooklyn must attend class, drive to her clinicals at the hospital, and then commute to work.

I get up at about 5:00 a.m., shower; get dressed… I have to be there by 6:00 a.m. So, drive to the hospital, park two and half miles away, catch the bus to the hospital, go upstairs and get my assignment, work, leave clinicals at 12:30 p.m., drive from the hospital to the center where I work. I begin work at 1:30 p.m., and stay there until 7:30 p.m. …It is just very demanding. I get off at 7:30, but
sometimes I am there until 8:30.... I drive …40 miles or 45 minutes, and then I iron clothes for school the next day. I have to check homework, and sometimes I have to wash dishes… I give a bath to my three-year-old cause I have to spend some time with him at this point. I talk to my husband for ten minutes, and I study until about 12:00 a.m. I go to bed and I start over. Friday nights, I nix the washing dishes, ironing clothes, homework sort of things, and I do laundry all night. I work everyday at the center except Tuesdays and Sundays. (Brooklyn)

Exhaustion is present in her voice, and she often wonders how she is physically able to go through another day.

As for managing the household, her husband has assumed many of the responsibilities that were once hers. She shares the new division of responsibilities in her home since beginning school.

Well my husband is wonderful. On clinical days, he drops my three year-old off at daycare. He gets off work early to have him picked up by 5:30 because obviously, I am working. He cooks now. I mean he’s doing everything I use to do.... He will iron. He will get everything ready for the next day. He will check homework, …he just, he’s really just taken over for the most part. He is so wonderful, you know support-wise. (Brooklyn)

A nontraditional approach of sharing traditional woman responsibilities has been employed, and now most responsibilities have been temporarily shifted to her husband.

I use to feel like everything differentiated into gender roles… but now he’s seeing everything I was doing and he’s like man she did all this? And you know she
worked full-time, and… she managed the household…. I mean I feel so guilty because he’s changed his life so that I could go to school. (Brooklyn)

Without this level of support, school would not be possible for Brooklyn.

She has seriously considered quitting on several occasions, but fellow employees stand on the sideline cheering her to success. “Yeah, they keep you going. I mean when you feel like giving up…” (Brooklyn). Many of the men and women she works with have never attended college, and say they vicariously do so through Brooklyn. The support they provide in addition to that of her husband and children helps Brooklyn manage the day-to-day doubts, fears, stresses, and overwhelming challenges she faces.

Brooklyn considers going on, but at the conclusion of this interview, she laughed saying: “If you ask me today, I would say no, but that’s only because I’m tired” (Brooklyn).

Desiree

From high school dropout to college graduate and nurse, sleepless in N.C.!

Desiree is a divorced White female with two children. She quit high school at 16, married, and at 21 she divorced her husband and began raising two small children on a meager income. Her ex-husband does not contribute financially. With the future looking bleak, she turned to the community college to obtain a GED. “After I divorced at 21 having two very small children making nine bucks an hour; I knew that wouldn’t pan out for long. I was going to have kids to raise for the next 20 years…” (Desiree).

“I needed to prove that I wasn’t a total screw-up… I never graduated high school, so just to prove it to myself” (Desiree). As a teen, Desiree’s home life was troubled. “I had a bad home life, so I think I picked out the sorriest person in town, married him, and
had two kids by him” (Desiree). She left the abusive marriage, and decided it was time for a change.

I realized when I had my children, that no matter how good of parent I was, it was hell that I was raising them in… he didn’t even want me to get my GED cause he was afraid that I was going to meet somebody else. (Desiree)

Desiree wanted to improve the quality of life for her family. She also realized the generational benefits of education. “As a role model for my children you know? If I could do it with two kids and a full time job then you guys can do it. No excuses! And that had a lot to do with returning” (Desiree). Her children provide the greatest inspiration.

I have to say my children have provided the most influence and inspiration... I just think things were influenced most by what I wanted out of life for them, and what I could get them. And so I sat down and asked, is it worth killing yourself to get what you want? And when it comes to my children, it’s worth it! These thoughts gave me the drive behind my education, and if my fiancé leaves me tomorrow, I have my education. (Desiree)

Desiree was a good student, but viewed college as something that only the wealthy enjoyed. Her parents had always affirmed education, but without financial support, Desiree had no hope of actually attending college.

I never even really thought about going to college; I quit high school. I mean I quit when I was 16. As soon as I was old enough to quit, I quit. Even though I was good, and I made good grades. My mom couldn’t afford to buy me clothes! Much less, send me to college… People who go to college usually come from
money, and that definitely influenced my outlook on college, because we had nothing. (Desiree)

While her mother hoped she would earn a scholarship, Desiree knew that college was for “the rich kids” (Desiree).

After receiving her GED, she applied to the nursing program, and has been in the two-year nursing program for over four years now. She should graduate at the end of this term. Her journey began with having to spend more than a year taking courses that would bring her skills in math, reading, and writing up to college level. She received no college credit for these courses.

“Trying to find out what you need when you get here as far as registration and supplies, books; I was like, help” (Desiree). She felt asking such questions would make her appear inferior, and therefore, rather than asking pertinent questions, she usually remained silent.

I’ve changed, I’m not the same person I was when I started here, but back then, I went through the dark. I did my own thing because nobody really helped. I was ashamed to ask. Some people had advice and sometimes I took it, and sometimes I didn’t. If I would have asked, maybe I would have got help, but it wasn’t offered, and I was too proud to ask. I thought my advisor was going tell me everything, and they don’t… and it took me like two good years to really get the hang of everything. (Desiree)

The process would have been much less complicated, if she had an advisor who had the time to share critical information from the moment she walked onto campus.
According to Desiree, the advising and registration process at the community college she attends has too few people to lend significant assistance to the many students who are first-generation and in need of more help than the average college students. From Desiree’s perspective, inadequate advising leaves students vulnerable to making poor scheduling decisions.

I know so many people who left school because they didn’t have the right information from an advisor, and they were going to have to wait another year to get into the program. It would be nice to have someone there to talk to. Oh yeah, instead of being in a room with a massive amount of people and you’re feeling rushed because people are waiting, and you feel pressure, and these guys doing general registration, it’s like you got it? Do you know what you need to do? The worst idea is that big pool advising. You feel rushed; people have to wait. They’ve been waiting in line for hours and you don’t want to be the one holding up the line. There are too many people who need a lot of help because they have never done this before, and there just aren’t enough advisors who can spend time with you. (Desiree)

Without more full-time advisors, Desiree believes that many older first-generation students will also be reluctant to get the help they need to be successful.

College has been the catalyst for great change in Desiree’s life stimulating personal and professional growth. She explains.

It has changed me by making me realize that I am strong, and it took me a long time to realize that I was special, that I could do kids, job, and school. For the longest time, I thought well, if I can do it, everybody can do it, but I’ve learned
that everybody can’t do it! I have seen a lot of my classmates fail out. I am making A’s, and it’s just a question of drive… I’ve also grown up a lot and realized that I cannot change the way people think about me, and I can’t make my parents love me anymore regardless of what I do. (Desiree)

Desiree has overcome much self-doubt, and understands the significance of the wisdom she has gained through maturity, education, and personal experiences. With an education and career, she will always be able to provide a financially stable environment and hopes her own children will find inspiration in their mother’s strength.

As a mother, the guilt associated with absence was extremely difficult for Desiree. “Leaving my children was the most difficult part of going back to school. I mean they were so small. It was in 1999, my youngest was one and my other daughter was not even three yet…” (Desiree).

During the first semester, Desiree found many of the details associated with attending college extremely challenging. Registration, instructor expectations, and learning to juggle all the responsibilities were among the most difficult.

I learned the very first semester to never come to general registration. I stood in line for four hours. If I could have, I would have left then. But you know you learn as you go… As for as individual instructors, I learned to sit down with the syllabus and I would kind of get a feel for what they expected out of me, and I worked very hard to fulfill those expectations. That is real important… There were many days when I would just sob, cause I needed sleep, or I needed an hour to myself. It was all so hard at first, and I didn’t get it. (Desiree)
Desiree describes herself as being stubborn, and attributes this aspect of her personality with her persistence in college.

Daily responsibilities and challenges are derived from the complex combination of mothering, studying, working, and maintaining a home.

I’m up rise and shine at 7:00 o’clock in the morning. Breakfast, get the kids ready, get myself ready... Get the kids to school, and come straight to school… five to six hours. Then, I get home an hour before my kids… straighten out the mess that we caused that morning… They have homework every night that we do. Then there are bedtime rituals the dinner, the bath, the reading, and then I typically try to do at least an hour of homework… On a Friday or a Monday, I get up at 5:00 a.m. in the morning, get my kids ready and take them to daycare. On Thursdays and Fridays… I work at the hospital at 6:30 a.m. I work until 3:00 standing on my feet constantly. Go home; get my kids… I get back up at 6:00 p.m. and go work another 12 hours at the hospital. I basically work 20 out of 24 hours in one day, and I’m doing that three times a week. (Desiree)

Desiree is the youngest participant in the group at 26, and often questions how long she could maintain this type of schedule before succumbing to physical exhaustion.

Basic essentials such as food, clothing, electricity, mortgage, car payment, and insurance are a challenge to address each month.

Just mortgage, car payment, insurance, food, but I mean that’s everybody!

Anybody would have to pay that! I think a lot more people would graduate and finish college if they had more resources to help them work less and survive...

(Desiree)
Desiree believes that her journey in education could have been simplified if her parents had attended college. “Well they would have said follow my footsteps, look at my example, and of course, people who go to college generally have a higher income” (Desiree). She further shares her perceptions on this topic.

I wish I could have gone to a four-year college, and had my parents pay for everything and work a little part-time job, and have a social life, and party, and do all those things that college kids do that I didn’t get to do even as a teenager, much less as an adult. So, now I can’t do it because I have children. (Desiree)

Desiree receives respect and admiration from her family for her success in college. “Everybody gushes over me! It’s almost embarrassing! My mom, I made a 99 average last fall, and she went to work and told everybody, and my uncle came up to me on New Year’s and he was congratulating me on my average, and I was like thanks” (Desiree). One of the most challenging aspects of being the first in her family to attend college was proving herself to everyone. “Proving myself to everybody! I mean nobody thought I’d make it because I had such obstacles to conquer” (Desiree).

Success is possible because of the love she has for her children. “They influence me, by praising me… and they bring home their little homework in there and they sit down beside me. We will study together, especially the youngest one who’s trying to write” (Desiree). Desiree’s children help her to focus on her priorities when she is overwhelmed, and many times she says they are reason she can manage all of the challenges she faces each day.

Her fiancé also provides support on many levels. He cooks, cleans, baby sits and bathes the children when needed. Without such support, none of this would be possible.
My kids are 18 months apart… Part of me feels like I’ve missed out on a lot doing all this, but I’ve also had a very strong support group. My fiancé and I got together when my youngest daughter was seven months old. So basically, he’s raised both my kids with me. If it had not been for him keeping the kids all weekend every weekend for me to work… I have a very strong support system.

(Desiree)

The support provided by Desiree’s partner allows her sufficient time to study and attend school. He provides childcare and support that goes well beyond traditional gender roles.

Desiree also has specific gender expectations in terms of male responsibilities within the household. “Cutting the darn grass! I am not doing it, and I’m not picking up trash that the dog tore out cause he didn’t put it in the trash can right. And I’m not changing my oil or fixing my own brakes” (Desiree). According to Desiree, repairing things that break and household tasks such as mowing the grass are a man’s responsibility.

Financial aid has allowed her to pay for books and tuition, and without these additional resources, college would not be possible. Desiree’s parents are divorced and have very little financially; they also refuse to provide childcare or emotional support.

I have received financial aid all the way, and had it not been for that, I would not be here. Neither one of my parents have ever helped me through school. They’ve paid for nothing, and won’t offer any support! My dad laughed in my face, and told me I’d never finish when I told him I was going back. (Desiree)

She later shared that her father’s harshness was perhaps a form of tough love, but his words were very painful whatever the intended purpose. Desiree graduated six weeks
after this interview and would like to do graduate work in the future. “I would love to get my masters, and be a pediatric nurse practitioner” (Desiree).

Elondra

*Anything is possible with a college degree.*

Elondra is a 34 year-old Black female who is married with two children. She and her husband work full-time in a group home assisting mentally and physically challenged adults and adolescents. She is currently enrolled full-time in the university transfer program attaining general college core credits so she can transfer to a four-year institution to receive a degree in psychology. Her goal is to become a psychologist.

Elondra attempted college immediately after high school, but was unsuccessful on her first attempt. Without guidance and support, extenuating circumstances led to early attrition.

I started at the community college in 1990. I had graduated late from high school in 1989, cause I played around in school. Once I came into the community college, it was the same thing… I wasn’t ready to get serious… I got pregnant with my first daughter, and I said okay. I will come out of school, and I’ll wait until my kids get bigger, then I’ll go back… Then I had another child, who went into kindergarten last year, and I was like okay, I’m going to do it, but the only thing with this college that gets me is that my transcripts go all the way back to when I was here in 1990. I have been making good grades since I came back, but the old grades have brought down my grade point average, and I am like, how? I don’t understand? (Elondra)
Elondra was genuinely surprised and upset that her poor grades from years past remained on her transcripts. She was completely unaware that student coursework is recorded and maintained. She has been back in college for over two years now working to accomplish her goals.

Her children inspired her to return to school, but Elondra also had a strong desire to live a life different than that of her mother. She aspires to have a meaningful career, versus mundane work in a factory.

I just wanted to better myself. I was determined that I didn’t want to work as hard as my mother had worked. She always worked for, Burlington Industries, in the textiles industry, and I didn’t want to do that. I wanted something better for my kids. Not to say that my mother did not do what she had to do for us, but we had nothing. We did wear nothing but the best, because of where she worked, but still, I want my kids to be proud. I want them to say oh my mom works at so and so, and say it with pride! …I want my kids to have that pride too! (Elondra)

Elondra views factory work as demeaning and wants better for her and her children.

Elondra sees very little support available to women such as herself.

I had to learn quickly not to do general registration. The registering part… It is such a pain, and when you are new to all of this, I think a lot of people just give up. Last summer, I did the registration by phone thing, and then I didn’t have the money to pay out of pocket that early. They want you to pay way before classes start… They dropped my classes because I couldn’t pay when they wanted me to. So you have to stand in this long line. …People are in the line before 7:00 a.m., even thought they say it does not start until 9:00. …So, I didn’t have the money,
and so by the time I got to register again, the classes were gone, full. The hardest part was sitting out a whole semester because I feel like if you sit out a semester, are not going ahead… (Elondra)

The entire college process is becoming clearer to Elondra, but she still finds many of the basic procedures foreign, confusing, unfriendly, and most policies irrelevant.

She believes people whose parents attended college have greater advantages than people such as herself who not only lack guidance, but also lack financial support.

I think people whose mother’s or father’s attended college, they are more apt towards going to school versus a person who didn’t have parents who went to school. If their parent’s went to college, they will have an easier time cause they have that background. They know certain stuff that we don’t know. My mother and father did not go, and I was like okay. You know you hear go to college, go to college, but you don’t see anybody doing it, and honestly, you don’t really know how to do it. (Elondra)

In general, Elondra believes that college is responsible for some very positive changes she has experienced.

Coming back to school has actually made me change. I have higher self-esteem now… because without school, I would have to settle for certain jobs, you know? Since I came back to school, I am like, no! I don’t have to settle… I can go higher! I can go as far as getting my master’s degree and get a job that pays a good amount of money. I don’t have to deal with some of the stuff that comes along with some of jobs for people without skills… I don’t have to be treated like crap anymore. I think differently now too… College to a certain degree is good
for women, cause it gives them that independence of not having to depend on a man, and… if a woman sits at home and waits for a check you are not only taking the easy route out, but also it’s not good for what you think of yourself. They just sit there having baby after baby waiting for a check to come each month.

(Elondra)

Elondra’s mother, husband and children inspire and motivate her each day to work harder and reach her goals. She also credits her community’s respect for education, and the support members provided when she was in high school. She explains.

My husband, I look up to him a lot. He went to college in New Jersey, but didn’t finish, but he knows a lot. I go to him a lot and ask him what he thinks. I also have two very good parents and I had two very good grandparents until they passed. In our community everybody looked out for one another. They were pretty high on education, so you couldn’t cut school or somebody would tell. As for college, most people in my community couldn’t afford college unless they went on some scholarship, and that was rare. From an early age, I have told my kids they are going to college period. (Elondra)

The pace of lessons within her math classes was too rapid, and this was problematic. Her math skills had diminished and she needed coursework presented at a much slower pace.

What I found with Algebra, being that I had been out of school for so long, over ten years, was that the teacher went way too fast. …Just going too fast, and so I had to drop it and then take it in the Campus Learning center, and I got it! I got it much better just sitting there taking the video home for a particular chapter. I
could slow things down for me, and then I started acing it! ...I know that some students are coming fresh out of high school, and it’s still fresh in their minds, but somebody that’s coming back, that is like a serious challenge for them! You feel stupid enough, so I wish they would slow down. (Elondra)

Another issue was test anxiety. To move beyond some of the developmental reading courses, students must pass a basic reading skills test. She failed to pass the required reading test twice, which she believes was most likely due to the intense pressure placed on her to pass the test. The frustration was immense.

I had to take a developmental reading course, and it became a real obstacle because I actually passed the course, but I didn’t pass the BPR, the test at the end of the course, and you can’t go on until you pass the test. I did very well throughout the course, and the teacher said I showed improvement. She went to the head of the developmental studies department to see if I could take it a third time, and she said no. She needs to retake the class, and I was like ah! ...I told the teacher I do not do well on tests. ...I also had some trouble with writing essays, cause I write like I talk and it’s hard not to use slang, but I am working on it. It’s very hard though; it is all very hard. (Elondra)

Elondra continues to struggle with test anxiety, and sees this as one of the greatest obstacles she must overcome in order to reach her educational goals. She performs well in situations where testing is more independent and there is less pressure. According to Elondra, the situation is further complicated by culturally her acquired nonstandard English dialect, which adds to her frustrations as she adapts to writing formally in her coursework.
Time is also a significant challenge for Elondra. Her days are filled with the day-to-day routine of working, taking care of the children, and attending school. She finds this schedule very stressful, and knows this is the way it will be for a long time to come.

I normally wake up around 6:00 a.m.; I get my kids up around 6:30 or 7:00 and get them breakfast. I let them wash their faces; they take baths the night before, and then get them ready for school. My husband and I work together to get the kids ready. Then, if I am ironing clothes he will get their breakfast. They normally leave around 8:00, and I have scheduled most of my classes around the time that they leave, so I leave just before they do to make my 8:00 a.m. classes, but I get to see them before I leave. I am normally here at school from 8:00 a.m. until 1:00 or 2:00 p.m. As soon as I leave school, I go straight to work. Then, I’m at the group home until 7:00 at night. Then I pick up the kids. My mom picks the kids up from daycare, the after school program, and she will pick me up from work and then we go home and get their baths, and do my homework that I have not finished. I make sure their homework is correct. We look over their homework, and then get them their baths by 8:30, and I try to have them in bed shortly after their baths. After they go to bed, that’s my down time cause my husband doesn’t get home until 11:00 p.m. He works the night shift from 2:00 to 11:00 p.m. (Elondra)

Elondra maintains a consistent routine and persists via the motivation and support she receives from her husband.

Physical exhaustion is also a serious challenge for Elondra. Most days she feels as though she could easily succumb to the fatigue.
Just getting up! The challenging part is getting up every morning and getting ready for class. Some days I say I don’t feel like going and then having to go to work after, and I am like, I have to push myself to the point where I say okay, I’m going to benefit from this in the long run. It is going to help my family and me, and that’s the only thing that helps you with the day-to-day challenges of being a full time mom, employee, and wife. (Elondra)

Maintaining a high level of motivation is one of the more difficult challenges according to Elondra. She has to remind herself that her life will be better, and that her children will benefit from this experience.

Financial resources are also a significant challenge. The family has a combined income of less than $34,000.

It has been a real struggle. A big struggle, and you know not being able to pay for other things some times. I just have to keep putting my faith in God and he will make it okay. Just know that I am going to be taken care of regardless. We just pray sometimes that nothing gets cut off and we don’t get put out, but that comes basically from having faith in God that he will supply our needs. We don’t have debt, you know it’s a rent bill, light bill, water bill, and just having to keep that going is a real strain. We’ll be above water someday. Now that I am going to school, we will be able to manage better after I get a degree. (Elondra)

Elondra and her husband work at a group home, and within this setting, a meal is typically provided so that her and her husband do not have to cook when they go home. This environment also allows time for Elondra to complete homework and prepare for the next day at school. The position she holds is highly conducive to attending school.
The good thing about my job is that I get to do my homework usually. I am able to do my schoolwork... That is one of the advantages of working at the group home. You can study! I don’t have to cook, because the kids actually get to eat while they are at the after school program, and are not hungry when they get home, so they usually eat at the daycare. I don’t do a lot of cooking because I eat what we fix the clients or I may bring something from home. (Elondra)

Successful management of daily responsibilities is critical to maintaining a sense of wellbeing and motivation. Having a significant support system allows her to move forward with her academic goals.

At first my mother said you are going to neglect your children, but then when she saw that I was juggling all of it she was like okay, you are doing very well. I am proud of you, and how can I help? I get a lot of support. I have a lot of people saying you can do it! When I get discouraged, even members of my church tell me you can do it, just hang in there. My husband is very supportive too. I can do what I do because of him. I mean my husband does my daughter’s hair, and it’s not one of those ponytails! He’s always been very supportive with taking care of the children. …He will make sure the kids don’t bother me like if I am studying. He spends time with them. …I have had excellent support since I have been back in school, and as long as you have that good support system, because the person who doesn’t have that system in their life, they will start, but they will drop out! You can’t do it! Keeping that motivation is so hard; it takes everything you got. My mother picks up the kids, and my husband helps with everything! I also
receive some grants to help with some of the tuition, but all of it. You have to have a serious support system. (Elondra)

Elondra plans to transfer to a four-year university next year, and wants to go beyond her bachelor’s degree. Her ultimate goal is to obtain a Ph.D. in psychology.
Chapter 5: Interpretation of the Data – Converging Voices

The degree to which challenges affected the women’s lives goes far beyond the scope described in most current literature, and therefore, it is critical to begin with understanding what motivated each woman to endure the immense physical, cognitive, and emotional exertion of working while going to school with a family, and the resulting deviation from traditional mothering roles. This chapter discusses some of the underlying reasons why the women persisted, how they described their first year in college, specific challenges and experiences, and how they managed the challenges.

Motivation

For the women in this research, motivation emerged as a mutual theme, whereby the participants’ principal and primary purpose was to liberate their children from the cultural effects and social structures of their socioeconomic origins by creating an opportunity for cultural mobility. In each case, this was the primary catalyst, which often initiated the process of academic attainment. Participants described having a deep desire to become a role model and provider for their children as a means of cultural or social mobility, which would increase quality of life for their children. A secondary theme pivotal to the persistence of participants was the external motivation stemming from the positive support and encouragement the individuals received from their spouses, parents, and extended family. And also essential to persistence, was the motivation, which came from the community in the form of praise, respect, rise in social status or social mobility, and encouragement.
Children

Substantial motivation emanated from the need to create cultural or social mobility for the children of the participants. Although participants never explicated the need to elevate social status directly, each participant was determined to make a difference in the lives of future generations through education; the rationale and inspiration was typically twofold. First, was the need to make improvements in current socioeconomic situations through economic gains in their personal incomes, and second, was the goal of being an actual role model, or what many of the participants called, “walking the walk.” Walking the walk in this case refers to demonstrating the importance of an education by receiving an education and by establishing education as a familial precedence.

My family [has been the biggest inspiration] because I have always been the pioneer in everything… I have always done the going to school and things like that. I have chosen to be a role model… so they can look at me and see how it’s done, and that I would do it myself so they can too… (Destiny)

Participants viewed educational attainment as a responsibility to one’s children and as a means of revealing the clandestine path to education. Participants found it important to demonstrate the significance and power of an education through personal example.

Each described how their children provided deep substantive motivation for initiating and achieving educational attainment. “I’m constantly worried about how they are going to pay their [college] tuition, how they are going to get these books, you know? But, if they want to go [to college], I want to be able to help them” (Mya).
So really my inspiration has been my children. I had a son when I was 17 going into my senior high school year…and that just made me more determined to do what I needed to do. I was really motivated by the fact that I had a young person here that I had to take care of and it meant that I had to make a better future for him. (Brooklyn)

After I divorced at 21 having um two very small children making nine bucks an hour, I knew that wouldn’t pan-out for long. I was going to have kids to raise for the next 20 some odd years and also, I had messed up my whole life…and, as a role model for my children you know. (Desiree)

Future financial stability and being a strong role model to children was essential to participants and a common theme among the women.

In addition, participants came to understand the significance of financial planning for the future education of their children beyond high school, because prevalent in their own families were unrealistic expectations for college scholarships. In most cases, the participants began appropriate financial planning for their children’s education.

I decided to attend college because as I got older, I knew that I had to have a future for my children as they got older, so I need to make more money, so therefore, they won’t have to struggle the way I did to try to come back to college. (Desiree)

The participants’ children were the primary catalyst for initiating a return to school. Educational attainment was approached with a sense of responsibility and duty that would have a profound positive impact on their children’s futures. This mother-love-
driven motivation is what most believed allowed them to succeed where so many of their peers had failed.

**Spouses and Family**

Inspiration and motivation to return to school and persist through tremendous adversity also came from the participant’s spouses, and immediate and extended family members. In cases where the participants were married, spouses were also recognized as a major factor in the decision to attend college. The uncommon support provided on several levels appeared to originate from within a family’s culture.

Wow, for me, my husband, he’s the one that encouraged me to go back because this was my third attempt and so since I had failed twice before, I was like to the point where you know… I’m just a failure. His words of encouragement, if it hadn’t have been for him, I wouldn’t have gone back… he said you can do this, and I finally said, I *can* do this. (Aubrey)

Spouses provided overwhelming inspiration, encouragement, moral support, and proved to be vital in the overall persistence and success of educational attainment.

**Social Mobility, Community Status, and Life Potential**

In addition to such ostensible motivational factors such as children and family, participants also had personal incentives that provided added motivation for persistence. Some cited the need to fulfill intellectual stimulation or a life-long desire to join a particular profession, where others reported personal growth and development or elevation is social status as additional factors.

I was determined that I didn’t want to work, work as hard as my mother had worked before, you know? At first with us growing up as kids, she always worked
in like, Burlington Industries you know, textiles industry and I didn’t want to do that. (Elondra)

The fiber-laden air of North Carolina textile factories created serious lung problems for this participant’s mother, and so she sought better opportunities for herself and her children. Factory work was also generally viewed as very demeaning with little respect from community members. “I want to say, I was nurse, or I was a teacher, but never have to say I had to work in a factory” (Elondra). Participants believed that in American society an individual is defined by his or her career, and therefore, completing a college degree increases an individual’s and a family’s worth in society.

Participants also associated their education with extensive personal growth that would linger well into the future. “There are, you know, a lot of other things that I would like to pursue in life, not just a nursing career, and college helps you do that” (Mikayla). Learning came to be viewed as an indulgence of the mind for most, and while learning had been a struggle during high school, it became a much more positive experience with maturity. Many stated that as they developed, they were able to focus on what was important, and maintain that focus for their children.

Attending college later in life can also be a personal decision for the sole purpose of learning, gaining knowledge, and becoming a better person.

I think when you start school at my age [she was 38] you really want to do it right because we want to do it for ourselves, we are not doing it for anybody else. Not for our parents, not for anybody, you know? Not for a career even, because it’s a very different kind of fulfillment, it’s like you’re getting some place. You don’t
need anything like clothes or money or anything! It’s like that knowledge thing. I can’t describe it. (Claire)

For some, satisfying a personal life-long wish to enlist in a particular field added great motivation. “I always wanted to be a nurse; I think I had to do this” (Joanna). For others, career was almost a spiritual calling that had to be fulfilled to create a sense of wholeness in their lives, which became a transformational experience for the women.

School is really, really exciting to me. Like someone is appreciating my mind over here! That’s what I really felt, because at home you’re just a mom. You know? You’re a wife, you’re a mother, and you’re a cook. Nobody appreciates you! But the way you feel from going to school [and being successful]… I can do this… it’s just so fulfilling. (Claire)

Participants typically had more than one significant motivating factor, which consisted of making a better life for their children, acting as a role model for their children, cognitive stimulation, and personal growth and development that assisted in achieving personal life goals. For most however, creating opportunities for social mobility on behalf of their children was the primary motivation. There were also significant secondary factors, which helped to sustain the women during times of great stress.

Inordinate stress levels came from a multitude of life areas, such as locating and being able to afford quality childcare, finding and being able to spend quality time with children and spouses or a significant other, maintaining the essentials of a secure and healthy home, providing proper nutrition and quality healthcare for children, having safe reliable transportation to and from work and school, having adequate time to study and
focus on learning and testing, and overcoming chronic and life-destabilizing financial situations. All of these situations created unbearable stress for the majority of first-generation women of nontraditional age in the community college, and for most, such factors limit the extent to which learning is possible and goals are achieved, yet to some extent, the participants were sustained by their faith in education’s ability to break down oppressive social structures for themselves and their children.

**Challenges and Achievement**

*Experiences, Obstacles, and Achievement Associated with Gender*

An overarching theme that emerged as the women described gender-based experiences and obstacles was that women believe they shoulder ultimate responsibility for their children. Secondary gender-based concerns include the lack of adequate time to properly parent children, a myriad of extenuating factors that are created as the result of having children and attending school, and the diminishing traditional role of mother within the United States, which is exacerbated by attending school.

*Student perceptions and experiences.*

According to the women in this study, while they are in school, the family becomes fractured with mothers spending a vast amount of time away from their children. Absence from children creates great remorse, and this was a particularly emotional topic. However, all believe the benefits of an education are worth the significant cost.

Sparse resources for women who struggle for cultural and economic mobility and parity within capitalist social structures create unbearable situations as parents encounter
day-to-day circumstances that produce severe financial and emotional stress, and demand a significant amount of time.

I spent last week at the hospital cause my daughter has Asthma. I was at the hospital from Monday, actually last Monday; I had to leave school early, leave here [school] to take her to the doctor… then of course the emergency room and then she was admitted to the hospital and she didn’t get out until last Sunday.

So… I would spend the night at the hospital, come here [school] that Tuesday for class so that Wednesday I didn’t go get my assignment I just did it that Thursday when I got there and left from the hospital brought my uniform, went to clinicals, went back to the hospital. I mean I went a whole week going, staying at the hospital with her and just running back and forth checking on people [other family members]... I mean I spent the entire week! She didn’t get out until Sunday… She has been to PICU, pediatric ICU four times [this year] because of Asthma. The slightest little change, I mean she got a cold and that’s what triggered it. (Mya)

Children experience various illnesses and injuries during childhood, which demand and require a high level of attention, time, and nurturing from a mother. When these situations arise, they further complicate the delicate balance between being a mother, an employee, and a college student.

According to participants, two incomes and a college degree are required to afford basic living necessities, and as families are pressed to make more money an education is no longer optional. Claire expressed a theme that was prevalent among other participants in terms of daily stressors associated with inadequate time spent with children.
Today, you cannot rely on anybody. You don’t even know who your neighbors are. You don’t send your kids outside to play. You should always be there, but you can’t. Those kinds of stresses are hard. The stresses of television, you know? If you are leaving, you are leaving kids at home, and you don’t know what they are watching. The last two months I was having the hardest time with my 13 year old. She was showing all those negative attitudes. She comes home from school around 3:00 and she had to stay home alone for one to two hours. Her sister was there, but she was sleeping or doing her homework… I had to really work throughout my… month break and I had to really sit down with her, talk with her, let her be involved in something which she would be interested in, and just listen to her what she really wanted to say because if you are so busy, you can’t sit with your kids and really listen. And you know something, it seems if we don’t do that we are really dropping the role of mother, and it really affects children, bad. It really does.

Often, going to college means altering the definition of what it means to be a good mother to children and creating alternative structures in order to cope with the dismal realities of their current lives.

I wanted to be a good mother, wanted to be a perfect mother, not good, but perfect mother! I cannot do that! I use to break down and I’ve learned that, they [her children] have learned it. They have learned that they have to make certain choices; they have to prioritize things and not everyday everything can happen.

(Claire)
Participants expressed personal feelings of anger and frustration when the topic of mothering was addressed. Returning to school further fractures already diminishing traditional American notions of mothering.

You have to balance these things; you have to prioritize; you have to make choices; you make a lot of choices by getting there, [through college] but really, you don’t have a choice; you have to have an education… I really would like to stay at home and wait for my kids to come home from school, and fix them warm lunches and little snacks, and make some special treats for them. I cannot do it, and I would like to, you know? It’s like from me inside. I would like to take them to the mall or to the barn, you know, just have a picnic. It’s not easy! And I would like to sit with them and talk to them about school, and help them with homework, help them with their assignments, fix their clothes. It’s been so many days since I have seen their closets; what’s going on in their closets? I use to fix everything like sew or crochet or knit, and I cannot do it…and it’s fulfilling for you as a mother, as a wife. Like if you have a proper meal on the table, a relaxed meal, it’s more fulfilling than just doing it in the microwave, doing it in just ten minutes… Time, there’s not enough time in the day to do everything. I get so angry when I hear other women who have money say oh, you should just stay home and be a good mother. I wish -- really wish -- I could! (Claire)

An average day.

A consistent pattern in the daily lives of the participants emerged from the data, and in most cases, an average day consisted of waking, on average around 5:30 a.m., making breakfast, getting the children ready for school, getting themselves ready for
work and school, driving the children to school or waiting at the bus stop until the bus came, going to class or work for the day, picking up the children or taking them to after school or evening care, going to work or class for the evening, coming home, cooking, feeding, children, bathing children, reading to children, studying, and going to bed typically after 11:00 p.m.

The extreme challenges encountered by the women in this research are devastating to college achievement, and severe fatigue is also a major challenge worth noting. Participants reported experiencing extreme fatigue stating it sometimes made learning difficult, and some participants noted it was a costly obstacle for many their peers who left college because of poor grades that were most likely the result of exhaustion. Long hours of work and studying, chronic limited sleep, and the resulting fatigue play a significant role in impeding academic achievement. The exhaustion created by working, caring for family, and attending school can become a significant obstacle for more mature students whom have numerous extenuating responsibilities and circumstances. The degree to which these women challenged physical, emotional, and intellectual limits was remarkable, and all reported that the ability to sustain such physical exhaustion and stress was definitely limited.

Faculty perceptions and observations.

Faculty participants believe what many policy-makers perceive as the stereotypical family structure and gender roles where the man goes to work each day and the woman stays home and cares for the children does not exist for most women of lower and middle-socioeconomic status. The obstacles and barriers first-generation women of nontraditional age encounter create a much different picture than most currently envision.
As one of the anthropology faculty members explains. “I think it is really great to shatter that snapshot picture that everybody has about you know...these women… or the families, about what life is really like. You [this research] have to rebuild this picture.”

And what does the family look like for the average student in this group?

Children create considerable challenges and a myriad of issues that parents must confront while attending college, and as one faculty member noted, children add challenges seldom considered in current research. As one humanities faculty member observed:

The student who is driving home from class who doesn’t have children, he or she can be, not necessarily, but can be thinking about what he or she just learned, right? The person with the child is thinking about picking the child up, getting something for the child to eat, listening to the child in the car, listening to the child when the child gets into the car, discipline, etcetera; walks in the door, cannot sit down and relax, cannot do any studying immediately. If they have a major test tomorrow, they must take care of the child until at least the child is asleep, and then hopefully, they are not sick and up in the middle of the night.

Children add new dimensions to the challenges of attending school, and beyond temporarily shifting focus away from the learning process to parent, children also require parents to challenge their current ideologies on what it means to mother.

Social structures such as classism and capitalism imposed on lower and middle class women negate the value of mothering as women must work to contribute to an already financially fragile family structure, and faculty members agreed, the minimalization of caring for children will have serious societal implications, and as one
faculty member who teaches anthropology explains, “I mean this is fundamental stuff to our society! We are short changing what it is to care for children… because we are refusing to really acknowledge what this really means.” Faculty participants also agreed that as a society minimal acknowledgement is given to the tremendous physical, emotional, and financial responsibilities necessary for mothers to adequately care for children in a society where working outside the home has become a necessity for women of middle and lower socioeconomic levels. “…Feed them three times a day, that sounds like a dream to me, I mean with an infant, I feed all day and pump when I’m away working” [a new mother and full time faculty member in foreign language].

Or twelve times a day, and get up with them in the night cause maybe they are not even sick, but childcare and mothering? Nobody can underestimate the demands of parenting especially in today’s society where you have all these families that are run by single mothers. I mean there are all those pressures that come into bear.

The lack of attention given to mothering and parenting children, can and will negatively impact future societies in terms of what is socially reproduced and not reproduced in children.

While current perceptions of American culture may reflect an overarching disregard for quality time to parent children, especially for low and middle-income families, study participants along with the faculty participants have a clear desire to spend time with their families. Yet circumstances created by the need for two-income households often thwart the family’s time together, and all report working harder for less. Student and faculty participants were deeply concerned with future implications for
children who may not be receiving appropriate socialization given the current demands on parents, and decisions made by predominately male policymakers within what continues to be a patriarchal society and social structure of ruling within the United States fails to adequately address the plight of the women represented in this research.

*Achievement*

Given the many challenges facing the women in this study, success seemed almost unattainable; however, many of the women graduated within a few months of the initial interviews. Closely examining how these women overcame challenges, barriers, and obstacles revealed nontraditional support systems, unconventional attitudes, and the fierce motivation of mothers driven by the love for their children to move their children beyond the constraints of certain social structures.

*Family and community support.*

Most of the women in the study had unusually supportive spouses, mothers, fathers, and family members who assisted in providing various levels of support to make learning possible.

My husband, my mom and my dad, those are the three who give… constant encouragement. My husband is always telling me how smart I am like if I take a test he’s always… you know you’re doing fine, you always do and you know and you’re kind a like and then there was that one time that I did do bad he was like and he just hugged me you and he’s like well you know you were sick and had this against you and this against you and he had all the right things to say….

(Aubrey)
The very nature of participating in college course work often challenges students to examine their core beliefs and values, which has the potential to create feelings of disassociation from family, culture, and friends. Additionally, within a family or community where there is an historic absence of experience with higher education, vocabulary and new approaches to various issues by first-generation college students can appear foreign to friends and family; however, participants in this study did not experience negative responses to their education from family or community. Instead, the majority believed that their education had a profound and positive impact on family and community relations, which also provided further reinforcement and motivation to complete educational goals.

How I relate to them and how I speak to them… I mean everything, how to do everything. If there is a question or something that they are unfamiliar with, I am now the source… If things need to be done, I am the one who has to do it, or show them how to do it. (Destiny)

It’s been very positive for me…people are always asking me questions, and…it makes me feel good to know that people will come to me because they think wow, she actually knows, you know? They trust me you know? (Aubrey)

They have full faith in me, and [laughter], you know? It causes changes in your inner-self when you know you have that kind of support system around you. If nobody trusts you then you cannot talk to them, so if they said oh no you are not going to make it, or don’t do this, you are just wasting your time… you might start thinking that way. (Claire)
They just think I’m a nurse already and it’s good, and I mean the ones that have problems… I choose not to surround myself with because they’re those pessimistic people. It’s real important to be around people who are positive when you’re going through this, and those that don’t want to make a difference… I separate myself from them. (Brooklyn)

My neighbor, she sees the work that I do with my kids and when I baby-sit her daughter, the work I do with her daughter. She knows that I went back to school and now she wants me to tutor her so she can go back and get her GED. So I am working with her too now… It’s been great! (Kyra)

Oh everybody gushes over me it’s almost embarrassing. Like my mom, I made a 99 average last fall in nursing, and she went to work and told everybody. My uncle came up to me on New Years Eve, and he was like congratulations on your average, and I was like thanks! So everybody is very out-spoken about how proud they are of me. (Desiree)

They try to relate to what I’m going through saying things like well don’t let too many things stress you out, and don’t get overwhelmed. Don’t take too many classes. They are just going to overwhelm you, so very encouraging. (Mya)

Overwhelming family support and positive community encouragement motivated this group to push forward. They believe that in order to maintain an optimistic perspective, it is important to have the support of positive people, and participants were reciprocal always willing to use newly acquired skills to enrich their communities and families.
Socioeconomic Status: Class-Based Experiences and Obstacles

Socioeconomic status and class-based obstacles emerged as overarching themes. Primary issues in this category include the fact that again, the majority of lower and middle-income women must work in the United States. Necessary employment to provide basic living needs produced immense challenges for the women while in school. For women of middle and lower socioeconomic status education will provide the opportunity to increase income and elevate social status, but it will not free the women, or their husbands from the need to work. In addition, the required shift in the role of traditional mothering for women that has to occur while attending college further reduces the time mothers spend with and for their children and extends well beyond that spent by traditional working mothers. In many cases represented in this research, children must temporarily become more independent and less reliant on their mothers.

An interesting finding was that middle and lower income women living in an urban southeastern area of the United States struggle to acquire basic essentials. In every situation, participants were not living extravagant lifestyles or beyond their income levels, and the women, their husbands, and in some cases, entire families worked full-time, yet all reported the expenses of basic survival as a demoralizing hurdle to face each day. Also, 7 out of 10 participants had husbands or partners who worked full-time.

Essentials are critical.

In the United States, capitalist social structures have produced an overly inequitable distribution of resources that places significant burdens on those with the least. Participants reported their financial obligations consisted of daily living expenses, and only one student reported having credit card debt because she placed her son’s
daycare on a credit card. The expense of day-to-day essentials was viewed as critical or problematic. Basic living expenses such as the cost of food, clothing, electricity, daycare, housing, and transportation were cited as the greatest stressors.

You have to work to get your insurance for the car. You have to get your groceries, … daycare; you have to pay for it! I can work, my husband works, my daughter can work, my other daughter who is fifteen years old can do some babysitting, we all work, and they bring money, and there is nothing. No savings. (Claire)

All of them, I mean really, if I didn’t have to make a car note, if I didn’t have to pay daycare, if I didn’t have to spend $200 a week on food, … food is expensive. I mean meat alone you can spend, and … there are just four of us, but my eleven year-old eats like my 28 year-old husband eats! So, it’s one of those things! But I mean if I could remove all of my financial expenses; have somebody pay my bills for 18 months this would be, oh my gosh. (Brooklyn)

To travel back and forth [to school] the gas prices are ridiculous, and outside of that probably if I owned my own house, and I didn’t have to pay rent every month that would be great, but then you come up on property taxes and you have to fix your own house. I don’t know? I don’t have any extravagant bills outside of my car payment and it’s $300 a month, so it’s not much, but…. (Kyra)

Financial burdens? All my bills, flat bills… Just flat bills, just the mortgage, car payment, I mean but that’s everybody. Anybody would have to pay that. Yeah, they do and I think a lot more people would graduate and finish if they had
more money to help them work less [during school] and survive, but you know.

(Mya)

“Just worrying about having to pay you know a rent bill, and light bill and a water bill; just having to keep that you know? That was a big strain” (Desiree). “Well as far as that, it’s just the bills! That’s it, the bills, just basic living bills” (Elondra).

Faculty members also identified securing basic living essentials as having the potential to become major obstacles in attaining educational goals. “There is just a lack of basic support for their issues [such as] transportation, childcare, and… I guess those basic elements are critical” (Paula). Working to provide critical living essentials for one’s family while going to school presents the utmost challenges, and therefore, work has become an enormous obstacle, which has caused many of the participant’s peers to abandon their educational goals.

To go to school full time and to work full time, I don’t think a lot of people can do both effectively. And, so if you’re serious about getting a degree, you have to put all your physical and mental resources into that, but society doesn’t allow us to do one or the other, so that’s one of the challenges that I have found to be most devastating. (Destiny)

Fundamental financial expenditures are highly problematic. “I live from check to check and I save when I can because I know another semester is coming and I’m going to have to pay for class… I mean if I could remove all of my financial expenses” (Mya). Major financial issues for all participants involved paying for tuition, books, food, housing, transportation, and daycare.
Participants frequently ate soup or potatoes, and nutritional intake was limited by the amount of money available in a given week. Securing the essentials is a day-to-day effort, and this struggle becomes overwhelming while trying to attend college. At least two thirds of the participants had husbands who made significant contributions to household income; however, overall combined incomes were rarely sufficient to pay for basic living expenditures, daycare, transportation, books, and tuition.

Daycare.

Issues related to daycare originate from patriarchal social structures that either blatantly or inadvertently ignore problems as they relate to women and parenting, and therefore, many perceive this as a gender-based issue, when in fact the primary challenge often becomes socioeconomic with ties to gender as women ultimately bear responsibility for children. Concern with quality affordable daycare was a frequently identified dilemma and persistent theme. The added cost and relentless anxiety over finding and maintaining quality childcare became an obstacle for many of the participants. As a mentor to new students, Aubrey shares what she has observed with her mentees.

They, my mentees, [mentees are novice students who this participant mentors as part of a mentor/mentee program at the college] who are women, have to work, to afford childcare and basic living expenses… Most of them can’t make it through school, because it’s either you know, I’ve got to study; I’ve either got to make an 80 or better on this test and study really, really hard for this test or I’ve got to go to work 12 hours tonight cause if I don’t go work 12 hours tonight, I’m going to get fired…Those kinds of…choices, they have to make and um, yeah, I see that all the time… It’s like they got a husband at home who’s working, but they need
her salary too. They’ve got three kids… There’s no childcare! The husband will
do the best he can, but he’s got the night shift and she’s got the day shift. It’s like
a no win situation.

The high cost of daycare overcomes many of the participants’ peers who do not
have family members to assume the entire responsibility of providing care for their
children.

The biggest, the biggest cost for us… and the reason we are in such debt right
now is daycare. We just started, putting our son in daycare in January and we
were having no problems until we put our son in daycare in January…we pay
$332 every two weeks, so about $700 a month… and mind you, we are putting
this on a credit card every two weeks because we have no other way of paying for
it. So, um our debt [from childcare] is a huge concern! (Aubrey)

And faculty members agree, many students drop out over issues related to
childcare. An anthropology instructor is particularly empathetic, as she has observed
first-hand the defeat many of her students have experienced.

Dealing with childcare issues is just horrible. When childcare is involved, school
days off or if there is illness, finding alternative care or having a backup, and just
the general energy expenditure of taking care of children you know? Feed them
three times a day, wash their clothes, make sure they get a bath, and drive them
around; I mean you know for a normal healthy person even with a flexible job, it
is very demanding.

A psychology instructor further explains this dilemma: “Well it’s huge to even
find it and then for there to be a minimum level of quality, and the research certainly
supports that the lowest socioeconomic groups also do not have available to them, quality childcare.” Faculty members believe that currently in the United States, the dominant culture has chosen to minimalize what it means to mother and parent, as indicated by inadequate funding of childcare for women of middle and lower socioeconomic status, the necessity for women to be in the workforce, and the fact that there is minimal support for women with children who are legitimately attending college.

Transportation.

Transportation for the participants was also a serious issue because lower and middle socioeconomic income levels limited the extent to which transportation was affordable and accessible. As the participants explain:

That car! That was one of my biggest financial burdens because up until then, I would have had, you know, like some rainy day money saved up if that car hadn’t acted up. I mean because like two weeks before it had completely conked out. (Mya)

Well, I just picked up a new car payment. Transportation is a major issue. I needed the transportation. I needed a mini van with four children and that’s what I got… to travel back and forth… and the gas prices are ridiculous… and I don’t have any extravagant bills outside of my car payment but it’s $300 a month, so! (Kyra)

In every situation, basic maintenance, gas, and loans for transportation reached crisis levels. Public mass transportation was not optional for most of the participants because it did not provide access to clinical and employment sites. Without transportation, school
and work would not be accessible, and therefore, to obtain an education, the participants
had to defy distinct boundaries of class such as public transportation.

Socioeconomic Status: Self-Perceptions, Psychologically-Based Obstacles, and
Achievement

Self-Perceptions.

Within this body of research, a family’s socioeconomic level had a profound
impact on how a child’s self-perception was developed. Many of the participants
emerged from families of lower and lower middle socioeconomic status where
fundamental survival was intrinsic and took priority. Optimism for a brighter tomorrow
by means of attending college was usually over shadowed by the reality of the family’s
economic circumstances. Participants consistently made a direct correlation between
wealth and education that originated from within the margins of racism and classism.
Their assumptions made were made on the basis of implicit rules from within their class
and became barriers that encapsulated the women within the boundaries of oppressive
social structures. Attending college was generally associated with having monetary
wealth, and being without this wealth lead participants to view college as unattainable.

I think a lot of it, the importance of an education had some kind of relationship
with the status of your wealth and so if an extended family member had more
money then they appreciated education more. And I don’t know why, but I guess
when you have more money, you have more opportunities or you come into
relationships with more people that have an education, but it goes together
somehow? If you have money to go to college, you have that luxury of learning
you know. (Destiny)
One participant stated that her mother regularly reinforced the significance of obtaining a scholarship so she could go to college, but the reality of her day-to-day living situation was quite different from her mother’s words. It was this reality that she felt created psychologically based barriers to college related to her socioeconomic status.

My mom couldn’t afford to buy me clothes much less send me to college…I never even really thought about going to college; I quit high school. I mean I quit when I was 16, soon as I was old enough to quit, I quit. People who go to college generally have a higher income and that played a significant role in my outlook on college. (Desiree)

While her mother hoped she would go to college, she knew college was for people with money. She knew her family was of low socioeconomic status and therefore, “I knew for certain I was not going to go to college.” “The rich kids,” as she referred to them, in her high school talked about which college to attend and had begun preparing by taking courses as early as middle school. She felt she did not belong and that work was her only option until she came to see the community college as a more realistic pathway to a career.

To further reinforce the notion that parents and the perceived limitations of the social structures they live within inadvertently reproduce attitudes and self-perceptions towards college accessibility via their own socioeconomic situations and culturally acquired behaviors rather than through verbalizing meaningless expectations to children, participants stated that their parents’ actions were some of the most critical evidence of that which was important. Therefore, what parents demonstrated in daily life directly influenced how students came to form attitudes about college attendance.
Student participants from lower socioeconomic homes, believed that overall, more emphasis was placed on work and survival than education, and although their parents stated college was important, it was the general absence of education in their parents lives that clearly demonstrated a different set of values. For all the participants, it was clear that work and home were the most highly valued. Avoidance of trapping their own children within the limitations of this type of thought may help to explain the intense determination displayed by the participants to demonstrate to their children the value of an education.

My mother …did the best that she could for us being a single parent. My father left when I was three my brother was seven and my sister was two. When I was in high school, … she didn’t push, so, if you didn’t push yourself, it didn’t happen… You have to show your kids it’s important, you know? (Kyra) Hearing an education was important, did not make it so. Instead, Kyra knew her mother’s main concern was work.

Parental attitudes and the influences of tacit social structures shaped the formation of attitudes towards college attendance and career.

When they were children, their priorities’ was making a living. Education was secondary to home life, …so, I don’t think my parents really understood the importance of an education. They could see the benefits of an education, but to them home life was more important and just the way they were taught. ( Destiny) As a result of parental attitudes, social structures, and parent actions with regards to work, college attendance was not a consideration; earning money was typically the most important task at hand. Recognizing dominant parental views and underlying paradigms
of the social structures that attributed to their own limited self-perceptions of education allowed participants to change basic constructs and come to view education as attainable.

By my realizing that the narrow view that they had, the concept that they had of education made me want to take advantage of the opportunities I had, and the more I learned the more important I realized it was, which I plan to teach my children, and teach my grandchildren. (Destiny)

All the participants’ parents regarded education as a beneficial entity, provided positive expectations, and made it clear that they would prefer for their children to attend college; however, financial support as a tangible consideration was not provided, nor was an example. Most parents did not understand how to attain financial aid or conduct long range financial planning, and were ultimately, either unable or unwilling to provide critical financial resources.

Participants learned through firsthand observation the familiarity of hard work and the concrete knowledge that they could always get by working without a degree just as their parents had done.

Well they [her parents] always said they wanted us to attend college, but I never really saw either one of them really go to college or taking any classes, so to me, they weren’t really pressing the issue to go. You could if you wanted to and if you didn’t, you didn’t oh well, you know? (Kyra)

In addition, while parents may see the benefits of an education, the lack of experience with the rigors of college tends to leave their children without basic financial, emotional, and moral support necessary for a successful college experience. It is possible however, that the positive indoctrination of the virtues of a college education bestowed
throughout childhood, enabled this group of students to develop deep-rooted beliefs in the power of an education and therefore, in this case, indoctrinated students were eventually able to achieve the goal after acquiring some level of understanding of the process as well as developing a meaningful support system and a high level of motivation.

When participants became separated from direct cultural and family influences and were engaged with highly motivating factors such as having their own children and gaining durable support systems, these students were able to successfully engage in higher education. In the majority of cases participants in this research, who were primarily from lower socioeconomic families, had a moment of epiphany where first, it became clear that an education was essential. Second, that to acquire an education it would take immense sacrifice and struggle to achieve given their socioeconomic status, and third, that educational attainment was worth the tremendous sacrifice. The participants clearly demonstrated an immense value for an education through their positive attitudes and persistence.

*Psychologically based obstacles.*

Growing up within a realm void of higher education experiences created for some, psychologically based barriers because as students explained, emphasis was placed on work and home, not education. As students approached the end of high school, they were unable to see college as a realistic option. To achieve success, it took additional life experiences to further alter existing attitudes to come to view education as viable.

Psychologically based obstacles seem to originate or are developed as a response to the tacit rules of varying social structures and become underlying barriers to academic
attainment. An intense fear of failure derived from previous academic experiences coupled with previously discussed socio-economic and socio-cultural influences such as strong feelings of inadequacy and inferiority associated with one’s socioeconomic status and lack of wealth, as well as the notion that home and work take priority over receiving an education, create psychologically based and socially reproduced perceptions that limit one’s thoughts on the viability of achieving academic attainment.

Fear of failure.

Often rooted in socio-economic origins, the fear of failure was a significant obstacle students had to overcome in the initial admission stages and in some cases, throughout their course work. This often stemmed from negative experiences earlier in academics and underlying beliefs of who belonged and who did not in college in terms of wealth.

I was scared that, I was scared that I was just going to fail… I was just scared. I was scared… I just kept telling myself that I was older and I knew a lot more…and telling myself, you can do it, you can do it, you can do it. (Aubrey)

Students experienced intense feelings of fear, intimidation, and a general feeling of inferiority and incompetence. “Being back in a scholastic environment, I think feeling inadequate because there were some people who were just out of high school so things were still fresh for them. (Joanna)” Feelings of inadequacy were overcome slowly through consistent achievement. “The studies gave me that thing okay, I can do this, and I can learn this, and I am doing well, and when you see your grades, it’s just so fulfilling and you know, that’s just wonderful. (Claire)” For some of the students interviewed, fear
was also a source of motivation to work harder, and as they succeeded, motivation to persist was positively reinforced with passing or good grades.

Achievement.

Consistent moral support was essential to success, particularly for students who began the college experience fearing failure and doubting self-ability. In addition, a significant factor in achievement in terms of overcoming psychologically based obstacles was the impact of successful learning experiences on improved self-esteem and personal growth.

Attending college increased self-esteem and allowed participants to experience tremendous personal growth. Successful learning experiences added additional dimensions to their persona besides that of wife, mother, cook, and housekeeper.

It’s been, very positive for me…especially with my son’s daycare you know, I go in and his teacher has hypertension, and she’s always asking me questions. I enjoy answering people’s questions. If I don’t know the answer, I try to find out for them. It makes me feel good that people will come to me because they think she actually knows and that they trust me. As far as the way I think? I mean in a way, I guess you can say it’s negative because every time I think… every time my son coughs or something… I am getting out the stethoscope, so you see, but in a way, it’s also positive, because if something is wrong, I know about it… I’m also more positive with the community. (Aubrey)

Okay, [laughs] elevated my self-esteem, my confidence. I think it has made me a better person because I am able to relate and communicate with other people, and I feel like now I can express or I am expressing some of the good things, the
very good things about life and maybe tell some people about life. Some things
they don’t know. Sometimes I run into people and they are so bitter and angry and
I’m like wait a minutes. Sometimes I can help. Oh yeah, I’ve learned there’s a
lot of different ways to look at a situation and there is never just one side to
anything. (Destiny)

I can do it! I am more confident and see things in a different light. I have
something to look forward to. Education is just wonderful; it has just opened so
many horizons. I’m telling you. Before I couldn’t even think of going back to
school and doing this. Now, if this didn’t work, I would think of something else.
It wouldn’t stop me. You are more patient; you are more concerned about things.
You think deeply, not in a philosophical way, but you think in a different light,
the important things, you know, money or time, or, this or that? Tomorrow?
Today? Like, tomorrow will come, but what about today, what are you doing
today? (Claire)

I feel better about myself; I mean I know that I can do stuff on my own,
without anybody’s help. Throughout this course when I first started, I was getting
married I’m no longer getting married. I had a fiancé. I no longer have one. So I
mean I don’t know? I survived that and I guess I can get through this too. (Mya)

I am very proud of myself. I am a very optimistic person and you know I try
to surround myself with those kinds of people because if you don’t you will end
up falling into this little hole…. But I am really proud of myself. I started to
believe my family when I was 17 and pregnant and… didn’t have anybody to talk
to about it, even my best friend. I think she was angry with me, but initially, I
couldn’t even talk to her, and I think I started believing that I was stupid… And I went to school eventually. I want my child to see that when you have determination that you can make it anywhere in life and there is nothing in this world that can stop you if you want to do something. I look at my situation now and have a second child and event thought it’s hard, and there are days when I’m just like, I can’t do this! I’m not going to make it! It’s just too much, I am really proud of myself cause I have stuck through it and at night when I want to go to bed, I say no. I wanted to give up several times, and I just keep pushing and I look at my children and I’m like, I’m doing it for them, it doesn’t matter what it takes. I will be sleep deprived for the next year as long as I can sleep when I graduate! (Brooklyn)

I’m more confident. Or I have more self-esteem…when I first came back I was always saying I can’t do this; I can’t keep up, and dropped one class, but I have more self-esteem now, and my advisor helped me, encouraging me when I did well. You build self-esteem with success, and I think probably that hearing other people, especially people in the school environment, say you’re so smart, and you’re really doing well. And wow! That validates you know, your thinking that yes, I am doing well. I also had a couple of instructors say, you’re so smart, and no one at school had ever told me I was smart before and it made all the difference in the world to me. I needed it, and they meant it. It wasn’t like fake… So when you hear something that’s genuine and you know somebody sees this and knows this about you. It makes a difference. It makes a huge difference. (Kyra)
It has changed me by making me realize that I am strong and it took me a long time to realize that I was special, that I could do kids, job and school. For the longest time I thought well, if I can do it, everybody can do it, but I’ve learned that everybody can’t do it. And, I have seen a lot of my classmates fail out and I’m making A’s and, it’s just a question of drive, and I’ve learned a lot about myself over the past four years. I’ve also grown up a lot and realized that I cannot change the way people think about me and I can’t make my parents love me anymore regardless of what I do, so why change the way they, you know, the way they look at life. And I have a lot more respect for single mothers then I did before, even though I have my fiancé you know there father has been absent since the day I left so in a way I guess you could say, I don’t look at myself as a single mother, but in a way I guess you could say…in a way, I am. I have learned that and for the longest time I thought well I got my fiancé, but you that’s not their father. And they have a father who could care less, so in a sense, I am on my own, cause if he decides tomorrow that this is not what he wants, they are mine to deal with forever. (Desiree)

Coming back to school has actually made me change on, you know, higher self-esteem. It gave me a much higher self-esteem. Cause, I would just have to settle for excuse me, for this type of job, and I would like to, and when I went back to school, I was like no! I don’t have to settle for this kind of a job. I can go higher! I can go as far as getting my master’s and get a job that’s paying this amount of money, and I don’t have to deal with it. Or, I can work for myself and
I am not going to deal with somebody telling me what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. (Elondra)

“Well, it makes me feel good because I know by me coming back to school I’m doing something to better myself and to look out for the welfare of my kids” (Mikayla). The impact of educational attainment experienced by the women in this research resulted in a tremendous sense of pride; fulfillment, increased self-esteem, and an overwhelming sense of personal growth all of which helped to diminish feelings of inferiority as well as many of the psychologically based obstructions previously held.

*Academics and Socio-Cultural-Based Influences, Experiences, Challenges, and Achievement*

The perpetuation of high status cultures within educational institutions operates from the perspective of sustaining internalized class based viewpoints and are focused primarily on producing student success within the limits of class structures rather than focusing on class struggle or the point of view whereby the institution seeks to reduce or eliminate class inequality. Therefore, rooted in the oppressive social structures of class, race, capitalism, and patriarchy, academics as they relate to socio-cultural-based influences and perceptions emerged as a theme within this project.

The first socio-cultural-based perception influenced by these social structures is the profound feeling of inferiority towards academically advanced students, administrators, instructors, and advisors. Such feelings of inferiority are acquired socially and culturally within the parameters of tacit social structures, and existed among all the participants. Participants experienced the greatest feelings of inadequacy initially because of a general lack of experience with the higher education academic process
which includes registration, advising, instructor expectations, and academic vocabulary, as well as socially and culturally acquired language that becomes an obstacle due to severe difficulties with learning to write on a formal level and learning in general due to vernacular speech and limited vocabularies. This was exacerbated when the women encountered academically advanced students with vast experiences and backgrounds related to the college coursework they will take.

There are some people who are just out of high school so things are still fresh for them and just that whole outsider feeling and that’s what it was, cause I mean it was being and, I mean you are an outsider and you can see it, you know kids that, and I use that term loosely, kids that are about the same age range, same, you know, likes, cliques, like we had in high school and you see that here, and a lot of these people maybe didn’t go to school together, but they congregate together. And then you have those older folks, we don’t have time to congregate, so we’re kind of left out in the cold as far as that goes, and I mean your an outsider if you’re a nontraditional student. (Joanna)

*Faculty perceptions.*

Faculty members agreed that often first-generation students experience feelings of isolation as a result of not having solid cultural and academic backgrounds in literature, art, and music, and that being older also adds to their isolation. A humanities faculty member explains:

I too am first-generation… and my husband is first-generation, however, in his family, in the extended family, there were a lot of medical doctors, pharmacist, educators, …Okay, my family was a small family where no one was educated,
and I wondered about the differences between the kind of support he got and the kind of support I got not from a gender issue, but rather from more of a background and educational experience issue, or class culture issues. He was often taken to the theater. He was often taken to concerts. His home had literature and information available to him, mine didn’t. So when you’re at college, so much more is new to you, so much more of the experiences that we talk about as background information in our classes… we assume everybody knows, but they may not.

First-generation students are more likely to come to college lacking background information that many instructors assume they know. According to the faculty members in this research, issues of class and culture can significantly impact the level of prior knowledge, language, and course-related experiences students bring to class. Faculty also stated that many students share feelings of isolation and apprehension. “Let’s be honest, every college freshman feels they don’t belong that there’s been a mistake, they weren’t really accepted, right?” The difference is that for first-generation students, the consequences are usually much more profound, and the feelings of isolation can ultimately end educational achievement.

Faculty members extended the notion of isolation to include more ambiguous obstacles such as family and friends who may unknowingly sabotage students. A faculty member and administrator in the nursing program concluded that given the difficult nature of their situations, “they just need sometimes somebody to listen where they can cry and get a box of tissues and then get over that and feel better. You know just
somebody where it’s safe to say whatever you want to say.” One of the psychology instructors added the following.

Exactly, I mean cause you’re unfamiliar; you’re doubting yourself, that just lack of comfort level. I think it is really one of the more undefined circumstances that I think sometimes too, family members not, one, are not role models, but at times can be real negative… because it’s seems … alien, it [college] is made to be strange… and we’ve had this conversation for a number of years even in student services that through education very often you really challenge your present belief systems. That’s uncomfortable for the individual, but it’s also uncomfortable for the family members because often times they view that as um not accepting the tradition of family as a threat…

A faculty member and administrator from the nursing program also shared her personal experiences on this topic.

That very factor contributed to my divorce… I’m serious; that was a contributor, that … change in behavior, my change in knowledge, my change in assertiveness, whatever I learned, it really was a threat to my family the way it was, so um, yeah, it’s a huge thing.

Challenging the parameters of familial social and class structures through education can produce tension among family members according to faculty members.

*Lack of familial role model.*

Within this context, faculty also identified the lack of an appropriate role model as a significant barrier. The lack of a role model from within an individual’s immediate culture and family was a significant obstacle because participants felt they lacked certain
inside information about the basics of going to college, and although most freshman college students may feel the same initially, first-generation students may never completely feel like they belong, feeling as one nursing instructor stated, “there are secrets that only those on the inside possess.”

Faculty participants identified the lack of a role model as having much deeper implications in that we often attempt to culturally reproduce what we see in our families via a role model, and there is a void in this area for the women.

I think there is also a lack of a role model. …If you’re working within your family and you think about your family and when we take our different roles, as we get older we tend to model ourselves after people in our families and there is no model! There’s no role model and so the student who is first in the family to come to school is really out there on a limb. And the family doesn’t even know how to support that person because they’ve never been through this experience! I mean I could be a student in this study. Years ago, I was a student and… my mother and my parents had no clue what I was going through because they themselves did not experience that and I think sometimes that’s what that student is lacking. …So that support, that role model support is critical.

As described, the lack of a role model and the critical moral support, which comes from such an entity, may help to explain one of the many reasons why some first-generation students leave college before completing their degrees.

Process-based experiences, obstacles, and achievement in academics.

There are very specific processes within academics in higher education, and as educational institutions typically function to sustain implicit class based frameworks,
they are often unaware of the need to indoctrinate first-generation students with this process and its language. This and inaccurate assumptions related to advising are costly in terms of added time spent in school, which also increases the likelihood of early attrition.

I didn’t know how to register for a program or how to learn what advising is, and when they give you an advisor, sometimes it doesn’t work, because I had a bad experience. I had to wait another year because I hadn’t done Math 70 and that’s what, I thought it was an advisor’s job to tell me, to look at my paperwork and tell me, and I had a hard time accepting it, because I was thinking, I would be getting into nursing school this year, and then they said you have to do this, this course, before you can put your name on the waiting list…. which I could have done earlier, but nobody told me and I took all the blame myself, because I didn’t know I had to take it. I know so many people who quit over this very thing. (Claire)

I remember like just waiting on my advisor to do everything for me, and my mentees now are developmental [students with basic skills that are below college level] students and so I can remember a meeting a couple of weeks ago they had their [advising] sheets out. Is this right? Is this right? And I was helping them with their advising forms… my mentees think that their advisors are going to sign them up for the appropriate classes to help them get all the classes they need to get them on the waiting list. I said it’s not going to happen. You are responsible to know what you need to be eligible to be on that waiting list before January. I said it is your responsibility... You are ultimately responsible for knowing what
Students frequently made incorrect assumptions about the degree to which advisors were responsible for registration and classes. Such mistakes often resulted in students needing additional coursework because they had failed to take a prerequisite course.

Language.

Language extends beyond communication and can become an oppressive social structure that limits students to the extent of their lexicon and ability to imitate writing structures of the dominant culture. Language as a means of communication especially in terms of speaking and learning to write formally can have serious implications for students who have been away from school for a significant amount of time, especially when immersed in colloquial speech within their communities. For example, cultural saturation with what many referred to as “street language” was reported as a significant obstacle for many students, and those lacking socially legitimate language struggle to incorporate the highly unnatural language of Standard English into their own language. During an informal discussion, one student stated she was not aware that the English she learned in school was the English she was suppose to speak and write until she was in the eleventh grade.

Within the community college, although not precisely Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) magisterial language, there are similarities in this concept with different dialects. In many cases, students speak a distinctly different dialect from the standard language used by teachers. This disconnect in the language alienates through confusion those who come from backgrounds where exposure to Standard English is limited or not
incorporated into colloquial speech. “The writing thing, I had the hardest time because of the way essays are written. In our neighborhood it’s just free flow. (Kyra)”

Communicating using a standard format, grammatical rules, syntax, and pronunciation were what several students identified as being unnatural, and because how one speaks often affects how one writes, the formal communication process becomes a serious challenge.

In school you are taught proper English and you are taught that that’s what you are suppose to use and that’s how you’re suppose to write. I think my big issue with coming back here [school] was my time away from school, and using street language and just adapting to speaking in I guess you want to say jargon, or dialect, or you know just without the proper words and then you come back and you’re so use to speaking that way, you write that way, and I think that was my main thing. I had to separate the way I spoke in the street and the way I speak around my family; it had to be different and separate from the way you speak and write at school. I just wish teachers would understand that before they criticize and down grade you when it comes to grading the papers because they need to take into consideration how long a person’s been out of school… I’m out of school for 16 years because I did it and it’s nobody else’s fault, so. (Kyra)

In all cases, the participants commented on seeing fellow students leave school because of poor writing skills citing this key issue as simply too much to overcome as the course work became more difficult.
It is also worth noting that most participants did not view their dialect as an issue in school; however, when asked about initial obstacles when they returned to school, the notion of the use of street language was presented as having serious implications.

Faculty members concurred that having a dialect that is not within the socially legitimate realm of language becomes a significant obstacle for many students. Faculty observed that students with significant dialectical differences can take several English courses, however, it is very difficult for the students to internalize the language and maintain standard usage beyond their English courses and reach full transference, and students confirmed this view as well. Several participants stated that the struggle to increase their formal vocabulary and write on a formal level was significant and ongoing.

For students who speak English as a second language, the effects of language can be particularly devastating.

Especially from the cultural and language point of view, I’m telling you the language thinks is a big barrier. The slang, like you might talk casually about something, and I have no clue what you are talking about, and I feel intimidated asking you because you will think that, it’s like a student’s point of view when a teacher is giving a lecture; the teacher is going on and on and will talk about… what happened in this year or about television programs, which I haven’t seen… which I haven’t any idea because I wasn’t there, I wasn’t here at that year when the television was giving those programs, so you know… you’re lacking that background… you feel, what’s that missing language you cannot get it and you cannot get it from books, you cannot get from the TV, you know? I’m telling you; that’s the biggest thing. When I was doing the first college English course,
had the hardest time, because the teacher was so vague about what he wanted us to do. Of course he knew what he wanted us to do, but... I didn’t have a clue.

(Claire)

The prevalence of American slang used by teachers and other students, a writing structure different from the native language’s writing structure, and teacher’s referring to historical events in life or on television without elaboration also create serious challenges according to this participant.

In addition to the language barrier from the perspective presented, there are also issues with language in terms of learning and language as it relates to exchanging ideas and processing information. Often a unique characteristic of women, conversation is a learning tool to connect and process various types of information on multiple levels. Students who speak English as a second language may experience difficulty when they are unable to find someone with a similar language to connect with and discuss what they have learned.

Having a person who can speak my language, like a student, it would be much better. I have a friend who was with me... we were studying here everyday... She is from Kenya. She is not in the program anymore, and I have lost a study buddy. And, you know, when you are studying with somebody, you are not just studying, you are talking your thoughts, you’re discussing, you’re teaching, you’re discussing your experiences, and it makes a whole lot of difference, just spilling! Just saying what ever comes to your mind. She is not here anymore and I think I am just lost... counseling said... why can’t you find somebody, and I
said I can find somebody, but it wouldn’t be the same. There’s a communication thing, a language thing. (Claire)

Communication and language pose great problems for students who speak English as a second language and for native English speakers who daily speech is laden with vernacular. According to participants, the transition into writing using standard conventions becomes a serious obstruction that many of the participants’ peers did not overcome.

*Achievement.*

In spite of numerous socio-cultural challenges related to academics, unconventional attitudes towards learning were commonplace among participants. They eventually learned the academic process by observing, listening, and asking questions. In addition, coursework, mothering, and work, left little time for students to participate in the useful student success workshops offered by the college to enhance process knowledge and skills; however, participants recognized that sometimes they must sacrifice study sessions or time with children for the beneficial workshops.

I took six workshops last semester…if you really want to know and learn you have to change a lot of things every day. It’s all about attitude, like I know if I’m not doing well in the class. I didn’t get a good grade… I said… I need to change something… it’s up to me to do something if I’m not getting it. (Claire)

Students agreed, that it is often very difficult to find time in an already full day to attend extracurricular information sessions, but that such workshops were often well worth the time. “Go find out what your school offers like student success workshops; they are
First-generation students in particular need such workshops to familiarize themselves with basic strategies such as time management and research.

**Race-Based Experience and Perceptions**

Experiences and perceptions associated with race emerged as an overarching theme with several secondary variations that follow. First, there was a positive perception of strength stemming from race among African American females. Second, there was a subtle denial of racism by African American females. Third was the perception of unfair support for minorities among White females followed by similar experiences that include unrealistic expectations of athletic scholarships among African American participant parents, and unrealistic expectations of academic scholarships among White participant parents. Both groups also exhibited similarities in terms of the effects of lower-socioeconomic status on educational attainment.

**African-American perceptions of race.**

African American female participants believed the historical strength of their race has provided a positive force to sustain them through very trying times.

When we were growing up, we were brought up I mean… it was like times they were in the midst of changing. I grew up being taught to be very independent, and I grew up as a strong independent Black woman. There were no expectations about when you finish school you need to get married and have children and stay home and take care of the kids, so there were no cultural or race barriers as far as that goes… things are different now; they just expect more out of women. (Brooklyn)
Although no one would overtly describe specifically the history that had made it so important to be a strong Black female as stressed by their mothers and grandmothers, most of the women spoke of race in terms of the strength it provided. They shared being raised to know race as an inner strength with origins in a rich history of survival among Black women.

*Denial of racism.*

As an oppressive social structure, race appears to be presented as having little negative bearing overall; however, on closer inspection of the women’s responses, a different picture emerges. For example, several of the African American students spoke of a perceived increase in the opportunities available to Black women today that were not present when their mothers and grandmothers were in school. “Well actually I don’t think it has affected me cause actually things has changed since my mother and grandmother was coming up and their school you know versus you know me now” (Elondra). However, in examining Elondra’s next sentence, it is apparent that while she states things have improved, she also subtly acknowledges racism’s existence. “Back then, there was prejudice, it’s not so much, it’s still a little you know within the school system, cause you still got some old people that are in the school system that are still doing that prejudice thing, but now, I don’t feel it; it’s not as bad” (Elondra).

Destiny’s response is also very telling.

In my race, in the Black race among certain groups, education is held in very esteem, and this is positive and provides great support and inner strength, but then there are groups in the Black race that don’t hold education in such high esteem, and it is very negative for those who follow that path. I don’t know if it’s so
much a race issue as a cultural issue, because for me, as a Black woman, education was everything. I just didn’t have the money to pursue it. I also did see some groups pick on kids if they liked school, so? (Destiny)

As Destiny states, there are certainly cultural factors within race that influence how individuals will perceive education. However, the fact that she “didn’t have the money to pursue” an education has origins in racism with the prolongation of a disproportionate number of African Americans living in poverty within the U.S. Therefore, her response also inadvertently confirms the existence of racism from a larger perspective.

Overt denial of racism was also shared.

Well, I can’t say that it’s, that it’s really made much of a difference. I am a minority, but in high school I was of the majority. There wasn’t a whole lot of negative cause my teachers were so supportive, both White and Black. But I love all people, so I just kind of mix with everybody, and it doesn’t really matter to me, and I’ve never been discriminated against in any school system… (Brooklyn)

Such deliberate denial of racism is perhaps intrinsic, but it may also stem from a significant lack of comfort in discussing this topic with a White female researcher. In either case, the denial of racism creates a vacuum where some important aspects and discussions could have been situated within this research.

White perceptions of race.

Responses to questions on race by White females provided responses that revealed some interesting perceptions of what they perceived as reverse race inequality.
Several White participants perceived African American and minority women as generally having more public financial aid and support than White students.

I think and I feel that Black women that have children that are single have a better chance of going to school because there is more public assistance for them than somebody’s that’s in an intact family…. There are scholarships and most of them are aimed at the Black community to get the Black community out of the position they are in… and I think that it’s excluded me from some things. (Joanna)

See I don’t know, because I’m of the majority… I don’t think I’ve gotten any special treatment because I’m White, I mean I may be blind and I may be wrong, but I think I struggle like everybody else. I see on TV all the time; they have colleges specifically for Black people. We don’t have colleges specifically for White people and if we did, we’d be condemned for doing it. I mean why isn’t there stuff like that for average poor Southern White people. I mean I don’t live in a $200,000 house and drive brand new cars. I mean I know some Black people who are much better off than I am, and I feel like it should be more equal for everybody. It shouldn’t matter if you’re green, you know as long as there is some avenue for me to further my education. (Desiree)

The White participants believed strongly in their perceptions of inequities in public financial support for minorities; however, according to overall interview responses related to financial aid, income, and public assistance of African American participants, the assumption of additional financial support available to minority women is inaccurate.
Similarities in race.

Notably, race is significantly important to the degree in which African Americans have a disproportionate representation of people living within the boundaries of poverty and lower socioeconomic levels. However, beyond race, this group of women shared in almost identical struggles with the common dynamic in all cases being socioeconomic level.

Other similarities include unrealistic expectations for athletic and academic scholarships. These two seemed to be divided by race in that, in this research, African American parents were more likely to believe that athletic scholarships were a viable path to college for their children, and reached this conclusion based on their observations of children within their communities who typically attended college on athletic scholarships. For White participants, similar unrealistic assumptions were made about academic scholarship where parents lacked experience with the criteria for academic scholarships, and therefore, were often unable to provide the necessary guidance that would help their children become viable candidates for such scholarships.

The common perception present among all participant parents was the belief that scholarships are a viable way to ensure college attendance. Participants’ parents did not understand the statistics, criteria, or the process of applying for scholarships. Nor did they understand that athletic scholarships are particularly difficult given various physical constraints and ability levels. Similarly, academic scholarships are also highly competitive, and participants revealed that such scholarships often went to students who parents had college degrees.
Perceived Benefits of Education to Future Generations

Perceived benefits to future generations provided immense inspiration as the participants hope to inspire their own children to pursue a college education and reap the personal benefits of higher education such as the opportunity for cultural mobility.

He will see that Mommy has an education. That Mommy makes good money… the personal growth too is a big positive as well… I mean there are just things that I can deal with my son, where my husband cannot. Yeah, education, it just helps a lot. (Aubrey)

I know it’s going to affect them because they are going to see it as an example, they going to see the benefits of it, cause I’m going to make sure they know. Just by the fact that I’m going and I’m an example. (Joanna)

“Oh, I hope it will make a great impact. I hope they will look at me and just see how I struggle, I mean the struggling I have done, and you know, just appreciate it” (Mikayla).

Well they see me going and my oldest is like, good Mommy! Good on your test or whatever. So I think that’s encouraging them to go to school, but I told them I want them to go right after they finish high school. Don’t wait like I did, and please don’t get pregnant. I mean cause that really slowed me down. (Mya)

I think it’s going to be very, very positive for them. I think that they are going to see that in spite of, whatever; you can do whatever you want to do. And, I know right now they are probably missing me, but at some point they are going to say, I remember my mom going to college and working late and coming home and um, it’s going to be very inspirational for them. Like she did it for me! (Brooklyn)
It’s showing them that there is more out there than just elementary, middle and high school. I tell them that they need a college degree these days and that’s going to pay them the money they want to make and their education comes first. (Elondra)

“I hope it has a very positive impact and they go away to a four-year college and live on campus and do the things that I never did” (Desiree)

I think that it will be positive for them, because I think that they’ve seen that kids aren’t the only ones that have to work at school. My mom does it too! And they know that daddy wants to go to school. So uh, we’ve already established a value and discussed it, you know? (Kyra)

Well, I think it will have a positive affect, because now that they see me going to college, they tell me that they want to be just like me and do the things that I do, like going to school. So I think I have had a positive affect on them. (Mya)

Although the immense sacrifice comes at a tremendous cost to the women and their families, each believes it is essential to break the existing cycle within the family and socially reproduce a new family tradition that includes higher education and professional careers. For this group, a college education continues to hold hope and promises a better life. It embodies the American dream.

Conclusion

First-generation women of nontraditional age have parents who saturate their young lives with positive dialogue related to college attendance; however actual support for college is rarely viable as parents set improbable goals for academic and athletic scholarships. Without a social model, appropriate financial and academic guidance, and
self-confidence, the direct path to college is ominous and highly ambiguous. Many first-
generation women of nontraditional age opt for the familiar path of their parents and
enter the work force immediately after leaving high school. Over time frustrating
experiences such as limited low-paying jobs, persistent feelings of unfilled destiny, a
chronic need for intellectual stimulation, and the overwhelming need to be a role model
to their children become nagging internal voices that draw the women back to the
community college and into various adult education programs.

When first-generation women students of nontraditional age initially enter the
community college, they lack basic knowledge of the academic process. Without such
fundamental knowledge, students are initially unable to anticipate the process of
admission and registration. Advisors and administrators too often assume new students
will be able to determine steps in this basic process; however, in most cases, first-
generation students of nontraditional age are essentially a clean slate without the benefit
of familial experience and habitus. In need of basic information and guidance, students
in this group find it extremely difficult to navigate standard protocol associated with the
logical flow and process of registration, admissions, developmental coursework,
prerequisite requirements, and program waiting list procedures. Students without
significant levels of support as well as an explicit plan of study and a high degree of
motivation are at risk of quickly succumbing to frustration and attrition.

During the first year, learning various aspects of the academic process is
complicated by psychologically based barriers developed inadvertently during childhood
within the boundaries of oppressive social structures related to gender, class, and culture
creating overarching feelings of self-doubt and inferiority. The all-consuming fear of
failure as well as a general misunderstanding of the role of academic advisors further complicates this process.

First-generation women of nontraditional age experience significant isolation during the first year as they struggle to find some level of comfort in an academic realm that is: foreign with new information, full of unfamiliar procedures, and awash with more complex language. Upon initial entry, the situation becomes more complex as first-generation women of nontraditional age engage in coursework with students from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, with students who have advanced academic backgrounds, and with fellow students who are much younger. With its origins in classism, psychological correlations between having a lack of wealth and educational attainment increases feelings of isolation among students from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds as they grapple to assimilate. Without a trusted familial role model to make the experience less strange, the first year is often spent as an outsider, which also places students at greater risk for attrition (Inman and Mayes, 1999).

It was apparent to this group that the future in America holds very little for the unskilled worker, and this fear provided immense drive for those who have experienced the sad realities of the current working situation within the United States. The women in this research understand from first-hand experience the inequities and limitations for those without some level of college education or training and perceive education as a fountain of opportunity and path to social, economic, and cultural mobility.

Most of the participants found the experience physically and emotionally overwhelming and counted the days until graduation; however, the irony of the situation was that while the women endured an incredible amount of physical and emotional stress
to provide the best for their children, it actually created somewhat of a paradox, because while the women attended school, they reported that their children had to become significantly more independent, and participants did not feel like they were the best mothers during this time. They agreed however, that attending college was necessary and worth the benefits their children would receive later.

While more progressive attitudes, or the willingness to share parenting and household responsibilities, existed among most of the third-party men discussed in this group, women continue to feel they shoulder ultimate responsibility for their children. The ages of the participant’s children did not seem to have a bearing on these feelings as participant’s believed they continued to carry such responsibilities as being role model and provider well into high school and beyond. This sense of responsibility was often the catalyst for seeking formal education and explains their expression of profound remorse when exclusive attention was temporarily averted from their children to engage in academic endeavors.

First-generation women students of nontraditional age who have tremendous familial support structures, and who find significant motivation from being held in high esteem by their family, community, and children persist in academic endeavors. Further, the women represented in this study are among a minority of women who succeed in spite of the tremendous challenges, because these women are fortunate enough to have significant support systems available to them.

Work is mandatory for the majority of first-generation women students of nontraditional age. The income produced is essential to meet basic financial responsibilities associated with raising children, paying for tuition, and maintaining a
household and transportation. While going to school, each 18 hour day consists of school, work, studying, and caring for children and household. Serious physical exhaustion and fatigue is imminent.

There was a notably small amount of single mothers represented in this research most likely because single mothers often lack the significant support described by the participants. This may explain why single mothers experience such difficulties in achieving academic attainment. Without encouragement, collaboration, and assistance from a spouse or family members attrition is imminent. This lack of significant support traps many single mothers and their children within the cycle of poverty.
Chapter Six: Contributions and Implications – The Significance of Success

People are often unsuccessful because they lack the proper cultural capital such as socially legitimate language, social skills deemed appropriate by the dominant culture, sound advisement on secondary course selection that will prepare them for college curricula, and financial support throughout college attendance. In each case, participants lacked the cultural capital associated with success as defined by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977); however, in spite of this fact, the participants were successful because they possessed other forms of cultural capital.

Success Indicators

Success was often indicative of several factors exhibited by participants. Indicators of success include having a significant support system, experiencing a change of status within family and community, developing an increased level of self-value and confidence, and assuming a role model position within the family. The combination of these factors fortifies the quest for educational attainment.

The first success indicator is a significant support system that encompasses support from several significant areas. First, it includes consistent positive reinforcement, moral support, encouragement, reliable transportation, stable finances, and a team approach to success from sources such as husband or significant other and family members. Working mothers who are also students need to hear appreciation and feel validated in their efforts. Second, household chores such as cooking, cleaning, helping children with homework, baths, and various other responsibilities that have been traditionally gender-assigned must become shared responsibilities or significantly decreased to allow sufficient time for studying and self. And third, childcare must be
fully resolved with layers of alternative or substitute plans in case of illness or an emergency. A complete support system allows the individual to temporarily shift focus to successfully address academic responsibilities.

Participants’ family members all demonstrated what appeared to be a culturally acquired strategy to accomplishing large goals such as educational attainment as all were willing to temporarily take on additional responsibilities, roles, and tasks so that a common goal could be achieved. Early attrition in many first-generation students has been linked to negative familial attitudes while an individual attempts college; however, in this research family support systems provided an uncommon level of vast support. The participants came primarily from lower middle to lower socioeconomic families where survival often depended on the family’s ability to work together closely and share responsibilities. This culturally acquired approach to familial success bestowed overwhelming positive support on many levels and was the primary reason these women succeeded where so many others failed. In this case, a familial, team approach to academic success must be considered a form of cultural capital.

The second success indicator is a change in social status within one’s family or community. Proud parents, children, and spouses often share their pride in the student’s progress and respond by demonstrating more respect and appreciation for the individual. Community members also gained and displayed more respect when they learned of educational progress. This new respect raised the individual’s status in the community and in one’s family. The desire to permanently maintain this new status generated compelling determination for the individual to complete the degree.
Capitalism, racism, and classism are oppressive social structures that make women from historically working-class families feel inferior. Such feelings usually become psychological barriers. In addition, fatalism associated with exploitive social structures can sabotage or at least hinder educational attainment. In this case, however, feelings of inferiority were overcome through a series of successes and validations, and an elevation in social status by family members and members of the community as well as indoctrination into a new profession by instructors and members of the given professional community.

The third success indicator is increased self-esteem and confidence. As the student successfully overcomes major obstacles, she begins to recognize, nurture, value, and trust her intellect and self worth. She develops confidence in her abilities and begins removing old negative constructs about self. She reconstructs old notions with new perspectives that encompass wide-ranging considerations and knowledge. From this new perspective, anything is possible.

Education made positive transformations possible in the lives of participants, their children, and their communities. Successful learning experiences at the community college resulted in increased self-confidence, increased self-esteem, and a greater sense of independence. In this research, school became a place where first-generation women of nontraditional age found self-worth and a sense of identity. In addition to acquiring specific academic and vocational skills enhanced interpersonal skills and the ability to critically analyze various situations were also the result of successful adult education experiences.
The fourth success indicator is the assumption of the role model position within the family. When the individual recognizes the subsequent impact her educational attainment will likely have on her children and future generations, her education becomes a sense of responsibility. The need to complete the degree becomes imperative and synonymous with her children’s success, and from this perspective, demonstrating to one’s children that educational attainment is viable becomes a formidable influence.

In every case, these women wanted to be not just good mothers, but outstanding mothers, and so they endured great stress and hardship by returning to college so they could provide a good example for their children and socially reproduce the desire to attend college in their own children. They wanted to “show them the way” as well as provide monetarily for the present and future of their children.

*Transition Indicators*

Initially, most first-generation women students of nontraditional age begin school feeling inferior and doubting their abilities. They seek advisors who will assume responsibility for the academic process and have no time to attend workshops. The initial personal investment in the education venture is often limited due to other competing factors. Students that will eventually become successful and graduate with a degree or certificate experience transitions throughout the process that often indicate success.

There are several changes that students experience which indicate imminent success. The first transition indicator students’ experience is a growing sense of independence as they take initiative and seek assistance with the academic process. They take the initiative to talk to other students, advisors, or instructors, and come to understand basic steps in the process. As the larger picture becomes evident, students
begin to develop the confidence to proceed and are willing to take further steps towards complete independence.

Next, they make certain financial aid or money for tuition is secured in advance of the upcoming semester and begin to accept full responsibility for their education, and realize that all decision-making and responsibility ultimately belongs to them. They begin determining which classes will be needed well in advance planning and taking the necessary steps to secure the needed courses. And finally, once they are secure with the process and are progressing successfully in their academics, they become comfortable enough to begin sharing this information with new students.

Students transition through the various stages along a continuum. Development of process proficiency and successful achievement in coursework produce optimal transition results when the two occur simultaneously, and one without the other often hinders transition and progression. Students may move back and forth between stages should they experience academic failure or inexorable obstacles that may directly affect confidence.

Cultural Mobility

As discussed in the literature, DiMaggio (1982) found that cultural capital theory was more viable for high status females who benefited most from their cultural capital, and that the cultural mobility model was more viable among lower socioeconomic status males. In the United States where students can take advantage of a strong education system, DiMaggio (1982) found that cultural mobility had the greatest impact on the grades of less advantaged males perhaps because possessing and attaining prestigious cultural capital recourses, such as high status language and skills, may significantly assist
people of lower status in upward class mobility. When this research was conducted in 1982, females from lower socioeconomic status demonstrated no applicability with the cultural mobility model.

A finding of this research project indicates that DiMaggio’s (1982) cultural mobility model also applies to first-generation women community college students of nontraditional age. In this case, alignment with the cultural mobility model comes after the women had been out of high school and in the work force for several years and typically had children of their own.

There has been a significant influx of women into the workforce, which surpassed the 59 percent mark in 2005 (Chao and Utgoff, 2005). And, perhaps because of this significant shift where women from lower and middle socioeconomic status in the United States are all but required to work, they too find themselves similarly restricted by the social structures imposed on those without monetary wealth and cultural capital associated with upper status families thus making the cultural mobility model together, with other forms of cultural capital, more viable for this group as well.

For first-generation women community college students of nontraditional age, time in the work force following high school and origins in lower and middle socioeconomic status generated the need for liberation from inherent social structures. Breaking from tradition, the women sought to create new social structures for both themselves, and more importantly, for their children. Cultural mobility became the catalyst and postsecondary education the mechanism by which boundaries of inherent oppressive social structures could be removed and new constructive structures could be employed.
Women can change their destiny, overcome oppressive structures, and reject the notion that individuals are permanently confined within the constraints of social structures according to Post Structural Feminist theory. In this case, the women resisted repressive structures and created vast new support structures to achieve success. Further, the education they received offered forms of cultural capital that would make invisible some of the obstacles associated with lower socioeconomic status, and became the foundation on which new structures were built. Postsecondary education provided participants with specific knowledge beneficial to their communities. For example, some of the participants would become professional nurses. Nurses assist all community members, and therefore, nurses have significant value to all socioeconomic levels in a society. As the data demonstrated, the nursing students experienced elevation in social status among community and family members and felt social barriers diminish, and this was also true for students with other majors as well.

According to participants, classism is often the source of inferiority in women from historically working-class families. Tacit social structures have conventions and boundaries that are implicitly understood by working-class women, and as children, living within the parameters of imposed social structures that include family expectations, labor force expectations, K-12 teacher and guidance expectations, gender role expectations and beyond can often lead to fatalism in that a particular habitus is developed that does not include possibilities beyond such structures. The fatalism associated with such exploitive social structures often sabotages and hinders educational attainment. As Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1996) suggested, such women
must develop “an awareness of their own minds… if these women are to stop passing down these patterns from one generation to the next,” (p. 163) and the women in this research achieved such awareness.

Participants resisted such fatalism and were able to examine the hegemony imposed by the social structures that bound their inherent cultures. Education for this group expanded knowledge, skill, and confidence, which allowed the individuals to engage in candid reflection about that which was produced socially and culturally in their own lives. Such experiences became the means for participants to question their own cultural hegemony and critically examine and challenge underlying beliefs and constructs. The result of this reflection was the ability to consciously reason and question how their beliefs, actions, and examples would affect what is socially and culturally reproduced in future generations, and how they could break the cycle within themselves and their children. This realization became the source of great determination and motivation for cultural mobility and the creation of limitless alternatives structures and mechanisms.

Further, participants came to see how their parents’ decisions, attitudes, actions, and cultures directly biased their attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions, in terms of education and career. Once underlying intrinsic beliefs were exposed within the context from which it came, such as classism, participants began to take deliberate steps to revise their children’s perceptions of the boundaries of oppressive structures by promoting an optimistic view of education, making financial preparations for college, taking an active role in their children’s education, and positively correlating career, higher education, and quality of life. Each participant worked diligently to develop good study habits, teach
critical thinking skills, and model the use of good communicative competence with their own children as a result of their learning experiences. The profound impact education had on the lives of the women and their children reiterates the significant importance and power of education at all levels.

Women in this research disrupted negative thought patterns and feelings of inferiority through a series of successes and validations, and through a sense of elevation in social status by family members and members of the community as well as indoctrination into a new profession by instructors and members of the given professional community. As acceptance into a new profession and social status became more of a reality, as demonstrated by the positive responses by family members and members of the community, cultural mobility was confirmed and motivation and persistence increased.

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1996) found in their work that within the marriages of working-class women, communication and power within the relationship often conformed to the sex-role stereotypes of the culture with an unequal distribution of power and designated “woman” responsibilities. This was not the case for the successful working-class first-generation women of nontraditional age represented in this research. Academic success hinged on an equitable division of power and responsibility within the home, and nontraditional support from husbands, fiancés, and family members with household chores, childcare, cooking, and cleaning made it possible for the women to shift some of their thoughts, time, and emotions to concentrate more effectively on academic endeavors. While the family support of one’s mother, aunts, or sisters is not completely unusual, the assumption of “woman” responsibilities by men so that the women could achieve success is somewhat uncommon, and may suggest a shift in
attitudes and social structures previously held by men of lower and middle socioeconomic status in the United States.

Within this research, women produced new structures by viewing their experiences through a positive lens. At first, I thought the fact that racism was not more overtly recognized as a barrier among the minorities may have been due to the fact that I am a White female and participants may have been reluctant to share their opinions on this topic. However, after further reflection, I believe there was more to their responses, because both White and Black participants reported avoiding the negative and focusing on the positive as essential to success. This deliberate avoidance may have been an inherent form of constructive resistance that was employed by all the participants.

By filtering all incoming stimuli to include only that, which supported success, the women resisted looming pressures through constructive resistance, actively choosing to disregard or deny the existence of pessimistic negative or disapproving stimuli and to receive only that which supported achievement. Each created new support structures to achieve success such as placing themselves within the context of their new professions. Early in the process, the notion of joining the profession was similar to that of role-playing; however, as academic success increased and family and community members accepted the women in their new roles, social status was elevated equal to that of a member of the chosen profession. The role-play became the student’s new reality, which significantly increased the likelihood of persistence and success.

Participants avoided placing the responsibility of their situation on oppressive social structures because that would validate their existence. Instead, they developed an intuitive strategy whereby they chose to intentionally ignore negative attitudes,
comments, and incidents indicative of oppressive social structures, such as familial, workforce, school, race or gender role expectations. “It’s about you! If you make a big deal out of it, you will loathe a lot of things. If I took everything personally, I would have stopped coming” (Claire). Narrow focus was placed on the task at hand, and counter-productive thoughts were deliberately obscured to maintain an affirmative attitude and persist in their endeavors. Although initially subconscious, resisting traditional reactionary behaviors to negative actions or stimuli produced a fresh attitude of implicit avoidance. In all cases, the women’s positive responses and reactions, increased sense of self-worth, and increased belief in their personal worthiness to join a particular profession defied the parameters of oppressive social structures such as racism and classism.

Consistent with the post-structuralist views of resistance and production, the women engaged in a two-way process whereby they constructively resisted social structures by denying their existence, and then produced new structures which consisted of a significant familial support system and integration into a profession of higher status than they previously belonged.

*Parenting in American Culture*

Also raised in this research is the tacit disregard for parenting within American culture by patriarchal social structures, which are then imposed on those from lower and middle socioeconomic income levels. Children need to be inculcated with legitimate socialization from within the home and have this socialization reinforced within schools and good daycare programs. Sound ethics, which promote good citizenship, compassion,
solid critical thinking skills, good manners, sound interpersonal skills, and socially legitimate language, are requirements for success in American culture.

In the business sector, the term human capital is used to characterize and categorize peoples' skills and productivity; however, for the purpose of this research, I refer to human capital as the contributions people make not in terms of monetary capital produced, but in terms of both the tangible services they provide and the improvements they make to society and future generations for the greater good.

The reduction in the investment of human capital phenomenon seems to have become a part of the national hegemony in that parenting is rarely a consideration in state and national policies that would truly impact the quality and nature of being a parent in the U.S., and the subsequent generations this will impact. In fact, serious debt with the war in Iraq and a federal reduction in taxation has caused investments in basic programs that assist with quality childcare to slowly trickle to a stop. For example, several of the participants were provided with before and after school care for their children, but with reductions in federal expenditures in what are generally considered social programs many states can no longer afford such services. Therefore, as of fall 2004, many such childcare initiatives were eliminated and several participants had to find alternative care where their children were not stimulated intellectually or socially. As a whole, middle and lower income level women must work outside the home, which means quality childcare is an essential factor for parents.

White males overwhelmingly control what knowledge is validated within the United States, and because this is still the case, this process intensely reflects the group’s interests with little regard for what is valid knowledge among women. This is particularly
true for African American women and women of lower and middle socioeconomic status, as they are invisible to the elite group of men who make national and state policies. Consequently, the knowledge generated by women with regards to education and children continues to be inadequately addressed by those in power. Patriarchal social structures continue to have significant bearing on women as decisions, policies, and considerations dismiss many of the issues directly related to women such as the need to work, education, and caring for children. Further research on how patriarchal social structures continue to affect women’s lives, work, children, and education in the United States is needed.

Further, the cost of housing, food, gasoline, and transportation have risen as salaries for lower and middle income families have stagnated to the extent that it has become necessary for women of middle and lower-socioeconomic income levels to work and help pay for basic living essentials. This trend reflects a growing disparity in income levels for those of lower and middle socioeconomic status where incomes are shrinking. More education is necessary for adults as quality jobs with higher salaries and benefits now require additional skills (Shipler, 2004).

Some may argue that recent legislation has been created to support families and parenting. For example, the Family and Medical Leave Act provides 12 weeks of job-protected leave to eligible employees upon the birth or adoption of a child; to care for a spouse, child or parent with a serious health condition; or to deal with their own serious health condition. However, I would argue that 12 weeks of job-protected leave supports those with higher income levels who can afford to take 12 weeks without pay, and not nearly adequate to address the larger issues associated with preparing adult populations to
enter more highly skilled professions that now exist in the United States while parenting young children.

As a matter of national policy, most families cannot thrive in jobs that require little to no education or training, and more women from middle and lower socioeconomic levels are finding it obligatory to obtain further education at community colleges. The overarching result has been more women entering the workforce and attending college, and while children receive greater benefits from this education, as a society, we must be careful that these children also receive quality nurturing childcare during the period while women are away from home working and obtaining an education to ensure appropriate socialization and emotional support for all children. The broader societal implications should this issue be ignored are significant.

*Family and Community Benefits*

The development of higher order thinking skills in the participants’ children was an unexpected finding. As I listened to participants share how they exchanged ideas and approached homework and questioning with their own children, it occurred to me that what they were describing was a critical shift in the way they questioned their children. As a former middle school teacher, I often used Benjamin Bloom’s (1956), *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, which categorized questions into hierarchal cognitive levels. The premise of Bloom’s taxonomy was to assist teachers in developing critical thinking skills in their students. Initially the participants were questioning their children on a very basic knowledge level, prior to taking classes. After the first year, the participants began to question their own children similarly to the way they were questioned in their college
classes asking questions on advanced higher hierarchical levels of synthesis and analysis.

For example:

When my kids were doing their homework, after reading, I use to ask them questions like what color was the dog in the story? Now, I see how teachers question you to draw out more information and get you to really think. You have to be able to think on your own when you’re a nurse, so now I ask my kids questions like, what would you do if you were in this situation? I’m not so literal anymore and neither are my kids now. (Joanna)

I have gone from looking at everything on a very spoon-fed, simple way, to analyzing everything in a very distinctive way, and you start looking at everything that way! It takes you far beyond just memorizing what you read, you know?

Now you take that knowledge and use it with your child and he learns. (Aubrey)

The participants provided many such examples over the course of this research. In essence, they had internalized higher levels of cognition through engaging in the academic process, and then intuitively passed these skills on to their children via questioning during homework and conversation.

The participants were inadvertently reproducing essential critical thinking skills in their own children, which is certain to provide an intellectual edge in their children’s academic endeavors ultimately creating more opportunities for cultural mobility.

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1996) conclude that maternal question posing in its most evolved form promotes human development at the highest level and is the nucleus of connected knowing, because this type of questioning develops advanced thinking skills and emotion in children (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1996).
The participant’s children benefit greatly from their parents’ education as they learn to approach education and the world from a critical perspective. Children also benefited from the use of a more extensive vocabulary used within the home and an explicit value for education and the opportunities it provides. It is therefore likely that the children of first-generation women of nontraditional age who are successful in educational attainment will come to be no different in terms of possessing extensive vocabularies and more developed cognitive skills than the children of people whose families have been attending college for generations.

Participants also acquired and developed greater interpersonal skills within the academic realm that they were able to apply on various formal and practical levels and in a range of situations to improve the lives of children, families, clients, and communities. From volunteering in their communities to speaking with ease to doctors, teachers, or supervisors, participants’ interpersonal skills were greatly enhanced. Transference and application of academic knowledge and skills was evident well beyond the classroom as this group successfully demonstrated the ability to think critically and compassionately and interact appropriately in a variety of new settings and situations.

First generation women of nontraditional age have extensive challenges; however, the potential contributions this group has to offer society are enormous and invaluable, and as a society, we cannot afford to lose so many of these women to attrition. Accordingly, societal investment in adult education contributes favorably not only to the people who engage in formal education, but to their children, communities, and society at large.
Hence, also considerable is the positive impact these graduates will have on society as they enter the workforce as nurses, teachers, and various other professionals equipped with reason and compassion. An ostensible result of the reflective rigorous nature of the post-secondary education process was the creation of better thinkers, better citizens, and better lives, and because these women are more mature when they enter possessing wide-ranging life experiences as mothers, wives, employees, they bring a distinctive compassion and empathy to their work. In their chosen fields, first generation women of nontraditional age will make considerable contributions to society providing quality health care, education, and a variety of critical services to the public.

As a civilization, investment in workforce preparation is essential to the members of society who receive services from those who become well-prepared professionals. Adult education programs offered within community colleges provide this necessary service to society at large, and as first-generation women students of nontraditional age enter the workforce upon graduation they provide many such critical services. In addition, these women become vital contributing members of society as their increased salaries allow them to purchase homes, educate their children, invest in their retirement, and support the economic good of others through community spending. The tremendous transformation that results from participation in adult education programs is valuable on many levels. Increased confidence and self-esteem, financial independence, the immense benefits children receive as the result of their mother’s education, and the incredible contributions these women make as professionals and contributors to society all warrant a shift in current thinking about adult education. Educating first-generation women of
nontraditional age must be seen as a valuable service to society that merits further investment.

First-generation women of nontraditional age who pursue an education need immense support that must be available to achieve attainment. Accessible quality affordable childcare, transportation, and assistance with tuition and books are a few of the minimal necessities needed to achieve success, and the level at which first-generation women of nontraditional age must work to attain an education amplifies why so many are unable to attain this goal. The level of motivation, hard work, and persistence is highly admirable, but not sustainable for most students in similar situations to achieve, because many students do not have sustainable support systems.

For women to be successful, physical, financial, and psychological barriers must be addressed. In terms of financial obstacles, childcare, transportation, books, and tuition must be made more accessible, and in terms of the physical, measures that would allow these women to sustain their families without working so many hours outside the home during school would be highly desirable. Psychological obstacles and feelings of inferiority can be dispelled somewhat with explicit instruction in the academic process and familiarization with academic vocabulary.

**Potential Areas for Further Research**

As a result of this research, there are several areas where further investigation may yield additional and significant insight and findings. Several issues come to the surface, such as the women who do not succeed; therefore a counter study would be valuable. In addition, further examination of the results of reduced investments in human capital and adult education are also significant. Also, limited academic access due to
increasing technology demands and accessibility, the lack of concern for parenting, and the affect of non-standard communication skills on academic attainment are also viable research areas with the potential to yield considerable results.

The participants represented are within the minority of nontraditional women students who return to college, because these women achieve academic attainment. In order to transfer this success to the larger population of first-generation students and women students of nontraditional age, greater support is required. The potential for the serving the greater good is significant, because as substantiated in this research, investing in the education of such women is essential to society. In this case, many of the participants will help to resolve the nursing shortage that currently exists, and the potential for many more to follow is viable; however, the true question is, can this level or some level of support be stimulated to expand this success to women without viable support systems? This is also a significant area for further research and program development.

A counter study exploring the women who are not successful would also be helpful to further expand knowledge and theory on first-generation women community college students of nontraditional age. Data collected from such an investigation might substantiate many of the findings in this research and provide additional insight into the lives of the women who do not have significant support systems. Such a study has the potential of alerting education to other constraint factors.

Reduced Investment

Capitalism is an oppressive social structure because as it builds wealth for a few, it fails to invest in human capital and the greater good of society. Within patriarchal
society, capitalism measures success in terms of monetary wealth, and in the case of Neo-liberal economics, consumes more than it gives back. One of the basic principles of this philosophy openly calls for an end to Federal spending that supports various forms of public education including Adult Education. Utmost emphasis is placed on profits with little to no regard for adequate investment in the training and development of lower and middle class citizens. The implications of such practices on Adult Education will most likely be further funding reductions and diminishing investments in Adult Education research, community colleges, and financial aid for adults who seek accessibility to higher education. Currently, funding for research in adult education and community college programs that could significantly increase the amount of people living quality productive lives has shrunk or is in jeopardy.

For women of lower and middle socioeconomic levels, life has become increasingly complicated by increased technological needs such as frequent access to a computer and Internet for learning and accessibility to registration, and for their children’s learning as technology has become an essential dynamic. Such added expenditures are necessary for children to attempt academic parity with middle and upper status students, and for adult students to access courses, homework, registration, etc. However, philosophies that espouse withdrawal of social investment are having a significant impact on opportunities for social mobility, advancement or equity in a society where two people must work full time and can barely afford the basic essentials. Without further education and training to increase an individual’s income level and productivity, the constant struggle to obtain essentials impedes quality of life and overshadows daily living with intense stress and anxiety.
Because many of the women in this research did not have home computers and had access only to computers in public settings, additional research on the implications and impact of technology on first-generation women of nontraditional age in the community college as it pertains to access is necessary. How is life more complicated without home access to technology, and how do students without access to home computers secure courses before other students with home accessibility to computers fill rosters? Also, how does the additional time spent away from home and the necessary childcare that results when technology is unaffordable in the home, affect students?

At the core of these issues is society’s comfort level and acceptance of inadequate care for young children and overall lower levels of social investment for those at the lower and middle socioeconomic levels. Student participants and faculty participants believe that, current attitudes represented on a superficial level by a passive media that lacks open and honest civil discourse, deceives Americans into a false sense of denial on such issues. The fact that Americans and the American media fail to be outraged seems to suggest a national hegemony and acceptance that all children and adults in the United States will not have the opportunity to develop to their fullest potential due to inadequate social investment.

Participants cite a general lack of funding to make a difference at the local level, and under-funded public programs that do not adequately address some of the early childhood education issues where critical brain development and sound nutrition is essential to all future learning. Such issues are essential factors in educating first-generation women of nontraditional age, because parenting and childcare are significant concerns in their lives that can and do lead to academic failure.
Communication Skills as a Barrier to Academic Progression

Many first-generation women of nontraditional age work in jobs that do not readily utilize academic skills, and in such situations, time away from education contributed to diminished scholastic proficiencies. This absence and the permeating prevalence of vernacular or non-standard formal language in American culture contributed to decreased proficiency in writing skills further complicating the first year’s challenges as students learn or relearn standard English usage and increase vocabulary levels.

Culturally acquired vernacular speech that deviates significantly from standard English to the extent that it affects one’s ability to read and write formally, deserves more attention and research. When students used culturally transmitted vernacular speech containing unusual syntax patterns that lack subject-verb and number agreement, they often struggled in developmental and core English courses. Participants viewed the patterns of standard English as unnatural from their own speech which made formal writing extremely difficult. For participants, writing like they talk was viewed as a tremendous barrier, which produced incredible frustration as they repeated courses several times and received poor grades initially.

Language also appears to be a significant barrier when students come to school speaking English as a second language. The use of colloquial speech, slang, and historical references unique to American culture used in classrooms confuses and creates obstacles in learning. More research is needed on how to assist learners with improving oral and written communication skills at the community college level. Assisting students as they make this strange language intrinsic is necessary for both groups.
Implications and Recommendations for Community Colleges

Overburdened administration, staff, and faculty can appear rushed and insensitive to the students who need help the most. First-generation women students of nontraditional age feel inadequate and are often uneasy to approach busy faculty members, advisors, and administrators who could provide assistance. Participants felt most staff in the community college were too overwhelmed with large numbers of students to answer questions, advise, and teach. Classes reflected a hurried approach, or as one participant commented, “she taught class like I already knew the material.” Students from this group enter the community college feeling apprehensive and inferior, and therefore, more time and attention is necessary to create rapport, trust, and a welcoming environment. Registration and admissions must be approached with greater sensitivity and from a very explicit nature where basic knowledge and vocabulary of the process is not assumed information.

While various research projects have previously stated the need for more one-on-one advising, funding levels have not risen to meet the needs of increasing concentrations of students entering the community colleges, and as in the case of this research site, funding levels have consistently declined since 2000. Academic advisors are assigned far too many students to have a significant impact. The persistent inadequate investment in adult education programs has the potential to limit the amount of professionals educated and greatly impact society as fewer citizens have necessary job training and shortages in critical areas such as nursing become catastrophic.

Within the community college where this research was conducted instructors have a teaching load expectation of between 18 and 22 credit hours per semester. This seems
excessive given the fact that many of the students who attend the community colleges are first-generation students who need much more support, guidance, and orientation to many aspects of college life. An obvious suggestion would be to decrease such high faculty teaching loads so that instructors have more time to address the additional advising needs of all students as well as adequately prepare for courses. Further research should be conducted on the impact and implications of the faculty workload within community colleges on student achievement and persistence.

Developing a relationship with an advisor is necessary, and a mandatory program-specific orientation would be helpful in providing students with information about coursework and dispelling any myths about the level of responsibility they may assume is their advisors. Most participants believed that once they saw an advisor, the advisor would assign courses, enroll them into classes, and send them a schedule when this is certainly not the case. With the help of effective faculty advisement, students must be made to understand that the responsibility of their education belongs to the individual, not the advisor. This information must be delivered via an almost surrogate role model who the students can come to trust from the perspective of similar culture and similar language.

Advisors must also make the registration process explicit to new students immediately, and the plan of study for academic programs should be revised so that each would contain all relevant prerequisite courses in a very overt hierarchical format.

Adult education programs recommend and community colleges employ numerous strategies such as student success workshops, advising centers, and academic advisors to assist students; however, many of these well-meaning strategies are ineffective. This
group of students often lack strong interpersonal skills initially and come to the community college with great apprehension feeling inferior in the presence of administrators, advisors, instructors, and more academically prepared students. They perceive the advising and registration process as impersonal and the overall environment as hostile and have no time to engage in extracurricular workshops. Staff in advising centers as well as advisors often use terms and language that are unfamiliar to students with no background in the college experience. Basic terms such as syllabus, semester, transcript, core, prerequisite, co-requisite, and numerous other terms, are unknown, and initial negative experiences can quickly confirm their worst fears of inferiority.

Strategies must be developed that make ineffective approaches effective for a wider base of students. Student success workshops are highly effective when they reach targeted populations, and consequently, such seminars need to be offered within mandatory orientation sessions or within the context of specific courses to ensure that students, who need the information, receive it in the initial stages of the process. Alternative delivery systems that are accessible online are necessary to ensure such valuable programs reach their targeted audiences.

*Recommended Practices in Adult Education*

When people of lower socio-economic status are made to feel a part of the profession they are pursuing and experience cultural mobility and elevation in social status, persistence and success increase. Program design in Adult Education should include, and more focus should be placed on, closely aligning and specializing students into the professions they are pursuing. In doing so, oppressive social structures lose their power as students begin to experience life from the perspective of an elevated social
status. They are able to see firsthand the possibilities and the power of the experience that creates a new consciousness. Once the student experiences this new reality, motivation and determination are increased. The participants represented here are within the minority of nontraditional women students who return to college, because these women achieve academic attainment. However, transference of their success may be viable through more collaborative program planning and integrated opportunities with various professions.

Adult education can assist community colleges programs on an empirical level in optimizing potential success for first-generation women students of nontraditional age by embracing the following recommendations:

- Incorporate initial training that makes explicit academic language, programs of study with precise instructions and guidelines on pre and co-requisites for various programs including college core and make such training available online for added accessibility.
- Develop student courses that will help students manage and understand the academic process that are explicit and accessible online.
- Reduce full-time faculty workloads or provide support systems for part-time faculty members so that more attention can be given to time spent advising students and building rapport.
- Develop training for faculty that would address the needs of students who speak English as a second language, such as avoiding slang usage, non-essential historical references, etc.
- Develop and explore teaching methods that support internal transference of writing skills among students with nonstandard colloquial speech.
- Establish a quality site-based childcare facility for the children of students and faculty members that is affordable or free of charge.

- Emphasize solid teaching and learning strategies among instructors to avoid teaching in a hurried approach that makes students feel they should already know the material.

- Provide more support to students initially by providing a designated place and team of permanent faculty advisors who would provide program-specific orientations upon arrival at the community college.

- Reduce the number of part-time faculty members and increase the amount of full time faculty members to support a community approach to learning and provide extended support to students.

- Collectively, engage people from community colleges and adult education programs to raise societal awareness of the critical need for funding and financial assistance for first-generation women students of nontraditional age.

“I know that what a parent learns they pass it on to their children, and so if my parents had went to college, they could have told me about a lot of obstacles and more about what to expect, and what to look to achieve, so that’s the difference I can make.”

*Destiny, 2004*
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APPENDICES
Appendix - A

EDUCATION AS EXPERIENCED BY FIRST-GENERATION WOMEN OF NONTRADITIONAL AGE IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Category I – Academic

1. How or why did you decide to attend college?
   
   • Also, would you be in college if you could make the same money as without a college degree?

2. How long had you been away from education when you returned?

3. Did you have to take any developmental or refresher courses when you returned to school, and if you did, how many and how many semesters did this take you?

4. Please describe for me an average day in your life since you began DTCC. Please begin from the moment you wake until the moment you return to bed.

5. During your first semester of classes, what was the most difficult part of going to school?

Category II – Social

6. Can you share with me your experiences and challenges such as with learning how to register, learning what each individual instructor wants, learning what future employers want, as well as learning how to juggle responsibilities beyond school such the kids, home, work, studying, and where to find a variety of resources?

7. In what way has your college experience to date changed the way you think and behave, and have these changes affected your relationship with your family or members of your community by changing the way you think about certain issues?
8. How has your college experience changed the way you feel about yourself? Please describe.

9. How has this experience (attending college) affected your social life?

**Category III – Gender**

10. Do you receive any financial support such as financial aid or assistance child-care with child-care?

11. Who provides moral support?

12. Please describe your home setting and the level of support you receive from others [family, spouse, children, significant other, etc.] in terms of cleaning the house, cooking, taking care of the children, helping the children with homework, shopping, paying the bills, day or evening care while you attend school, and earning money. Also, please tell me how many children you have, and if you are you married?

13. Do you consider certain responsibilities to be a “woman’s” when it comes to work in the home and raising children?

14. How does this differ from what you consider a man’s responsibilities in the home?

15. How do you think attending college is a different experience for women? Please explain.

**Category IV – Culture**

16. Describe the most influential person in your life.

17. How did that person affect your life and your decision to attend college? Why or why not and how?
18. Family Structure: When you were growing up, what was your parents’ outlook on education and attending college? How do you think their outlook has affected your attitudes towards going to college and getting an education in high school?

19. What was your extended family and communities’ outlook on education and attending college?

20. Did that outlook affect your attitudes towards going to college and getting an education in high school?

21. Has attending college changed the way your family and friends speak or relate to you?

22. Every person has a dialect they receive from their culture and family. How do you believe your language or dialect has helped or hindered you in school?

23. How do you think your race as affected your overall experience with education?

24. What have been the positive aspects of race for you in terms of getting an education?

25. What do you believe are the negative aspects of race in terms of getting an education?

26. How do you think your going to college will affect your children?

**Category V – Economic Aspect of Educational Attainment**

27. Attending college classes, buying books and supplies, and caring for your family can be very expensive. How do you manage to financially?

28. What have been the most difficult financial burdens that, if they were removed, would help you achieve your goals educationally?

**Category VI - First-Generation Aspect of Educational Attainment**

29. You are the first in your family to attend college. How do you think your experience is different from someone whose mother and father attended college?
30. What are some of the benefits of being the first in your family to attend college?

31. What are some of the challenges of being the first in your family to attend college?

**Category VII – Nontraditional Aspects of Educational Attainment**

32. Please explain why you did not go to college immediately after high school?

33. Please explain what you think makes attending college more difficult when you are older than when you are of the traditional college age of between 18 and 22?

34. Please describe the positive aspects of attending college when you are older than traditional college age.

35. How do you think your experience is different than a younger student’s or how do you think the college experience differs for traditional versus nontraditional students?

**Conclusion**

36. What advise would you give to other new students who are similar to you in terms of age, having children and little prior experience attending college when they come to the CC?

37. What would make this experience better?

38. Is there anything else you would like to add that I did not cover in this interview?

39. Do you think you will graduate with an associate’s degree, bachelor’s degree, or beyond? If possible, what would you like to ultimately achieve in terms of a career and degree?
Appendix B

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Faculty Consent Form

Title of Study: Educational Experiences of First-Generation Women Community College Students of Nontraditional Age.
Principal Investigator Catherine Elise Barrett Faculty Sponsors: Dr. Audrey Jaeger Ph.D. and Dr. Barbara Sparks, Ph.D.

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to understand in greater depth, the daily experiences of women of nontraditional age who attend community colleges and who are the first in their families to attend college. In addition, this study also seeks to better understand the degree to which norms established within a groups’ culture, class, and race, affect educational attainment. The intention is to provide community college administrators, instructors, and policy-makers with more information about the daily experiences both within postsecondary education and at home of this increasing group of students.

INFORMATION
1. Faculty volunteers will be asked to engage in a formal focus group that requests faculty members to contribute their observations and insights on the challenges and daily experiences of first-generation women community college students of nontraditional age. During the focus group, participants are required to conceal student names for the purpose of individual privacy.
2. Participants in the faculty focus discussion group are required to conceal the names of any third party individuals that may surface in the discussion to protect the privacy of those individuals as well.
3. Participants in the faculty focus group will participate in a single to one hour group discussion on the challenges of the first-generation women community college students of nontraditional age.
4. Data will be collected during the one-hour focused group discussion, and the discussion will be audio taped. The taped discussion may be used to present findings of this research and pseudonyms will be used to conceal each participant’s identity and protect individual privacy. No data will be kept that could potentially link participants and pseudonyms and tapes will be secured at all times.
5. Audio tapes will be destroyed after the final presentation of the data and secured until the time of destruction.

RISKS
The focused discussion will address only the observations and insights of faculty on the challenges of first-generation women community college students of
nontraditional age No risks are present and the researcher will protect the identities of all participants in this study.

BENEFITS
Potential indirect benefits from this study include greater awareness and knowledge about mature community college women who are the first in their families to attend college and the challenges they encounter as they work, take care of children, and attend college. In addition, increasing tacit knowledge about this large group of students may help to improve advising strategies, generate discourse for developing or enhancing policies at the national, state, and local levels, and potentially provide solutions that help this group of students persist and reach their intended goals at the community college.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential. Each interviewee will have a pseudonym. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless you specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. No reference will be made in oral or written reports to which could link you to the study.

COMPENSATION
For participating in this study you will receive no monetary compensation. If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion, this will not affect your relationship with the investigator. Participation is completely voluntary.

EMERGENCY MEDICAL TREATMENT (not applicable)

CONTACT
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Catherine Elise Barrett, at 2401 Snowhill Rd., Durham, NC 27712, or (919) 686-3551. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Matthew Zingraff, Chair of the NCSU IRB for the Use of Human Subjects in Research Committee, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/513-1834) or Mr. Matthew Ronning, Assistant Vice Chancellor, Research Administration, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/513-2148)

PARTICIPATION
Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT
I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.
Subject's signature______________________  Date _________________

Investigator's signature______________________  Date _________________
Appendix - C

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Student Participant Consent Form

Title of Study: Educational Experiences of First-Generation Women Community College Students of Nontraditional Age.
Principal Investigator Catherine Elise Barrett
Faculty Sponsors: Dr. Audrey Jaeger
Ph.D. and Dr. Barbara Sparks, Ph.D.

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to understand in greater depth, the daily experiences of women who are older than the traditional college age of between 18-22 years of age who attend community colleges and who are the first in their families to attend college. In addition, this study also seeks to better understand how the beliefs and values of a woman’s race, culture, and family affect educational attainment. The intention is to provide community college administrators, instructors, and policy-makers with more information about the daily experiences these women within postsecondary education and at home so that more informed decisions can be made with resources, etc for this group of women.

INFORMATION
1. As a student research participant, you will be asked to share your daily experiences as a women who is the first in her family to attend college and not of traditional college age of between 18-22 years of age as you participate in community college classes. The researcher will ask a variety of questions that explore various challenges in individual interviews that are audio taped. The taped interviews may be used to present findings of this research.
2. The researcher will select an anonymous name (pseudonym) that will conceal every participant’s identity and protect individual privacy.
3. The tapes will be in a locked cabinet at all times and will be destroyed after the final presentation of the data.

RISKS
No risks are present and the researcher will protect the identities of all participants in this study.
BENEFITS
Potential indirect benefits from this study include greater awareness and knowledge about mature community college women who are the first in their families to attend college and the challenges they encounter as they work, take care of children, and attend college. In addition, increasing tacit knowledge about this large group of students may help to improve advising strategies, generate discourse for developing or enhancing policies at the national, state, and local levels, and potentially provide solutions that help this group of students persist and reach their intended goals at the community college.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential. Each interviewee will have a pseudonym. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless you specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. No reference will be made in oral or written reports to which could link you to the study.

COMPENSATION
For participating in this study you will receive no monetary compensation. If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion, this will not affect your relationship with the investigator. Participation is completely voluntary.

EMERGENCY MEDICAL TREATMENT (not applicable)

CONTACT
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Catherine Elise Barrett, at 2401 Snowhill Rd., Durham, NC 27712, or (919) 686-3551. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Matthew Zingraff, Chair of the NCSU IRB for the Use of Human Subjects in Research Committee, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/513-1834) or Mr. Matthew Ronning, Assistant Vice Chancellor, Research Administration, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/513-2148)

PARTICIPATION
Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT
I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Subject's signature_______________________________________
Date________________
Investigator's signature

Date
Appendix - D

Coding Results: Mutual Themes

Motivation: Children, Family and Community

- Motivation from children – participant as a role model
- Motivation from children – participant as provider
- Motivation from husband, mother, father, extended family – positive reinforcement/ encouragement
- Motivation from community – respect, praise, and encouragement, rise in social status

Inspiration: Reaching One’s Life Potential

- Significant desire to join a particular profession
- Intellectual/cognitive stimulation
- Personal growth and fulfillment

Obstacles Associated with Gender

- Feeling ultimate responsibility for children as a woman
- Mothering creates a myriad of extenuating day-to-day circumstances
- Lack of adequate time to parent children
- Attending school further fractures diminishing traditional role of mother in U.S.

Obstacles Related to Socioeconomic Status and Class

- The majority of lower and middle-income women must work in the U.S.
- Women would gladly forego work to be better parents if possible
- Paying for basic living essentials while in school creates tremendous obstacles

Experiences and Challenges Associated with Academics and Socio-Cultural Influences

- Profound feelings of inferiority among academically advanced students, administrators, instructors, and advisors
- Absence of familial role model
- No experience with higher education academic process: registration, advising, prerequisites, instructor expectations…
- Language as a barrier: difficulty writing formally; limited unscholarly vocabulary, vernacular language
Psychological Obstacles

- The fear of failure and inadequacies
- Feelings of inferiority associated with socioeconomic status and wealth
- Home and work take precedence over education
- Culturally acquired limited perceptions of educational attainment
- Obstacles and Barriers Associated with Race

Obstacles and Perceptions Associated with Race

- Positive perceptions of strength among African American females
- Perceptions of unfair support among White females
- Expectations of academic scholarships among White females’ families
- Expectations of athletic scholarships among Black females’ families

Managing Challenges: What Makes Success Possible

- Extensive support and positive reinforcement from husbands, children, mothers, extended family
- Extensive support and positive reinforcement from community
- Increased self-esteem, personal growth, and confidence
- Perceived benefits to future generations/role model