

## **ABSTRACT**

ROBINSON, EMILY ERIN PETERSON. Mothers, Workers and Students: Examining the Experiences of Single Mothers Transferring from Community Colleges into Universities. (Under the direction Audrey Jaeger and Alyssa Bryant).

Single parent households are on the rise, and female headed households are more likely to live in poverty than other single parent households (Holyfield, 2002). Many single mothers who do not have an undergraduate degree see education as a way out of poverty (Holyfield, 2002; Heller & Bjorklund, 2004). This research was undertaken to highlight areas where universities are assisting single mothers to attain a degree. This qualitative study utilized semi-structured in depth interviews of 16 single mothers who transferred from community college to a university. Three themes emerged regarding the educational experiences of single mothers who work and attend college. The first theme, “Finding my way to and through college”; highlights their motivating factors, their support network(s) and their feelings of pride. The second theme, “Struggle for legitimacy as a parenting student” focuses on the challenges that confront mothers as students: invisibility within the institution, and the fact that motherhood is a full time job which she cannot neglect. The final theme, “Striving for balance between multiple roles” centers around how they cope with their multiple obligations: knowing herself (honoring abilities as well as limits), and overcoming time scarcity (by managing multiple priorities). Women in this study were challenged by financial need not met by aid packages, finding appropriate child care, insensitive instructors and class schedules which made working difficult. These women were proud of their academic accomplishments and felt supported by institutional recognition of success. They were also supported by student health, counseling services and academic support programs.

Mothers, Workers and Students: Examining the Experiences of Single Mothers  
Transferring from Community Colleges into Universities

by  
Emily Erin Peterson Robinson

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
North Carolina State University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education

Higher Education Administration

Raleigh, North Carolina

March 30, 2010

APPROVED BY:

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Paul D. Umbach

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Mary Wyer

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Audrey J. Jaeger  
Committee Co-Chair

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Alyssa N. Bryant  
Committee Co-Chair

## **DEDICATION**

To my mother, Vicki Jenkins Peterson (February 22, 1949- February 24, 2006), who, as a single mother showed me the importance of education and taught me that I could do anything that I put my mind to.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Erin Robinson is currently the Assistant Director in North Carolina State's Office of Advising, Support, Information and Services. As a part of the OASIS team, she provides support for Pack Promise Scholars, a group of students whose families fall at or below 150% of the poverty line. She also coordinates the Advisor's Development Institute, a training program for advisors on campus. Prior to her work at NC State, Erin worked as a recreation therapist in the mental health field. She earned an MS degree in Recreation Administration from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Erin's undergraduate degree is in Developmental Psychology from Duke University.

Aside from her day job, Erin is a distracted wife to Greg and doting mother to Grace. She enjoys scrapbooking, making stained glass and almost anything crafty, and she looks forward to being able to devote more time to those hobbies soon.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work would not have been possible with support from numerous sources. Endless thanks and gratitude to:

- The generous women who shared their experiences and their precious time with me. To Autumn, Beth, Brett, Catrina, Danielle, Eliza, KB, Lily, Phoenix, Queen, Sally, Samantha, Sara, Susie, Tina and Valeria—thank you for being willing to share your stories.
- To my husband Greg and my daughter Grace for their patience as I took time away from them to focus on this study. Greg has been an excellent editor, sounding board and great support in keeping our household going during this process. Grace has been a breath of fresh air, always willing to give hugs and kisses of support.
- My grandmother, Emmy, my aunt, Jenny, and my cousin Elizabeth who gave up untold weekends to watch Grace while I headed to the library for a quiet workspace. Knowing that she was well cared for and having fun allowed me to focus on the task at hand. I will never be able to express my gratitude properly. Thanks also to Emmy for editing early drafts to make my writing more coherent and succinct.

- To my father, Richard, who listened patiently as I worked and reworked themes, struggled to articulate my research goals and in general tried not to pull all of my hair out. Thanks to my brothers, Mike, Chris and Alex who cheered for me even when they did not understand what I was talking about.
- To Audrey and Alyssa who read and re-read drafts to help me best reflect the words of my participants and pushed me to do my best.
- To Laura, Keri and Deb, for reviewing my work to make it stronger, making suggestions, and generally being there to listen when I needed it.
- To my church family for their prayers, to God for listening and giving me the strength I needed, and to my mother's angel, who was never far from me.
- To Roxanna McGraw and Keri Bowman for listening to my presentation more times than they cared to and always looking interested. To Roxanna, my supervisor, for understanding my distraction and allowing me time off when I needed writing days. To Keri and the entire OASIS team for assuring me that it could be done.

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## **CHAPTER 1- Introduction**

The challenges of the student who is a single mother are multifaceted: she confronts the rigorous academic demands of her degree program in addition to her childcare responsibilities and often, she must also negotiate employment obligations (Bowl, 2001; Sharp, 2004). Research considers the ‘problem’ of the single mother, a student ‘at risk’ (Choy, 2002; Vann-Johnson, 2004). She has to navigate the barriers of the academic system, (inconvenient class schedules, tricky parking situations, financial aid requirements, etc.) while also negotiating her need for a flexible work schedule, quality childcare and reliable transportation (Bowl, 2001; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Vann-Johnson, 2004). According to Pullman (2006), roughly 21 percent of undergraduate students over 25 are single parents.

By definition, a single mother is a non-traditional student by virtue of being a single parent with dependents (Choy, 2002). Researchers who study non-traditional students have found numerous ways in which this is a group at risk. Non-traditional students are less likely to complete a baccalaureate degree, more likely to fail out of school, and more likely to interrupt their studies than their traditional peers (Kienzl, 2004; Townsend, 2001). According to Roueche and Roueche (1994), non-traditional students possess “academic, social, and economic problems that challenge...success in college- e.g. poor academic history, low self concepts, limited world views, an absence of role models, family and employment responsibilities, and financial needs” (p. 3).

The list of shortcomings attributed to single mothers coupled with the multiple barriers to higher education attainment that non-traditional students face make the single

mother's quest to complete a degree seem nearly impossible. Fortunately, despite these challenges, single mothers successfully earn undergraduate degrees. How is it that these women, victims of time scarcity and role overload, manage to join the 28% of Americans who complete undergraduate degrees (US Census Bureau, 2005)? The purpose of this research is to probe this question, to seek those stories, and to highlight the accomplishments of single mothers who challenge the odds against their victory and succeed anyway.

## **Background**

Women make up 46% of the American labor force (Blades & Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2006). Approximately 82% of working women have children before the age of forty-four (Blades & Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2006). Waldfogel's research on wage gaps showed that women who were not mothers earn 10% less than men, mothers earn 27% less than men and single mothers earn between 34-44% less than equally qualified men (1998). Fully twenty-five percent of American families are mother-headed households (Van Stone, Nelson & Niemann, 2004). One way that single mothers have attempted to reduce this wage gap is to pursue higher education in order to obtain a more highly skilled and highly paid position. High relative earnings are associated with individuals who have high educational attainment, reflecting the increased need for highly skilled and educated workers (Barrett, 2005; Kienzl, 2004). While this solution to the issue of low wages is admirable, single mothers pursuing higher education have been shown to face a myriad of challenges such as a lack of child support, limited financial aid, institutional policies that are insensitive to the needs of parents,

and course schedules that conflict with work obligations (Bowl, 2001; Cross, 1981; Khan & Polakow, 2004; Vann-Johnson, 2004).

The growing costs of higher education present a particularly problematic issue for low-income students like single mothers (Clarke & Peterson, 2004; Gladieux & Swail, 1999). Disadvantaged student populations are less likely to have access to higher education opportunities than their more mainstream peers (Dupre, Butler & Smith, 2004; O'Brien & Shedd, 2001). Accordingly, the greater accessibility and lower costs of community college enrollment arguably make transfer programs a viable and appropriate option for these students (Heller & Bjorklund, 2004; McQuay, 2000). Current studies show that nearly 50 percent of all college students begin their education at community colleges (Alssid, Gruber, Jenkins, Mazzeo, Roberts & Stanback-Stroud, 2002).

Of the fifty percent of college students who begin their education at a community college, many have aspirations of transferring into a four-year college or university. Unfortunately, merely acquiring enough basic course credits to transfer does not always translate into sophomore status at their chosen university. Instead, many students who transfer from a community college find that not all of their credits will transfer into their new school, due to poor articulation agreements, diverse university requirements and perceived differences in the rigor of coursework at diverse institutions (Hagedorn, Lester, Garcia, McLain & May, 2004; Kienzl, 2004). Additionally, once those transfer students have made their way into the university system, research shows that they are less academically successful (have lower GPAs and are less likely to persist to graduation) than their peers who

did not transfer (Townsend, 2001). Transfer students complete baccalaureate degrees at lower rates than their peers, and the graduation rate is even lower for particular groups of non-traditional students such as single mothers (Bean & Metzger, 1985; Hagedorn, et. al, 2004).

Additional complex risk factors that further compromise graduation rates include being the sole source of monetary income, having children or dependents, being a single parent, delaying postsecondary enrollment, and working full time (Bradburn, 2002; Choy, 2002). Having three or more of such 'risk factors' put students in significant danger of leaving postsecondary education without a degree (Bradburn, 2002; Vann-Johnson, 2004). Because of their inherent circumstances, many single mothers pursuing undergraduate degrees indeed fall into multiple risk categories.

There are many factors that influence the barriers encountered specifically by single mothers. Cross's (1981) study of adult learners identifies dispositional barriers, situational as well as institutional barriers to academic success. Institutional barriers to continuous education found to be problematic for single parents by Vann-Johnson's (2004) study of a historically Black university are lack of flexible course scheduling (needed to accommodate work schedules) and financial need not addressed by financial aid awards. Lack of adequate financial aid support often forces single mothers to struggle with completing their educational pursuits (Heller & Bjorklund, 2004). Pullman (2006) reports that single parents' receipts of Pell grants has fallen consistently over the past 10 years with only 26.9% of Pell grant recipients being single parents in 2003-2004. This trend mirrors a national trend of

decreasing amounts of need-based financial aid in favor of merit-based financial aid awards such as the Georgia Hope scholarship (Heller & Bjorklund, 2004; Thomas & Wingert, 2010). Because many single mothers have other responsibilities aside from school, earning merit based aid can be problematic. With one possible source of income from financial aid jeopardized by the lack of grants, many must obtain jobs in order to support their families, some of which require a commitment of more than 20 hours a week (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2001; Phillippe & Valiga, 2000). Research has shown that students who work more than 20 hours per week are more likely to struggle academically and are less likely to complete a baccalaureate degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Because single mothers typically rely upon increasingly scarce need-based financial aid, making the choice to attend college ever more challenging for single parents (Heller & Bjorklund, 2004). To adapt to the shortage of need-based financial aid, many single mothers enroll in community colleges as a more affordable option for higher education. Despite the lower costs of coursework at a community college, many single mothers must work in order to afford education. Research has also clearly shown that the choice to work while enrolled in college, especially working more than 20 hours a week, can jeopardize educational outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Having outlined the numerous challenges of pursuing a baccalaureate degree as a single mother who must work, this research will focus on areas in which single mothers have found support or success. The writer's constructivist stance will be paired with a conceptual framework that relies on Schlossberg's transition theory, Holland's theory of Person-Environment fit and Goode's theory of role strain. From

this unique perspective, the research will examine the stories shared by single mothers who have succeeded at being a mother, a worker, and a student. This research will highlight the places where institutional environments and individuals have worked together to meet the needs of single mothers on their pathway to a baccalaureate degree.

### **Statement of the Problem**

All inquiry directs attention to the object of the investigation. “Human systems grow in the direction of what they persistently ask questions about” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). If inquiry is directed at what makes a person or system successful, attention will be turned to the positive possibilities for success within that environment. Previous research on single mothers often depicts them as deficient in particular areas (Kent & Gimmestad, 2004; Roueche & Roueche, 1994). Instead, this investigation will depart from the deficits based approach to focus on the multiple ways in which single mothers are finding success in their multiple roles of mother, worker, and student. In order to engage in a paradigm shift, this research will begin by recognizing the current state of the higher education system as it relates to the needs of single mothers.

Many single mothers seeking to complete a baccalaureate degree struggle to manage their multiple roles of mother, worker, and student. Based on the accommodation of part time enrollment and lower costs, community colleges are often chosen by single parents as an appropriate starting point for their educational journey. Community colleges also offer smaller class sizes that can allow re-entry students a less intimidating academic environment (Hinshaw, 2003). Community colleges also often have a greater percentage of non-

traditional students than universities, yielding a more welcoming environment for single parents who are more likely to find other parenting students within their classes (Freeman, 2005; Shaw, 1999).

The advantages of community college enrollment do not provide a suitable and sufficient solution for all single parents, however. While course schedules and class sizes make community college attendance easier to attain, research shows that earning only an associate's degree does not adequately prepare students 'beyond the margins' such as single mothers for a competitive workforce (Freeman, 2005). Kienzl (2004) reports that students who complete an associate's degree have lower overall earnings than those who have a baccalaureate degree. Thus, despite the appealing scheduling flexibility of the community college, single mothers often transfer to a four-year college in order to complete their baccalaureate degree and seek a higher earning potential.

While almost half of students at community colleges report the intent to complete a baccalaureate degree, for a variety of reasons (personal, professional, educational) only approximately 21-24% of those students actually transfer to a four-year school (Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Phillippe, 2000). Additionally, completion rates for students who transfer into a four-year college from community college remain lower than their peers who matriculated directly into the four-year college (Townsend, 2001). This could be due to Cross' (1981) dispositional barriers such as low self esteem or lack of time devoted to studying; situational barriers such as lack of child care or limited transportation; or institutional barriers such as

inadequate financial aid, inadequate academic counseling or strict attendance policies (Vann-Johnson, 2004).

While responsibility for these sub-standard educational outcomes can be attributed to numerous sources, finding ways to assist single mothers in their academic endeavors is essential if these mothers are to earn a living wage. This mission is critical not only for the personal development of the women in question, but investigation is also crucial to assure a better quality of life for the future generations they support (Barrett, 2005; Katz, 2002; Van Stone, Nelson & Niemann, 1994). In the current financial climate where unemployment disproportionately impacts low wage and semi-skilled workers, providing avenues for single mothers to gain education serves the individual student as well as makes good business sense for universities seeking enrollment. Given that enrollment swells at community colleges and universities during times of economic recession, an awareness of the needs of incoming students who are more likely to be non-traditional is an essential tool. This allows colleges and universities to move beyond recruitment of non-traditional students and into creating intentional programs for retaining those students.

### **Significance of the Problem**

There is considerable literature on barriers faced by mothers within the higher education system (Bowl, 2001; Butler, Duprez & Smith, 2004; Clark & Peterson, 2004; Heller & Bjorklund, 2004; Home, 1998; Vann-Johnson, 2004). However, there is limited research on where and when single mothers have experienced success or environmental ‘fit’ or congruence as they negotiate higher education institutions in pursuit of their baccalaureate

degree. Bowl (2001) maintains that the women in her study have been systematically disadvantaged by educational structures through unresponsive policies, a deficit of racial awareness, and support services that did not attempt to accommodate their needs. Vann-Johnson (2004) found that single parents encountered multiple barriers to the completion of their baccalaureate degree including lack of time, finances, transportation, childcare, housing, and job responsibilities.

This study gives voice to single mothers' successes and feelings of 'fit' within the campus environment, thereby generating suggestions to inform both academic and student service practice to accommodate the diverse needs of this special group. By generating additional knowledge of these women's educational experience, this research allows community colleges, state universities, and private universities to be more aware of and responsive to the needs of transfer students who are single mothers that work. This research also extends the literature focused on person-environmental fit beyond full time, residential students to include non-traditional students like single mothers. Furthermore, this research provides a qualitative analysis of student experiences of environmental fit and student defined success where many previous studies have used quantitative measures of institutional congruence or 'fit' as paired with Holland typologies (Feldman, Ethington & Smart, 2001; Feldman, Smart & Ethington, 1999).

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Framing a research study within the bodies of knowledge from which it comes is an essential aspect of a well-developed study (Maxwell, 2005). In order to best situate this

research, it is necessary to consider the researcher's personal theoretical standpoint (social constructivism) and the analytical frameworks (Person-Environment fit, role strain and transition theory) that will be used to contextualize the data gathered.

My personal theoretical standpoint is a constructivist one that all concepts are socially constructed. Within this framework, actions or ideas are given meaning by the context within which they are used (Atwood, 1997; Osman, 1999). Once these concepts have been shared or become a part of explicit knowledge, they are assumed to be reality (Atwood, 1997). The constructivist position further stipulates that what groups or individuals chose to focus on becomes paramount to the outcomes the group or individual will experience (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). There is always a choice about the focus of inquiry, and instead of choosing to consider single mothers in the academy as a problem to be solved, this research is presented from the stance that much can be learned from student's experiences of 'fit', inclusion and success.

The analytical frameworks that guided the data interpretation in this study are Person-Environment fit, role strain and transition theory. Person-Environment fit considers the individual student's psychological inclinations, the sociological aspects of the academic experience, and how the individual shapes and interacts with her environment (Pike, 2006). The theory of role strain looks at individuals within their societal context as actors who are impacted by the requirements of their societally imposed or personally chosen roles (Gigliotti, 1999; Goode, 1960). Transition theory is a more individualized focus on the psychology of the individuals who are moving in, moving through or moving out of a life

event and their experiences of marginality and mattering (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995).

Swanson and Fouad (1999) describe three core concepts of Person-Environment fit: individuals seek out environments that correspond to their skills and abilities, the degree of fit between the person and environment has formative impact on the person and the environment and that this formative process is reciprocal. Umbach and Porter (2001) praise Person-Environment fit for successfully integrating both areas of research in major choice; focus on individual factors and focus on environmental or sociological factors. This framework is appropriate for this study based on the researcher's interest in discussing personal experiences of the collegiate environment and atmosphere.

Goode's classic work on role strain focuses on the person as actor within the larger social realm. Given the demands of (in this case) working, attending college and child rearing, some conflict between the requirements of these roles is almost unavoidable. "Objective role conflict exists ... when meeting the demands of one role will make more difficult meeting the demands of the other role (Gigliotti, 1999 p. 37)." Because of the nature of child care responsibilities and student obligations are continuous, single women are likely to continually face tension in meeting and maintaining these roles (Home, 1998). Increased levels of role strain and perceived role strain are associated with higher levels of attrition in post-secondary education, making this theory important in understanding persistence for single mothers in college (Gigliotti, 1999). Additionally, due to my theoretical standpoint,

concentrating on the ways in which single mothers in college balance their multiple roles allows this research to highlight success (Marks & MacDermid, 1996).

Schlossberg's transition theory focuses on transitions that are expected, unexpected or non-events (Schlossberg et. al. 1995). Perception plays an important role in this theory, because the individual experiencing the transition defines if indeed a transition has occurred, as well as the meaning or significance that event has for her life (Schlossberg & Robinson, 1996). This theory focuses on the process of dealing with transition because Schlossberg points out that not all people successfully adapt to the transitions in their lives (Schlossberg et. al, 1995). A particularly meaningful aspect of this theory is the concept of marginality and its complement, mattering. Mattering is defined as "our belief, whether right or wrong, that we matter to someone else" (Schlossberg, 1989 p. 9). Marginality, on the other hand, centers around feelings that marginalize—feelings that one does not fit in or that they are not important to others (Schlossberg, 1989).

Utilizing these three theories to consider the experiences of single mothers navigating to and through college education allows for an in depth look at factors which influence and support success. Having a realistic understanding of the role strain faced by single mothers in college provides a clearer perspective of what individual factors influence their college experience. While the ways in which larger organizational change can impact individual factors like role strain are limited, a more thorough awareness of issues faced by women navigating multiple roles is critical to accommodating their academic needs. Further, acknowledging the concerns faced by women in multiple roles will allow administrators to

be intentional in addressing or changing institutional practices which could marginalize students. Beyond reform, this knowledge might also encourage policy and practice which provides or fosters experiences of mattering or ‘fit’ within the larger context of the university.

### **Purpose of the study**

Current inquiry into the importance of student-environmental fit for student success largely focuses on traditionally aged students enrolled full time at residential facilities (Feldman, Ethington & Smart, 2001). Studies of single mothers in higher education tend to focus on the individual attributes of the students when identifying issues. Psychosocial challenges such as role strain and multiple priorities which detract from the student’s ability to dedicate time and energy to study are commonly cited, as opposed to the larger sociological barrier or supports (Shaw, 1999; Vann-Johnson, 2004). For those studies that identify sociological supports, the impact of family and community support as important aspects of collegiate attainment are considered most often (Vann-Johnson, 2004; Van Stone, Nelson & Niemann, 1994). Sociological research by Hall and Sandler (1985) on out of classroom experiences speculated that minorities, older women, and women with disabilities might experience a less welcoming climate than their more traditional peers on campus. To date, few studies have considered the chilly climate issue for single mothers, and none have looked at the role of the university in addressing this issue (Dusquaine-Watson, 2007; Morris, 2003).

Given this limited understanding of the on campus experiences of single mothers it is equally critical to consider positive experiences. Some such positive experiences which warrant additional research is looking at experiences of fit within the institution, as well as experiences of mattering. To gain a clearer understanding of the multiple factors that are at play in a single mother's pursuit of an undergraduate degree, this study considered both the individual psychological factors that influence college attendance as well as the multiple sociological and societal impacts that take part in shaping these women's experiences.

This research studied the experiences of single mothers who transferred from community colleges to four-year institutions in pursuit of a baccalaureate degree. Specifically, this study focused on examining these women's experiences of success and institutional 'fit' within the higher education system. This focus on the transition between colleges and their pathway to determining a major yielded insight into what factors influence the academic choices of single mothers and how institutions of higher education can be better equipped to accommodate their specific needs.

This study's impact began with reminding the participants of how much they have accomplished by obtaining the amount of education they have while fulfilling their multiple roles. This study also advances scholarship on Person-Environment fit, marginality and mattering and role strain as they relate to diverse or non-traditional populations such as single mothers. The knowledge generated by this inquiry will allow others to carefully consider articulation agreements, institutional policies and classroom climate—all of which impact students who are single mothers. By highlighting institutional best practices, this study

presents constructive measures to facilitate social change to the benefit of this overtaxed group.

### **Research Questions**

Research questions were developed to reflect the socially constructed nature of the college milieu, where students can be a part of creating an environment that they find welcoming. Exploring the idea that knowledge is co-constructed allowed this research to advance the idea that single mothers attaining degrees are powerful individuals with much to teach the educational system. This examination of the multiple factors that contribute to these women's experiences of the educational system was guided by the following research questions.

1. What are the experiences of single mothers who work and attend college as they navigate the educational system in pursuit of the baccalaureate degree?
2. How do these mothers experience the intersection of their multiple roles?
3. How do single mothers enact their own agency through the pursuit of academic environments that fit their needs and aspirations?

### **Summary**

This study is grounded in research on the experiences of single women within higher education, and barriers to success for single parents. By profiling the reported experiences of single mothers who transferred from community college into a university, this study examined the academic transitions and the 'fit' or correspondence between their own skills and interests and their collegiate environment. Utilizing semi-structured in-depth interviews,

this study probed experiences of their university environments, their transfer process, and their reflections on their multiple roles of mother, worker and student. These findings are presented within the context of three theories; transition theory incorporating the concepts of marginality & mattering (Schollossberg, 1989), Person-Environment fit (Holland, 1997), and role strain (Goode, 1960).

## **CHAPTER 2 - Review of Literature**

Attainment of a baccalaureate degree for single mothers who begin their postsecondary studies at community colleges is challenging in several ways. First, as non-traditional students, these women encounter a myriad of barriers (Bowl, 2001; Chao & Good, 2004; Cross, 1981; Vann-Johnson, 2004). Second, as transfer students, they must negotiate multiple institutional systems that are often unclear and sometimes duplicitous (Davies & Dickmann, 1998; Townsend, 2001). Third, as women in institutions of higher education, they encounter discrimination and inhospitable cultural climate (Bowl, 2001; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Morris, 2003). Fourth, as primary caretakers and workers, they have family and work obligations beyond their academic course load (Sharp, 2004; Vann-Johnson, 2004). This occupation of a multitude of roles; woman, mother, worker, and student leads them to hold mixed and often conflicting aspirations and commitments, which make academic excellence problematic at best (Christopher, 2005; Home, 1998; Shaw, 1999). In order to understand these women's experiences within this multitude of factors, this research highlights the pathways to the baccalaureate degree in the students' own words and stories. This research focused on the areas where students found success, experienced support, or felt most engaged.

### **Theoretical Traditions**

The context of this investigation is an essential consideration: a constructivist stance towards knowledge guided this inquiry. Solely considering the multiple challenges faced by this group does not account for these women's own agency and ability to influence their

environments, therefore an awareness of Appreciative Inquiry guided the interviews and analysis. Person-Environment fit, role strain theory and transition theory formed the theoretical underpinning and analytic frame of this investigation. An understanding of women's ways of knowing provided a background to the research.

### **Social Constructivism**

Much of the current research in social construction focuses on gender, disability and identity. Concepts such as situated reality and lived experiences are outgrowths of social construction (Atwood, 1997; Turner, 1991). "Social construction theory seeks to explain the process by which knowledge is created and assumed as reality" (Devine & Wilhite, 1999 p. 33). The framework of social construction argues that concepts such as 'single-mother' are socially constructed; given meaning by the experiences of those using the term, and the context within which they are used (Turner, 1991). Bamber and Tett (2000) contextualize the learning environment by stipulating that the support of students in educational endeavors requires that student support staff take into account the environment within which learning takes place. In this framework, individuals are active creators who interpret and impart meaning to their experiences (Osman, 1999). This process is particularly important in light of the fact that administrators apply not only their own experiences to non-traditional students, but also their readings and the experiences of others (referred to as a "sharing of constructed reality") to inform their decisions regarding these students (Atwood, 1997; Clarke & Cochcrane, 1998). According to Clarke and Cochcrane (1998) knowledge is maintained and reproduced through texts as well as conversations, which leads to the creation

of a shared construction. Within this shared interpretation and construction of reality, not meeting a set of standards defined as “normal” means that the non-traditional student is assumed to have an inferior status to their more traditional peers (Devine & Wilhite, 1999). Socially defined concepts such as race or non-traditional status “structure the manner in which the different groups are constructed as the same, equal or different, and these constructions have consequences for people defined as such.” (Osman, 1999 p. 35).

Lavin and his colleagues examine the constructed nature of graduation rates, pointing out that short time intervals for graduation disadvantage non-traditional students, particularly minority students. “... [A] so called “on time” four-year graduation rate would fail to report 27 percent of eventual Puerto-Rican American graduates, 23 percent of Mexican-American/Chicano graduates and 43 percent of black graduates” (Lavin, Lerer, & Kovath, 1997 p. 8). Such narrow intervals “serve to reinforce negative stereotypes about black and Latino students as educationally unsuccessful students” (Lavin et al., 1997 p. 8). Lavin found these attribution errors to be particularly prevalent at two year colleges where there were higher percentages of nontraditional students who often took time off to work or had family obligations not required of their more traditional peers (Lavin et al., 1997). He also brought to light the negative impact this lower attribution of collegiate graduation statistics for particular populations had on specific institutions. Because grant aid to colleges is determined based on graduation rates, community colleges are actually penalized for serving low income and minority students because those students are less likely to graduate in a ‘timely’ fashion (Lavin et al., 1997).

Lavin et al's work (1997) demonstrates that the constructed nature of knowledge and how the information gleaned from research can be used to present accurate data that disempowers or misrepresents a disadvantaged population. Recent research has focused on rejection of the deficit discourse. Cooperrider & Whitney (2005) link deficit based change methods with the erosion of people's power as change agents within their own environments. Professional vocabularies of human deficit can be much harsher than any insult hurled in the heat of an argument, and professional vocabularies hold more social weight (Fine, Weis, Weseen & Wong, 2000). Deficit terminology, such as 'at risk' essentialize people and are expected, like a thumbprint, to manifest themselves in multiple arenas of the person's life (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Gergen, 2001). With much of the previous research on single-mothers coming from a comparative lens that finds that they 'fall short' when compared to their peers, research that is aimed at highlighting success on an institutional and individual level as it pertains to single mothers is relevant and important.

### **Person-Environment fit**

Person-Environment fit asserts, "Individuals seek out environments that are congruent with their characteristics" (Swanson & Fouad, 1999). Holland (1997) maintains that individuals look for environments that will let them exercise their natural talents and abilities, express their beliefs, attitudes and values and take on agreeable problems or roles (p. 4). Levels of fit between an environment and a person acting within that environment have important corollaries such as satisfaction, achievement, performance and retention (Swanson & Fouad, 1999). Incongruence between a person's values or attitudes and a person's

environment can be associated with a change in behaviors that make the person more closely align themselves with the vision and values of the organization to which they belong (Holland, 1997). The ways students interact with their academic environment are directly related to student satisfaction and academic success (Vann-Johnson, 2004). Person-Environment fit theory involves the participant taking an active role in seeking out environments that match with their needs (Swanson & Fouad, 1999). Taken further, this concept could allow for students to modify their learning environment to reflect their values and beliefs as a member of that community.

Examining Person-Environment fit within the context of major selection has yielded information about how student personality type might be correlated with major field choice. Pike (2006), Feldman, Smart and Ethington (1999), and Umbach and Porter (2002) have all used Holland's research on Person-Environment fit to extend to major choice. Holland's work divides students into one of six personality types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising and conventional (Holland, 1997). Holland further investigated context by taking aggregate data from participants in the environment to determine where within those same six categories to classify the environment. The templates for personality "become frames for understanding the collective features of human environments" (Strange & Banning, 2001).

Feldman, Ethington and Smart's (2001) research considers the implications of personality type incongruence with academic environment. Findings indicated that students with incongruence between their personality type and their environment "made about the

same amount of gain in abilities and interests pertinent to the environment as did students whose dominant personality type was congruent with that environment” (Feldman, Ethington & Smart, 2001 p. 688). Because their study did not include many non-traditional students, they suggest that further research should consider this point from a qualitative perspective.

The premises of Person-Environment fit apply equally well to selection of courses, major, or program of study, as shown by the multiple quantitative studies on this topic (Feldman, Smart & Ethington, 1999; Umbach & Porter, 2002). While much research has been done on the larger university environment and its consonance with personality types, this research does not always apply to single mothers who are rarely residential (Hearn & Moos, 1976; Walsh, 1973). Geoghegan’s (1999) essay considering how students select institutions as influenced by the degree of ‘fit’ focuses on residential students that are both traditional age and enrolled on a full-time basis. Geography may be a limiting factor for many mothers who must return from college to pick up children from day care or go to work (Freeman, 2006; Kienzl, 2004; Reay, Ball & David, 2002). While single mothers may be geographically bound in terms of being unlikely to relocate to attend school, once they are on campus, they are usually able to seek out environments that meet their needs and fit with their self-concept in their major area of study. Because universities and other students have the greatest impact on persistence and degree completion in part-time non-traditional students, the consideration of those environments and the students’ intersections with those environments is essential (Yum, Kember, Siaw, 2005).

A counterpoint to Holland's Person-Environment fit as it relates to major choice centers around the fact that most research to date has been done on traditional students (Feldman, Ethington & Smart, 1999). These students do not have the financial commitments that many single mothers have; therefore, they potentially do not pursue their choice of major with the same instrumental approach that many students of limited means do (Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Kienzl, 2004). Low income students' instrumental approach to education often leads them to select majors that they feel will benefit them financially upon their graduation as opposed to focusing on interests, skills or passions (Fenske, Porter, DuBrock, 1999; Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Kienzl, 2004; Reay, Davies, David & Ball, 2001).

### **Role Strain**

As women who work, care for children, and attend school, these women occupy several concurrent roles (Home, 1998). Unfortunately roles occasionally come into conflict and role strain ensues (Goode, 1960). The experience of role strain increases with the addition of obligations, of which single mothers as primary caretakers, workers and students have more than their share (Home, 1998; Gigliotti, 1999). Women with family responsibilities are the fastest growing group of adult students who are currently requesting entrance into institutions of higher education (Home, 1998). While the growth of access to higher education is encouraging, the multiple roles that these women inhabit can conflict with their academic goals. Theorists who consider women's roles have identified three dimensions of role strain in women: "(a) role conflict from simultaneous, incompatible demands, (b) role overload (insufficient time to meet all demands), and (c) role contagion or

preoccupation with one roles while performing another” (Home, 1998 p. 86). Of note is the fact that role strain (a feeling of difficulty in meeting role demands) is more extreme for women with three roles (Grendell, 1991; Schmidt & Scott, 1986). A disheartening statistic from Home’s (1998) study is the fact that role overload (a sense of being constantly behind) was not impacted by any of the support measures in her study. Although Home’s (1998) study was made up of mainly graduate students who worked full time and were middle class and White, these findings suggests that even with support, a sense of being “spread too thin” can be disastrous for women with family responsibilities.

Women with young children had increased levels of role conflict than women with older children or women without children (Duxbury & Higgins, 2001; Morris & Coley, 2004). It has been speculated that this was largely due to the stress of arranging child care for children who were not enrolled in school (Van Meter & Agronow, 1982; Duxbury & Higgins, 2001). Gigliotti, (1999) however, found that role stress was not correlated to number or age of children.

When Shaw (1999) examined constructions of identity and community in the community college, she found that many students defined themselves in terms of fragmented identities that seem to clash. The multi-layered nature of identity seems particularly pronounced in the women Shaw chooses to highlight for the study. They are concurrently grappling with roles of student and mother, wife and activist, worker and Chicana (or other minority) (Shaw, 1999). Both of the women in Shaw’s study indicated that they felt role conflict and that often their student identity was at a disadvantage when considered in light of

their other responsibilities (Shaw, 1999). Morris and Coley's (2004) study of low income mothers who worked and went to school found that:

higher reported flexibility from one's employer or school setting, which could provide resources to mothers in the form of more options, greater control, and more choices regarding the balance of work and family, was related to lower levels of role strain. (p. 430)

The awareness of such mediating factors to reduce role strain is a critical component of assuring that single mothers attending college have the best possible experience. Morris and Coley (2004) also found that their findings differed when compared with previous studies the low income mothers in their study (largely minority women) reported lower levels of role strain than middle income White women, which could be attributed to the lower incidence of full time work. They hypothesized that this might be due to the higher incidence of part time and shift time work in the sample they studied (Morris & Coley, 2004). Considering potential role strain of mothers in higher education is critical to considering all aspects of the educational experiences of single mothers. The challenges of multiple priorities and multiple obligations faced by the single parent will impact how they are able to navigate the transition to undergraduate education.

### **Transition Theory**

Many women return to school after a major transition in their lives (Cross, 1981; Home, 1998). Schlossberg's transition theory is a psychosocial theory focused on growth and development, but the theory itself does not indicate that positive outcomes are most

likely (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Schlossberg et. al.'s (1995) definition of transition is “any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles” (p. 27). Because attending school while being a mother often changes routines, roles and even relationships, this theory is particularly relevant to this research. Schlossberg (1989) sees the transition process as having three distinct parts: approaching change, taking stock and taking charge. Because this research was particularly interested in women’s academic choices and their expression of agency, the final two parts “taking stock” and “taking charge” are particularly salient.

Schlossberg defined four Ss’: situation, self, support, and strategies as areas in which individuals should consider the ratio of their assets to liabilities as a part of taking stock of their readiness for transition (Schlossberg, 1989). A particularly unique aspect of this type of analysis is that it allows for change in the individual with regards to ability to cope with transition. This ratio explains “why different individuals react differently to the same type of transition and why the same person reacts differently at different times” (Schlossberg et. al., 1995 p.49). While some single mothers might have lots of assets in terms of self (young, healthy, psychologically healthy) and support (family, friends and neighborhood support) others may not have these luxuries.

To consider an individual’s readiness for a transition, the researcher makes two separate appraisals: one of the transition itself (positive, negative, neutral) and one of the individual’s ability to cope with the transition (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). The four Ss’ assist with the second appraisal of the individual’s resources for coping with

transition. The first “S” characterizes aspects of the situation: the timing, duration, role change, concurrent stressors and triggers. The second “S” refers to the self—characteristics of the individual such as race, gender, age, socio-economic status, and psychological resources that might help cope with transition. Support, the third “S,” can be made manifest the form of family, friends, neighbors, institutions, and communities. The final “S” is strategies, which include situation modifications, controlling the situation, and managing post-transition stress (Schlossberg et. al., 1995).

Based on her previous research, Schlossberg characterizes the nature and extent of support through her concepts of marginality and mattering. The definition of mattering in this context is “our belief, whether right or wrong, that we matter to someone else.” (Schlossberg, 1989 p. 9). She outlined four aspects of mattering: attention (being noticed), importance (feeling cared for), ego extension (feeling someone will be proud), and appreciation (feeling efforts are appreciated). A concurrent concept to mattering in this model is marginality. “Feelings of marginality often occur when individuals are taking on new roles... Marginality can be defined as a sense of not fitting in and can lead to self-consciousness, irritability and depression” (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998 p.27).

While Schlossberg’s transition theory was developed with a focus on counseling adult students returning to higher education, the model has also been applied to traditional aged students. Chickering and Schlossberg (1995) considered attending college within the stages of moving in, moving through and moving on. Further, there are many applications beyond simple counseling. Using this theory, administrators can develop programs that engage

students in critical reflection on their own life stages. Careful consideration of the implications of marginality and mattering as it impacts single mothers in the institution is critical to assure that these important populations are accommodated.

### **Feminist Pedagogy**

Barriers experienced by women have long been studied in the context of feminist pedagogy and women's ways of knowing. (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1996). The lens of feminist standpoint theory allows for the critical examination of a patriarchal system which oftentimes oppresses and marginalizes women (Brooks, 2007). An awareness of the gendered nature of the experiences of single mothers who attend college informs and situates this research within the broader context of educational research on women.

Standpoint theory takes into account the multiple lived identities of women and recognizes that no one gendered experience is valid for all women. Feminist standpoint theory holds that women see the world from a particular standpoint based on their participation in a patriarchal society (Dougherty, 2001; Wilkinson, 2001). "A feminist standpoint is a way of understanding the world, a point of view of social reality, that begins with, and is developed directly from, women's experiences" (Brooks, 2007 p. 60). This theory focuses on examining experiences within a mind to granting voice to all women and recognizing that context and the perspective of the knower define knowledge (Gergen, 2001; Wilkinson, 2001). Feminist standpoint theory is particularly relevant to this study due to the historically patriarchal and hierarchical nature of higher education (Nilsson & Nocon, 2005).

Tisdell's (1995) research on power informs this review of feminist pedagogy as it relates to single mothers who are transfer students. Tisdell considers how knowledge and truth are shaped within the context of the classroom and puts forth the concept of positional pedagogy as important (1995). Positional pedagogy considers how "various positionalities—the gender, race, class, sexual orientation—of both the participants and the instructor matter and have an effect on the learning environment" (Tisdell, 1995 p. 75). This viewpoint is particularly relevant due to the nature of the proposed sample and those women's experience of college.

Feminist scholars strive to give voice to underrepresented groups of women, particularly those who have been or are marginalized by society (Brooks, 2007). Feminist standpoint theory comes from a challenge to "(1) see and understand the world through the eyes and experiences of oppressed women and (2) apply the vision and knowledge of oppressed women to social activism and social change" (Brooks, 2007 p. 55). To remain true to these epistemological tenets, feminist standpoint scholarship must begin with the oppressed or marginalized women's lives as they encounter them (Brooks, 2007). Within this context, "knowledge is seen as contingent upon the standpoint of the knower, and as dependent upon the specificities of her experience" (Wilkinson, 2001 p. 21).

Presenting research from within this framework is essential because without women consciously reinterpreting their own reality, marginalized women are likely to accept society's interpretation (Nielsen, 1990). A strength of the feminist standpoint is that it resists the urge to group all women's life experiences into one point of view based on dominant

ideologies. A corresponding challenge of this standpoint is the potentially fractured stories of women's life experiences that such inquiry might produce (Brooks, 2007). Because of this balance, I sought out women with varied life circumstances to participate in the research to assure a reliable and trustworthy study. The importance of considering each woman's lived experience as a valid and unique perspective, forced me to remain aware of feminist standpoint theory and women's ways of knowing as I conducted interviews and reviewed and categorized the data from those interviews.

### **Related Research**

In order to most accurately consider the issues of single mothers who work and attends college, a review of related literature is important. This research began with a solid grounding the literature on the history of women's education in America providing a social context for the study. Beyond the clear link that single mothers are women, many are also non-traditional students, deviating from the norm of the resident student who attends college directly from high school and is in their late teens or early twenties. The literature on non-traditional students clearly illustrates the deficits-based approach of some previous scholars as well as illustrating the barriers that these students have encountered in their educational pursuits. Beyond being non-traditional students, many single mothers are also transfer students, having begun their undergraduate coursework at community colleges. Due to the participants' experience of transfer from community college to their current institutions for their bachelor's degree, current research on transfer students is included to give additional depth. Because students at community college who plan to transfer to a university are not

required to have a distinct major, this is a choice that most make upon arriving on their university campus. Therefore, research on major choice is critical and allows for the consideration of Person-Environment fit, specifically within major departments. Lastly, current research which deals with single mothers within post-secondary education allows this research to be well grounded in the field and aware of the findings of previous studies of this often overlooked group.

### **Historical context of women's education in America**

In North America, education began as an endeavor for the well-to-do. Young white men were educated to become ministers to begin with, although within the first two hundred years of collegiate education in North America, this outcome had shifted (Cohen, 1998). The early colonial colleges became the place for attendees to meet and make partnerships with other powerful businessmen and politicians (Vine, 1997). Many early politicians' sisters were married to their schoolmates as a way of cementing family prestige (Vine, 1997). At this time, there was no conversation on the education of women, unless it was to comment on their ability to raise well-bred children (Palmieri, 1997). In 1873, Dr. Edward Clarke published *Sex in Education: A Fair Chance for the Girls* which argued that higher education would damage women's health and reproductive abilities.

By 1905, the concept of "race suicide" emerged based on the low marriage rates of women's college alumni, who were largely White (Palmieri, 1997). Black women engaged in higher education were encouraged to participate in "race uplift" to allow undereducated Blacks (particularly in the South) access to educated teachers (Perkins, 1997). At this

period, most women who did receive post secondary education received it at a normal school, training to be teachers (Ogren, 1997). This education allowed women to work as teachers until they might marry, although many Black women continued working as teachers past their marriage (Perkins, 1997).

In reaction to the concept of the scholarly spinster, women's colleges encouraged women to "wear their learning like a flower" so that they might combine education with marriage (Palmieri, 1997 p. 180). Women's colleges soon served as a 'finishing school' that allowed women to meet well educated men. Between 1920-1940, the proportion of 22 year old women with college degrees swelled from 1.7 to 6.6 percent (Fass, 1997). Much of this changed after the second World War as women left their schools and homes to work to support the war effort, and in the 1950s, only 30% of all students in institutions of higher learning were women (Fass, 1997). The 1950s brought about the GI bill, which opened college education to middle and lower class students and made a college education more common among all types of students (Cohen, 1998). While the GI Bill allowed many students to pursue higher education who had not previously had access, the majority of lower class students who utilized the GI Bill went for training at a trade school (Cohen, 1998). This wider access allowed college education for many groups, and as enrollments swelled, the numbers of female degree recipients kept pace with numbers for males (Fass, 1997). In the later 1950s and early sixties, many colleges introduced family life studies for the "more than 80 percent of the women students who will become wives and mothers" (Fass, 1997, p. 706). Women's college education at this time focused on the family and largely took place at

women's colleges or junior colleges. Its purpose was summarized by Jane Berry: "To be a more well-rounded person and a better wife and mother; to occupy my time until marriage; to be prepared in case I have to earn my living; to meet men that have the same interests, and would be good husbands and fathers" (Berry, cited in Fass, 1997 p. 711).

In 1972, Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 was passed, prohibiting sex bias in collegiate admissions (Cohen, 1998). Of course, by this time, numbers of female undergraduates had almost reached parity with their male counterparts. The truly important impact of Title IX was not in admissions per se, but in admissions to particular major fields of study such as engineering or science (Cohen, 1998). While most current students only recognize Title IX's impact on collegiate athletics, the initial impact was to increase the number of women admitted to law and medical schools in the subsequent few years. This might have improved the percentages of women graduating from medical school or law school with a degree; parity in medical school admissions has almost been achieved, and female admission to law school is at 44% twenty years later (Bass, 1999; Cohen, 2001).

From a historical perspective, while much of the discourse around women's education dealt with preparing them for motherhood, nowhere in the historical literature is there mention of educating mothers, or more specifically single mothers. Although women's education in America has become much more equitable over the years since the founding of Harvard in 1636, there are still major shortfalls in equal representation of women in all fields of higher education, especially the STEM disciplines (Wyer, 2003). This has particular relevance for this study due to the fact that individuals employed in the STEM disciplines

(Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) earn more than their peers who study liberal arts (Hamermesh & Donald, 2003).

### **Non-traditional students**

The term non-traditional student was first used to differentiate students who deviated from the norm of an economic dependent, in-residence student age 18-24 who had at least one parent who had gone to college (Kienzl, 2004). Choy identified a series of traits that identify students as nontraditional; based on one or more of the following classifications:

- Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school);
- Attends part time for at least part of the academic year;
- Works full time (35 or more hour per week) while enrolled;
- Is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid;
- Has dependants other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others);
- Is a single parent (either not married or married by separated and has dependents); or
- Does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school). (Choy, 2002 p. 26)

Additional studies focusing on the definition of nontraditional student have added first generation student status, interrupted collegiate studies, low socio-economic status and a commute of more than 50 miles as potential identifiers (Allen, 1993; Alssid et al., 2002;

Hamm, 2004; Kienzl, 2004). During the school year 1999-2000, 89.5% of all community college students were in some way defined as nontraditional (Hamm, 2004).

Choy states that non-traditional students typically have more than one defining characteristic, and students with multiple factors associated with nontraditional status face greater risk of academic failure and attrition (2002). Although non-traditional students attend all levels of institutions, a non-traditional student at community college is much more likely to be a full time worker, have dependants, or delay college enrollment than a student at a four-year school (NCES, 2003). While multiple roles and the strain it can create has already been discussed, the greater risk of academic failure and drop out is salient to this research as well.

Compared to their traditional peers, non-traditional students are less likely to attain degrees (Bailey, Alfonso, & Scott, 2005). According to Roueche and Roueche (1994), non-traditional students possess “academic, social and economic problems that challenge...success in college- e.g. poor academic history, low self concepts, limited world views, an absence of role models, family and employment responsibilities, and financial needs” (p. 3). These perceived academic problems and challenges are often addressed by requiring that students complete some sort of remedial education before they are eligible to take college level courses.

Hamm reports that 62% of students with at least three defining characteristics leave college without a degree as compared to 19% of traditional students (2004). According to the US Department of Education, students who have traits which have been identified as

negatively impacting persistence and degree attainment are considered at risk of not succeeding in college (NCES, 2003; Price, 2004). The traits identified were: “(1) delayed postsecondary enrollment, (2) high school dropout or GED recipient, (3) part-time enrollment, (4) financial independence, (5) *having dependents other than a spouse*, (6) *single parent status*, and (7) working full time while enrolled” (Price, 2004 p. 36 italics added). Clearly single mothers, according to the US Department of Education, are students at risk of not persisting or succeeding in college.

Beyond the level of commitment to graduation, Kent and Gimmestad (2004) posit that it is the differential levels of preparation for collegiate coursework that separate adult undergraduate ‘persisters’ from ‘nonpersisters.’ They also note that on the multiple roles scale, there is a substantial difference between the scores of persistent and nonpersistent adult students. Their explanation hinges upon their assumption that “persisters acknowledge their own responsibilities in balancing their multiple roles with their educational goals” (Kent & Gimmestad, 2004 p. 16). For many students, degree attainment is the pathway to improving earning potential. While this was a commonly cited reason for attending college, improving earning potential by itself was not highly correlated with improved persistence or completion rates (Chao & Good, 2004).

Kienzl (2004) found that non-traditional pathways (e.g. delaying enrollment, interrupting the course of study or working a majority of the time enrolled) negatively impact the earning potential of the student particularly among community college students. Many students return to higher education in hopes of gaining job skills that will improve their

earning potential (Chao & Good, 2004). Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, and Terenzini (2003) found that first generation students (which many single mothers are) were not enrolled in selective institutions at a proportional level—as first generation students were underrepresented at selective institutions. This finding is of significant concern considering that institutional selectivity enhances the earning potential of a college degree (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Kienzl, 2004). Perna (2000) found that minority students were particularly attracted to an increased earning potential brought by further education. The overrepresentation of minorities in roles of primary caregiver and roles as community college students, and underrepresentation at selective universities is therefore essential to consider within the context of this research (Bowen & Bok, 1998). The impact of earning potential as a particularly strong factor for single mothers concerned with being the sole provider for their children (Butler & Deprez, 2002). Enrollment in higher education usually requires that single mothers not only take on the responsibilities of a mother but also the responsibilities of a student and a worker.

While social integration into extracurricular activities improves academic outcomes, non-traditional students very rarely take advantage of such activities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Vann-Johnson, 2004). Accordingly, the lack of extracurricular involvement creates an experience of college that is largely focused on the classroom as the unit of collegiate experience for non-traditional students (Kasworm, 2003). Therefore considering theories that examine the classroom experiences of these individuals is particularly relevant.

## **Transfer students**

There is a growing trend within the college population, nontraditional students especially, to move between universities (called ‘swirling’) and to concurrently take courses at multiple universities (called ‘double dipping’) (Shang, Cabral, Kappes, Macagno-Shang, & Miser, 2005). Hamm reports that 33% of community college students started their coursework at another institution (swirling) and eleven percent are concurrently taking coursework at another institution (double dipping) (2004). These shifts in attendance can be problematic for students in terms of gaining course credit towards their degree insofar that many students who transfer from a community college have completed many more credits upon graduation than their peers who completed their degree at one institution (Shang, et. al, 2005).

For single mothers preoccupied by the cost of a college education, taking courses at a community college (or several if they are convenient) is an affordable and accessible option that allows for flexible course schedules, small class sizes and lower cost per credit hour than state universities (McQuay, 2000). While community colleges allow for these accessibility benefits, they are unable to offer a baccalaureate degree, a degree that offers much higher earning potential than an associate’s degree (Kienzl, 2004). In order to move beyond an associate’s degree, single mothers must transfer into a larger college or university, and due to financial constraints most prefer to attend state sponsored institutions over private universities.

To facilitate the transfer process, the community college and the state institution should have an articulation agreement that standardizes what the accepting institution will grant credit for (McQuay, 2000). Having a system such as this one in place allows the 25% of college students who report aspirations of transfer to know what courses they will be able to complete towards their degree while still enrolled at the community college (Kim, 2001). Kim also showed that within five years, almost forty percent of students with transfer intentions had successfully transferred to a university (50% of full time students versus 26% of part time students).

The adjustment process for transfer students can be difficult due to the intersection of academic, social, personal, and psychological aspects. Where community college courses are generally small, the size of university classes greatly varies depending on institution. As compared with their new peers at the university, community college transfer students have higher attrition rates and are more likely to be on academic probation (Laanan, 2001). These factors all influence satisfaction, persistence, and academic progress in tangible ways.

‘Transfer shock,’ a concept referring to an initial decline in grade point average during the first semester or year at a four-year institution, has been examined by multiple authors (Cejda & Kaylor 1997; Handy, 2001; Kim, 2001). There is some debate about the universality of ‘transfer shock’ and some argue that between the sophomore and junior year of college, course work becomes significantly more complex, potentially leading to a drop in GPA that is not associated with the transfer process (Lavin et al. 1997). Cejda and Kaylor (1997) found that 53% of community college transfers to liberal arts universities experienced a

minor decline in their first year GPA, however, the mean decline of the sample was 0.09. It should also be noted that transfer shock is only reported to impact the first semester or year of a transfer student's academic career at a four year college or university. There is not a strong correlation with degree attainment, although some correlation exists between the decline in GPA and the level of persistence (Shaw, 1997). According to Diaz, sixty-seven percent of students reporting transfer shock recover, most within the first year after transfer (Kim, 2001).

### **Single mothers in post secondary education**

Thousands of working poor women..... face significant obstacles in returning to school. The greatest challenge is finding the time and financial resources to care for children at home while pursuing a degree... Balancing classes, homework, and paid employment with home and family forces women to make tremendous sacrifices of time with their children. Of those who pursue education despite the barriers, many leave school before completing their degrees, overwhelmed by the demands on their time and financial obstacles. (p. 204 Watts & Schaefer, 2004)

Much of the current literature on single mothers pursuing education beyond high school focuses upon single mothers who utilize government programs such as TANF (Temporary Aid for Needy Families), Medicaid, and WIC (Women, Infants and Children) which is responsible for the food stamp program (Butler, Duprez & Smith, 2003; Holyfield, 2002; Kahn & Polakow, 2004;Ratner, 2004; Riemer, 2004). Enacted in 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) is known more simply

as welfare reform or welfare to work drastically changed the landscape of higher education opportunities for single mothers (Kahn, Butler, Duprez & Polakow, 2004). Under previous welfare policy, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), women could count education and training programs towards the work requirements of the program, but under PRWORA, that was no longer the case (Kates, 2004; Kahn, Butler, Duprez & Polakow, 2004; Ratner, 2004). In the five years after welfare reform, the City University of New York saw the raw number of enrolled students receiving welfare drop from almost 27,000 in 1995 to slightly over 5,000 in 2002 (Lane, 2003 cited in Ratner, 2004). This unfortunate fact not only meant that enrollment at the university plunged, but more importantly, the ability of women to remove themselves from the welfare rolls dropped significantly as well (Butler, Duprez & Smith, 2003; Heller & Bjorklund, 2004; Holyfield, 2002; Ratner, 2004).

According to Holyfield (2002), who had been a single mother within the welfare system, prior to the completion of her doctorate,

[P]ursuing higher education was a life-changing event that helped us gain greater control over our lives. The opportunities, resources and cultural savvy our educations brought were essential in helping us move out of poverty. Other, less tangible things also came with our educations, like empowerment or the ability to cope with circumstances that once seemed beyond our control (p. 57).

Earning post secondary education grants students social capital and self confidence—critical aspects that are not often explored within the literature, outside of a few studies (Butler, Duprez & Smith, 2003; Duprez, Butler & Smith; 2004; Haleman, 2004; Holyfield, 2002).

Instead, most studies focus on the barriers and stigma faced by single mothers who opt to pursue post-secondary education (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Sharp, 2004).

I am not attempting to diminish the barriers faced by single mothers seeking education; Austin and MacDermott (2004) found that single mothers who did not persist cited three factors that influenced their withdraw from college: the lack of TANF funds to support their family, the strain that they perceived college attendance put on their children, and housing and child care difficulties. Holyfield (2002) found that single mothers on welfare considered the lack of child care to be a significant challenge to their pursuit of higher education. The financial hardships faced by single parent families who work and attend school is well documented, particularly the fact that many had financial need which was not addressed by financial aid awards (Heller & Bjorklund, 2004; Vann-Johnson, 2004; Watts & Schaefer, 2004). One way that colleges address this gap in financial aid and need is to offer emergency loan programs, yet Sharp (2004) found that such programs are often not publicized “for fear ‘that every student would say they have special needs and come in and apply for it’.” (p. 125). The practice of not providing information about important programs which might assist single mothers in their journey to complete a college degree is a common refrain in the literature. Most studies highlight misinformation and strict adherence to standards which disadvantage mothers who are students, despite exceptions which might allow for education (Kahn & Polakow, 2004; Miewald, 2004; Ratner, 2004).

The financial barriers to attending college are often made worse by case workers who bend the truth to garner increased adherence to welfare to work policies. Duquaine-Watson

(2007) found that the climate towards low income single mothers was demeaning and marginalizing-- either by virtue of overexposure, where single parents risk being 'outed' in classrooms or through ignorance where needs are either unaccommodated or completely ignored. Sharp (2004) examined two institutions of higher learning which offered no systemic support to students, leaving them to find their own way amidst the bureaucratic red tape of the university system. Beyond the challenges faced in classrooms and on a larger campus context, many women cited feeling marginalized by the fact that their peers on campus were teenagers, oblivious to the challenges of their lives (Zhan & Pandey, 2004). Because the university setting is a largely depersonalized and alienating environment, many single mothers are forced to leave without completing degrees (Watts & Schaefer, 2004).

### **Summary**

This educational research on single mothers is grounded in three constructivist traditions. The personal theoretical position of social constructivism with a concentration on a strengths based analysis or appreciative focus was central to all aspects of the investigation. To conceptualize the research findings, the model/theory of Person-Environment fit was applied to identify potential indicators for major choice, an area of research which has largely focused on more traditional populations (full time, residential, non-transfer) to this point (Feldman, Ethington & Smart, 2001). In prior research, single mothers were generally more willing to discuss sociological factors (such as how they feel about their environment and where they feel supported) to their academic success rather than psychological factors (Van Stone, Nelson & Niemann, 1994). An additional theoretical tradition which informed the

study was the concept of role strain, a concept which encapsulates both sociological and psychological factors. While roles can be socially constructed, the impacts that role strain and role overload have within a student's life are largely psychological (Gigliotti, 1999). Within the context of single mother's student identities that include both non-traditional student status and transfer student status, they have a plethora of other roles, and some role conflict that they must mediate in order to attend school. It is therefore essential to consider a single mother who attends college and works as composed of the multiple roles she inhabits and the accompanying role strain that those obligations can cause. Using the literature surrounding role strain, role conflict, role overload, and role contagion helps put the challenges of these women into perspective (Home, 1998). While considering sociological factors is important, this research considers the intersection of personal psychology and environmental support using Schlossberg's transition theory. The concepts of marginality and mattering inform this discussion of 'fit' within their chosen universities (Schlossberg et al. 1995).

To begin any study of women in higher education, it should be noted that women have been at a disadvantage compared to their male peers (Wilkinson, 2001). History provides an overview of the patriarchal and oppressive structures that current educational practice is built upon—critical to this study. In addition to being aware of the relative disadvantages students historically face as women, it is critical to remain aware of other aspects of their student identity which further disadvantage them. Current research on non-traditional students in college has largely focused on their limitations and comparative lack

of academic and social preparation (Roueche & Roueche, 1994). While non-traditional students potentially have challenges based on their academic preparation, previous educational history, and other psychological factors, transfer students may also face potential challenges to the seamless integration into the university. A review of the literature surrounding transfer relative to success and barriers informs this study of women who have transferred. This allowed me to remain cognizant of challenges such as transfer shock and the student's need to readjust to her academic environment at the university relative to her previous academic experiences at community college.

Lastly, a close review of current research on single mothers within the context of post-secondary education was critical to anchor this study within the field. Education is found to have benefits for single mothers in the form of increased self confidence, improved relationships with friends and family and increased earning potential (Butler, Deprez & Smith, 2003; Holyfield, 2002). Unfortunately, numerous barriers hinder the completion of a degree (Ratner, 2004; Sharp, 2004; Watts & Schaefer, 2004). While there is no doubt that completing an undergraduate degree while working and parenting is fraught with hardship, it is my belief that there are areas where students are finding accommodation and success. Given both the benefits and the obstacles highlighted in the literature, this study aims to seek out areas of success yet recognize the inherent challenges of undertaking of an undergraduate degree.

## **CHAPTER 3 -- Methodology**

This chapter will apply qualitative research methods to thoroughly examine and interpret the experiences of single mothers in higher education. The study addresses three specific research questions:

1. What are the experiences of single mothers who work and attend college as they navigate the educational system in pursuit of the baccalaureate degree?
2. How do these mothers experience the intersection of their multiple roles?
3. How do single mothers enact their own agency through the pursuit of academic environments that fit their needs and aspirations?

This chapter will begin with a general review of qualitative research methods involved in a basic interpretive study. Second, a review of purposive sampling in qualitative research and the sample selection methods will convey how the various methodological choices were made. Finally the methods utilized to interpret the results will be presented.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research methods serve as effective tools to explore topics with limited associated data. Such exploratory studies are often used to deepen the knowledge base of the topic area and to gain insight into relevant areas for further research (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). This investigation examined the experiences of non-traditional transfer students who seek an undergraduate degree as single parents while working to support their family. This study then describes and outlines the understandings that the study participants have of their own lived experiences as college students, and their self concepts based on those

experiences. “One cannot understand human actions without understanding the meaning that participants attribute to those actions- their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values and assumptive worlds” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Because the study was descriptive and will share the perspectives of the participants, qualitative research was selected as the research approach appropriate to the completion of the study. This research focused upon the exploration of feelings, understandings, and beliefs about the role of worker, mother and student within the context of the participants’ academic trajectory. Qualitative research

“is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting- what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what’s going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting.... The analysis strives for depth of understanding.” (Patton, 1985 p.1 as cited in Merriam, 2002)

An interpretive qualitative inquiry was deemed the most appropriate method for this inquiry due to its focus on understanding how single mothers interpret their everyday experiences within the higher education system and how they attribute meaning to those experiences (Merriam, 2002). Merriam and Simpson (2000) assert that “the key philosophical assumption upon which all qualitative research is based, is the view that reality is constructed by individuals in interaction with their social worlds” (p. 97).

“The “reality” of ... situations... is *socially constructed* through acts of interpretation” by the research participants (Prasad, 2005 p. 13). Given that participants construct their own meanings of lived experiences, data and reporting of data is from the perspective of the participants and not from the researcher (Merriam, 2002). In this research, understanding meaning and intention is emphasized more than causal explanation (Prasad, 2005). Because much of this process occurs within a social context, examination of the social milieu is as important to the research aims as firsthand accounts of lived experiences (Maxwell, 2005). While this study is not structured from a feminist methodological stance, it is important to note that the participants are female and based on that fact alone are participating in a society that oppresses and marginalizes their experiences (Wilkinson, 2001). The inhabiting of a gendered self is part of the socially constructed structures that this research examined. This research not only looks at the experiences of single mothers in college, but also their adaptations to that environment and their sense of marginality or mattering within that system.

### **Sample and Site Selection**

Female students who had attended community college and gone on to transfer into a university were invited to participate in this study. These participants were recruited from several areas across North Carolina. Targeted recruitment efforts were implemented at two research extensive state universities with at least 25,000 currently enrolled students. In addition, two state universities with a minority-serving mission were also sites of targeted recruitment efforts (one HBCU and one Native American serving institution). One final state

sponsored liberal arts university with a focus on serving a commuter population was targeted for recruitment efforts. Contacts at the five institutions assisted with recruitment efforts through posting recruitment fliers and nominating students to the researcher. Once those efforts bore limited participants, the researcher, under the guidance of her chairs, expanded her recruitment efforts to include all universities within the southeastern US, as well as online education programs. Beyond institutional contacts, volunteers were recruited from internet-based communities like Facebook and Craigslist. Once identified, candidates were informed of the study's purpose and time commitments.

This study was a mixed purposeful sample. Criterion sampling allowed for individuals with specific qualities to be selected for participation. Purposive sampling offered the researcher the opportunity to select participants who showed different perspectives on the problem or question (Creswell, 1998). Specifically, stratified purposeful sampling was used in order to gain participants who had varied life experiences and to identify possible subgroups (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). While every effort was made to obtain maximum variation between sample participants, participants were not rejected based on demographic characteristics to design a more diverse group of interviewees. For this reason, the study cannot consider itself employing maximum variation as a sampling framework (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Students who met the following criteria were interviewed for this research:

- Female
- Had attended community college

- Had a child or children who are currently living with them
- Was the primary caregiver for the child or children who lived with them
- Worked outside of the home.
- Have already completed at least one semester of study at their baccalaureate granting institution at the time of the interview.

Due to their unique perspective, all participants were female. Previous research examining the experiences of single mothers has found different levels of social support and types of barriers than those experienced by single fathers (Duncan & Edwards, 1999). While the majority of single mothers attend public universities, many begin their education at community colleges due to their accessibility in terms of geography, cost and class size (Jacobs & Winslow, 2003; Pullman, 2006).

Because the demands of child care responsibilities are more rigorous for mothers of pre-teen children, this study targeted single mothers of younger children in an effort to highlight those who are most likely to need accommodation and assistance in managing their multiple roles (Home, 1998). Having primary care responsibilities for children is considered a risk factor for successful completion of baccalaureate studies and requires more juggling on the part of the single mother in order to attend classes (Choy, 2002; Home, 1998).

Working twenty or more hours a week while enrolled in school has been found to be detrimental to the academic outcomes of students, yet such professional commitments are typically necessary for single mothers serving as heads of the household (Jacobs & Winslow, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As part time enrollment status was found to be a

significant deterrent to degree completion in women even when other demographic factors such as full time work or transfer status were controlled for, this research focused mainly on women who were considered full time by their university at the time of the interview (Jacobs & Winslow, 2003). Two women did not fall into this category, one due to having taken a medical withdrawal for depression the semester we spoke, and one because by the time we could get the interview scheduled, she had graduated. I chose to interview women who had been at their university for at least a semester to allow for students who might have experienced transfer shock to have adjusted to their new environment (Lavin et al., 1997).

Women were recruited and interviewed until the researcher reached saturation, the point at which the researcher has heard similar stories or thoughts from multiple participants (Merriam, 2002). Participants were not compensated for their participation in this research. None of the women who were interviewed chose to withdraw their participation from the study. One interview was completed with a student who did not have previous community college experience and her data were withdrawn from the study.

### **Data collection**

Three types of data collection are often used within a basic interpretive study; interviews, observations, and document analysis (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2002). Within this research, I relied heavily on in-depth interviews with single mothers, and observations completed during the interviews themselves, but also attempted to observe study participants at events geared towards single mothers (ex: information sessions, play groups, study sessions). Unfortunately, few of the mothers in the study reported participating in such

activities. In addition, when I attempted to attend such events as an observer (and to recruit additional participants) no one attended the events I went to observe. For this reason, observations were limited to the interviews themselves, and I kept a researchers journal of the observations that I made in observing the study participants within the context of the interviews. Additionally, very few documents were found at the universities where study participants attended which were specific to single mothers (e.g.: scholarships, policies).

Women who fit the study criteria outlined above were identified at several institutions within the southeastern United States offering a breadth of experience and maximizing variability, thereby providing external validity (Merriam, 2002). Due to my desire for a conversation about participant's lived experiences, in depth interviewing was used as the method of data collection.

### **In-depth Interviewing**

Marshall and Rossman (1999) suggest in-depth interviewing when the goal of the researcher is for "the participant's perspective on the phenomena of interest [to] ... unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it" (p. 108). In addition, to accommodate the time constraints of women who work and have families, participants were asked to participate in only one in-depth interview and one follow up contact to member check the transcript of our conversation. Home (1998) points out that many mothers in higher education experience role overload (a lack of time needed to accomplish all of the tasks required of them), so all interviews were kept to no more than two and a half hours.

After a review of the informed consent for research, participants were asked to describe themselves and their educational pathway beginning in high school. This allowed me to probe for the way they selected their college or university as well as how they selected their major. Once we began to speak about their major, I probed for factors which influenced their choice of major, and how they felt they were similar or different from the students at their university and more specifically the students in their major. We discussed what they saw as their motivation for completing an undergraduate degree and what factors they thought were important in an academic environment. Participants were asked to share a time of transition which impacted their academics, and what factors they thought made that transition successful. Each was asked to share what her typical day was like, and how she felt that being a mother who worked shaped or impacted her experience of being a student. Women were also asked if they felt that they were important to their university and if they were aware of any programs that supported single parents on their campus. At the conclusion of the interview, women were asked if they had anything else that they felt it would be important to share and if they had any questions about the project. A detailed list of interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative research allows for multiple types of data all of which must be organized and analyzed (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Maxwell, 2005). Analysis of the data occurred concurrently with the investigation following Strauss and Corbin's (1998) constant

comparison method. This method “involves continually comparing one unit of data with another in the developing study” (Merriam, 2002 p. 8)

The steps in the constant comparative method happen simultaneously and include: (1) begin collecting data; (2) look for key issues, recurrent events, or activities in the data that become categories of focus; (3) collect data that provides incidents of the categories of focus; (4) write about the categories being explored, describing and accounting for all the incidents in the data while continuing to look for new incidents; (5) work with the data to discover the basic social processes and relationships; and (6) engage in sampling, coding, and writing as the analysis focuses on the key categories (B. G. Glaser, 1978).

The process was iterative in that each interview informed the next and analysis took place at all levels of the process. This method of data collection and analysis being concurrent “build[s] a coherent interpretation of the data” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999 p. 151). Interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. All interviews were reviewed to perform a thematic analysis and do preliminary open coding (Maxwell, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). “In qualitative research, the goal of coding is not to count things but to “fracture” (Strauss, 1987 p. 29) the data and rearrange them into categories that facilitate comparisons between things in the same category and that aid in the development of theoretical concepts.” (Maxwell, 2005 p. 96)

This method was deemed appropriate for this study because I was interested in perceptions. I used categorical aggregation to establish themes within the participant

responses and then collapsed those themes into patterns (Creswell, 1998). I utilized the comments feature of Microsoft Word to include codes and labels for each quotation. The coding scheme can be found in Appendix B.

During the research process, I kept a researcher journal to record observations about interviews, emergent themes, and all other queries related to the investigation (Merriam, 2002). The journal was coded and considered as evidence because within qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the “human instrument” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000 p. 183). From those observations and comments, information regarding action themes such a pride was more apparent than strictly from the interviews themselves.

Initial coding was begun using codes derived from the literature on Person-Environment fit, Role strain and Transition theory (specifically the concepts of marginality and mattering). Upon those initial codes being assigned, further codes came from the continual review of the interview transcripts, researcher’s notes and observations and the fracturing and reforming of the narratives (Strauss, 1987). Beyond the initial codes, theoretical frameworks shaped the structure of the reported themes, and each narrative was considered as it either supported or failed to support the theories selected for the research.

### **Validity, Reliability and Trustworthiness**

Due to my personal theoretical standpoint that reality is socially constructed or given meaning by interaction I was particularly careful in the selection and implementation of this study. Because assumptions and beliefs are reflected in the questions posed as well as the interpretation of results, questions were reviewed by external audiences—a single mother

who had attended school and worked with a child in middle school as well as my classmates to assure that questions were not biased or leading. In this way, I assured that all biases and presuppositions were considered and held apart from the methodology.

To assure validity and trustworthiness of the data, I employed member checks of the interview transcripts (Merriam, 2002). Interviewees were encouraged to change the text to better reflect their understandings and beliefs. In addition to member checks, having scholars in adult and higher education review partial transcripts served to address validity concerns. Care was taken to focus on rich thick description and maximizing variation in the participants as well as the study sites (Merriam, 2002). Lastly, during analysis I considered various possible alternatives to all conclusions so as not to rely on those that best fit my theoretical and/or methodological bent, a process called negative or discrepant case analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 2000)

This proposal underwent review by the Institutional Review Board of North Carolina State University and was deemed appropriate without modification. In addition, one institution where a student was interviewed required that the study undergo Institutional Review through their channels as well where it was also given clearance. In order to comply with all requirements from the committee, interviewees were informed of the risks associated with the study and asked to sign informed consent documents. During the transcription process, pseudonyms (selected by participants during the interviews) were assigned to each interviewee and identifying data were removed from all records. After transcription, all tapes of the interviews were destroyed, and the original transcripts were secured

electronically with a password required to access the files on my computer and the computer where I kept a back up copy of the data.

### **Researchers Position/ Reflexivity**

In qualitative research, the researcher is seen as the instrument for data collection and must be clear about her biases, beliefs and subjectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). As a woman within the system of higher education, I have found some institutional barriers to my own academic progress (Cross, 1981). As a ‘traditional’ student who is a married mother, I am interested in how other women who have many more roles to negotiate might experience the system of higher education within a state institution. Additionally, my work in a university advising office that serves transfer students and low income students make the topic particularly salient.

My interest in this topic also stems from my mother’s experiences as a single parent to a toddler (myself) attending graduate school full time while also working full time. Through our conversations about the difficulty of that time period for her, I gained a greater appreciation for the tenacity of women who juggle the roles of mother, worker and student. This work is an attempt to honor her and all other women who pursue further education to improve their earning potential and make a better life for their families.

“A[ppreciative] I[nquiry] seeks, fundamentally, to build a constructive union between a whole people and the massive entirety of what people talk about as past and present capacities: *achievements, assets...innovations, strengths...opportunities... stories...* -

*and visions of valued and possible futures”* (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005 p. 3 italics in original)

Appreciative inquiry points out that focusing attention dictates where people will expend energy, therefore, a focus on the positive can yield powerful results. “Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an organizational development tool that focuses on bringing out the best in people and organizations, instead of viewing them as problems that need to be solved” (Bloom & Martin, 2002). The process is broken into four stages: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny. Discovery involves hearing positive stories; Dream incorporates taking the themes from those stories and developing a vision. Design focuses on creating a unified plan to attain the dream phase vision and Destiny concludes the process by allowing the individual or group to make change, but continue the appreciative process to continue to improve.

Appreciative Inquiry is used most often in creating organizational change. It has been used on an individual level in the form of ‘Appreciative Advising’. The same four steps are employed to point students towards areas where they can excel (Bloom & Martin, 2002). Appreciative Advising is an advising model that relies on students identifying their academic strengths and interests, and it has had a good deal of success at helping academic probation students recover. The AA approach involves the employment of Appreciative Inquiry to assist students in building upon their personal strengths to achieve academic success (Hutson, 2006).

Appreciative Inquiry as a theoretical framework has eight core assumptions:

1. In every society, organization or group, something works.

2. What we focus on becomes our reality.
3. Reality is created in the moment, and there are multiple realities.
4. The act of asking questions of an organization or group influences the group in some way.
5. People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future when they carry forward parts of the past.
6. If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what are best about the past.
7. It is important to value differences.
8. The language we use creates our reality.

(Hammond, 1996 cited in Yoder, 2005 p. 48)

These assumptions stem from AI's foundation in social construction theory. Because language is so important in social construction theory and AI, the wording of appreciative questions is very important. Cooperrider & Whitney (2005) speculate, "the seeds of change are implicit in the very first questions we ask" (p. 5). They further go on to explicitly state that linguistic practices such as wording questions have important implications for changes in social practice.

This research departs from appreciative inquiry as a methodology for research due to the subject nature and the individual focus of the research. However its explicit connection of social constructivist tendencies with a strengths-based approach is relevant to this research based on the extensive research on the barriers single mothers face as well as the dearth of literature on areas where they find success or support. This appreciative stance resonates

with me as someone who has worked as a therapist before—while individuals often struggle and encounter hard times, encouraging a focus on what is being done well allowed my previous clients to see what they were capable of and ‘dream big’.

This same concept, I would argue, can be applied to single mothers. While it is easy to become disheartened, a focus on strengths and successes not only serves to hearten the individual participants, but also allows administrators at colleges and universities to see what is working. This strengths based approach disarms complaints from administrators that to make accommodation is expensive and difficult, and instead highlights what is being done well. This strategy also makes the ‘ask’ to modify some practices to better accommodate students easier, because instead of beginning with a litany of shortcomings that must be remedied, college administrators are praised for what supports they have provided.

### **Limitations**

This research was limited in scope. Students were recruited solely from baccalaureate degree granting institutions in the Southern United States. This research did not include single fathers, nor did it consider married students who were pursuing degrees. This study did not include single mothers without experience at a community college. This study did not engage staff or faculty at any of the identified institutions to request their perceptions of this process. Lastly, this study was limited to sixteen participants, so generalizations of the study’s findings could be limited.

Following the work of Bowl (2001) and Johnson-Bailey (2001), participants were asked to share their stories to honor their experiences. An appreciative stance to

constructivist inquiry focuses on what is being done well, and such an approach has been shown to be empowering and uplifting (Patton, 2003). As these single mothers face numerous demands on their time and expertise, affirming their choices and successes yielded important information about institutional accommodation for single mothers. This aim was partially limited for some participants who reported feeling that pointing out the multiple demands on their time and resources was alienating, so the conclusion of the interviews were reworded in order to affirm and encourage the mothers in their educational pursuits while not being distancing. Due to the multiple roles of the women being interviewed, there were time constraints on this research. This qualitative study was designed to identify successes of single mothers who matriculate into higher education institutions. A longitudinal view of the transfer experience and the process of choosing a major course of study were outside the scope of this research.

### **Summary**

This research was designed as a basic interpretive study aimed at interpreting the experiences of single mothers who are students and examining their feelings around those experiences and interactions (Merriam, 2002). The primary mode of data collection was in-depth interviews with sixteen at eleven different institutions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. The data were analyzed using constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and was broken down into themes (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Beyond interviews, I engaged in participant observations during the interviews to watch the students interact with their environments.

## **CHAPTER 4 – Participant Profiles**

This research was undertaken with the cooperation of sixteen women who shared their stories and journeys through the educational system. At the outset of the interview, each woman selected a pseudonym to maintain anonymity. This chapter will begin with a general description of the study respondents by demographics, and then the participant profiles will be broken down into three groups. While all women who participated were single mothers, the trajectory that they followed from high school through the point at which they were interviewed varied widely. Most of the women in this study fell into one of three groups: teenage mothers, high school drop outs, and the ‘detour’ group. A description of each group will be followed by the participant profiles for each of the women who fell within that group. The profile of one participant who did not fall into any of these groups will be shared before the group descriptions are outlined.

These summary sketches will provide an overview of the women’s stories as well as descriptions of how they presented themselves within the context of the interview. These summary sketches for each of the sixteen study participants will allow the reader to gain perspective on the varied life experiences and voices of the women who chose to participate. Prior to sharing these summary sketches, however, a broad overview of the demographics of the study participants will be presented, as well as a table with information regarding the length of time that they had been enrolled in both community college and university education at the time of the interview. Table One will provide additional information including occupation and number of children.

Table One: Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Group	Marital Status	#/ Age of Children	Race/Ethnicity	Yrs. Bachelor Edu.	Yrs. CC Edu..	Hrs. worked/ week	Job Title	Major
Autumn	27	Detour	Divorced	1/ 3	White	.5* & .5	2.5	30-40	Receptionist & Freelance writer	Geography, Urban Studies minor
Beth	29	H.S. drop out	Single	1/ 3.5	White	2* & 3 yrs. graduate school	4*	20	Teaching Assistant	Sociology
Brett	29	Detour	Single (Divorced)	1/ 5	White	1.5* & .5	2	15-20	Staffing	Sociology (Marriage & Family)
Catrina	36	Teenage mother	Single	2/14 & 22	African American	3	2	15-20	Receptionist	Social Work & Psychology, Women's Studies minor
Danielle	23	Teenage mother	Single	1/ 6	African American	4	1.5	20	Telemarketer	Child Development
Eliza	31	Detour	Divorced/ Partnered	2/ 8,11	White	2.5 & 1 p.t./ .5 graduate school	4	32-40/6	Nutrition buyer/ T.A.	English; Public Health
K.B.	33	Detour	Divorced/ Single	1/7	White	1 year* & 1 year	3	10	Server	Nursing
Lily	31	H.S. drop out	Single	1/ 5	White	1.5	2	25	Receptionist	Teacher Ed
Phoenix	26	H.S. drop out	Single	2/3.5, 7	White	3	2	15-20	Community Resource Specialist	Psychology/ Social Work

\* indicates time without child

Table One (continued)

Name	Age	Group	Marital Status	#/ Age of Children	Race/Ethnicity	Yrs. Bachelor Edu.	Yrs. CC Edu.	Hrs. worked/week	Job Title	Major
Queen	53	No designation	Divorced	(grand children-twins- 4)	African American	4 (graduated)	2*	10-15	Research Assistant	Social Work
Sally	26	H.S. drop out	Single	1/ 7	African American	2	3/1	30	Graphic Designer; Credit Suisse	Graphic Arts
Samantha	26	H.S. drop out	Single (Divorced)	1/ 7	White	1.5	2.5	6, 15	Research Assistant; Server	Sociology, Women's Studies minor
Sara	26	Detour	Separated/ Divorced	2/ 4.5, 1	White	1 * & 1.5	1	40	Customer Service	Human Resources
Susie	25	Detour	Separated/ Single	1/ 4	Native American	.5	.5	40	Substitute Teacher	Elementary Education
Tina	26	H.S. drop out	Single	1/ 7	White	1	2	weekends	Server	Social Work
Valeria	42	Detour	Single	3 in home/ 9, 8, 5	African American	2	2	45	Nanny	Religion

\* indicates time without child

## **Participant Demographics**

Seventeen women were interviewed for this research, with one woman's interview excluded due to her lack of experience with the community college. The age of eligible participants ranged from 23 to 53, and each lived in North Carolina. All but two attended a college or university in North Carolina; four had completed undergraduate degrees; two were completing a second undergraduate major; and two were pursuing graduate degrees. The two participants who did not attend colleges in North Carolina took part in online degree programs. Half were either divorced or separated from their child(ren)'s father. Five women self identified as Black/African American; ten self identified as White; and one self identified as Native American. Two women were currently looking for work, and those who were working did so from six to 45 hours a week. All participants (aside from the one who had graduated the previous semester) were enrolled in at least three courses; which qualified them as full time students at their respective universities.

Queen, the one participant who did not fall within any of the three groups laid out was the oldest study participant, and based on the era when she came of age, it was less likely for an African American woman to enroll in college directly after high school graduation. For this reason, she was not included in the 'detour' group, where some sort of event or intervention prevented women from continuing to attend college directly after high school. Because she was neither a teenage mother, nor a student who dropped out of high school, she was not considered eligible for those categories either. Accordingly, her profile will stand on its own to represent her story.

## **Queen**

Queen is a 53 year old grandmother of eight, who lives with two four year old twin grandsons near a small rural town in central North Carolina. She self identifies as divorced and the primary caretaker of her grandsons while her daughter is in prison. Although Queen completed a bachelor's degree in Social Work at a local private college, she began her academic work at a local community college. At the time of the interview, Queen held a part time job working with a research firm doing follow up questionnaires, and was seeking additional part time work. Queen aspires to own her own business where she would be the proprietor of a family home working with older adults.

In high school, Queen graduated tenth in her graduating class, and focused on business classes. After living in New York for several years, she relocated to South Carolina to take a job doing relief work after Hurricane Hugo hit. While she was in South Carolina, she took several courses in various special topics such as medical terminology, but it was only after she moved to North Carolina that she opted to complete curriculum courses at the community college close to her home. After two years of community college education, she went to a university fair, where she found a table from the private university she attended. They convinced her that they would be able to take her at their school immediately. Queen later expressed regret at her decision to attend her (private) university, upon learning that many of the required courses were also offered at a significantly lower cost through her local community college. Eventually, Queen needed to take a semester off due to financial

constraints, but due to her perseverance, the university provided funds for her to continue for her last semester and graduate.

Queen describes herself as a frequent volunteer, and someone who has a deep and personal relationship with God. She appears emotional, deeply religious, generous, and is someone who has overcome multiple obstacles in life to get to where she is. She is very proud of what she has accomplished and was visibly hurt in describing a story where her integrity was questioned. She describes a skill of being able to manage cooking dinner, washing clothes and bathing children all at once.

### **Teenage Mother**

Two of the women in this study identified as teenage mothers. Each got pregnant while in high school. Despite the demands of having a small child, both Danielle and Catrina chose to complete high school-- and subsequently enrolled in community college upon graduation from high school. Danielle continued onward with her university courses immediately after community college. In contrast, Catrina chose to work using the applied associate's degree she earned before returning to community college to complete the courses needed to transfer to a university.

#### **Danielle**

Danielle is a 23 year old African American female who lives with her six year old daughter in the town near her university. She identifies as single, but during our interview she discussed how her boyfriend was a significant source of support for her. She is majoring in Family Relations and Child Development with a minor in History at a historically black

university. Danielle has aspirations to complete a master's degree in counseling, and a PhD in counseling by age 45. She began her collegiate work in Virginia. She currently works as a telemarketer for twenty hours a week.

During her junior year in high school, Danielle discovered that she was pregnant with her daughter. She gave birth in September of her senior year and with the help of her family was able to get a home teacher which allowed her to continue with her advanced coursework instead of attending a school for "pregnant teenage mothers" where the coursework was at a general level and focused on caring for a child. With the help of her home teacher, Danielle graduated with her advanced diploma and began to study at the local community college near her family in Virginia. She began there to assure that she could maintain excellent grades while being the primary caretaker for her daughter. When she realized that she was able to keep up her grades, Danielle decided to attend her university for several reasons. Initially she was encouraged for several reasons. Her twin sister was attending a nearby university. In addition, since her aunt and uncle had both attended the university she was considering, she believed they knew people who could help her get scholarships. Finally, Danielle reports that ever since watching the television show 'A Different World' as a child, she wished to attend a Historically Black College or University.

Danielle describes herself as caring, adaptable, and able to manage her time well. Resourceful and resilient, she maintains very high expectations of herself academically. Continuing to attend college while battling cervical cancer illustrates Danielle's dedication to her academics as well as her ability to ask for help when she needs it.

## **Catrina**

Catrina is a 36 year old African American woman with two children. Katrina's son is 22 years old, and her daughter is 14. Both children live with her in the eastern part of North Carolina. She identifies as single. Katrina has already completed her Psychology major, and she's now in the process of completing her second major, Social Work. Because she loves working with elderly individuals, she has aspirations to own her own assisted living apartment complex. Before being laid off from her job three months prior to the interview, she had worked part time as a secretary who often also served as a nursing assistant. When she was working, she typically worked in the afternoons for between 15 and 20 hours a week. When she completes her undergraduate work at the large public university she currently attends, she plans to pursue a Masters of Social Work (MSW) from another large public university and afterwards hopes to attain a PhD.

Immediately prior to starting high school, Katrina moved from New Jersey to a small town in rural North Carolina. Unlike New Jersey, where there was lots to do, when she arrived in small town North Carolina, there was a great deal of focus on having a boyfriend. She mentioned that if she had not gotten pregnant in her 9<sup>th</sup> grade year, she was considering running away. She had her son in 9<sup>th</sup> grade but continued to attend high school. After completing high school, she attended a computer institute in Virginia and was offered several jobs upon graduation. After several years of working in Virginia, she attempted to reconcile with her son's father, and she became pregnant with her daughter. Shortly thereafter, she became estranged from her children's father, and she subsequently moved closer to her

mother, whose health was failing, in order to care for her. In 2002 she decided to attend community college in the evenings. Based on her interest in studying Psychology, a patient in the doctor's office where she worked suggested that she enroll at her current university.

Catrina describes herself as motivated, determined, dependable, compassionate and smart. She appears capable, committed to her goal of education, and very self assured. She also seems less overwhelmed by her mothering responsibilities than the other mothers in this study, which is likely due to the older age of her children.

### **High School Drop-Out**

Several of the women in this study did not complete high school in a traditional format, for a variety of reasons. Most of the women in this group took some time off from school before they completed their General Education Degree (GED). One woman included in this group did not complete her degree at a community college, but instead attended an alternative high school for students who had previously dropped out of a more traditional school. At the point of earning her high school degree or GED, some continued onward to complete their associate's degrees. However, some chose to work for a while before returning to the community college for college level coursework.

### **Phoenix**

Phoenix is a 26-year-old White female with two children, ages 7 and 3 ½ who live with her outside of a coastal town. She identifies as single and has not been associated with her children's father for three years. She is a double major in Social Work and Psychology at her university. She has aspirations to complete a master's degree in Social Work upon her

completion of her bachelor's degree. She began her collegiate work at the community college close to her home and now works as a community resource specialist for children with disabilities for 20 hours a week. She also runs a pit bull rescue in her home and is currently seeking 501-c3 status for the rescue. In her spare time, Phoenix likes to ride motorcycles.

At fifteen, Phoenix dropped out of high school and emancipated herself from her family. After taking a year and a half off to work, she chose to return to community college to get her General Education Degree (GED). Phoenix said that her adult high school courses enabled her to acclimate to the college environment and easily transition from GED courses to courses in Pre-Psychology. One of Phoenix's proudest academic achievements was maintaining full time enrollment at the community college while pregnant with her son. She spoke about only missing a few days of class to have him, and despite giving birth mid-semester, she still made the Dean's List.

Phoenix describes herself as flexible and fluid because her life is in a constant state of flux. She appears self-assured, resourceful, and very self-reliant. For example, when her car started breaking down frequently, Phoenix chose to learn small engine repair because she could not afford to hire a mechanic. She describes the important financial skill of "making a whole lot out of a whole little."

### **Sally**

Sally is a 27 year old African American woman who lives with her seven year old daughter in a city in central North Carolina. She identifies as single. She is pursuing a major

in Graphic Design with a minor in Studio Art at a private women's college. Sally has aspirations to be a top name New York designer who designs large billboards for Times Square. During the day, Sally works for a local financial services company, and in the evenings, she works as a graphic operator to gain design experience. Between her two jobs, Sally works 30 hours per week. In addition to her paid work, she must put in numerous hours in studios for her major (citing 10-12 hour stints in the lab to complete a project) because she cannot afford to have the high end graphics programs that she needs to use for her homework on her home computer.

Sally was not able to complete high school due to what she called a dysfunctional family situation, and so completed her Adult General Education Degree. She began her collegiate work at an arts school in North Carolina, yet during her first year there, she discovered she was pregnant with her daughter. She transitioned from there to a local community college, but she found that their degree was focused on obsolete technology. When another community college closer to her home began offering coursework in graphic design, she transferred to earn her associate's degree in graphic arts. Based on her undergraduate internship in graphic design, she realized that she had much more to learn before she would have marketable skills, so she began to look into her college's adult degree completion program and their major in graphic design.

Sally describes herself as sensitive, ambitious, hard working and a planning person. She appears quite dedicated, willing to go outside of her classroom to take on internships and other opportunities to learn things that will allow her to build the skills she feels that she will

need in her life as a designer. She is very soft-spoken and polite. She looks utterly exhausted (likely due to working third shift and attending classes during the day) which leaves only a few hours a day for sleep.

### **Beth**

Beth is a twenty-nine year old woman with a three and a half year old son who lives with her in the Triangle region of North Carolina. She identifies as single. She has completed an undergraduate degree in Sociology from a university in Arizona, and she is now working on her doctorate in Sociology at a nearby university. Beth currently works 20 hours a week as the teaching assistant for a Sociology course.

In high school, Beth bounced around between several high schools, between private and public, and she eventually graduated from an alternative high school. After graduation, she started taking courses part time at the local community college while working full time for a dental insurance company that provided tuition reimbursement. When she completed her associate's degree, she was able to apply the same tuition benefit to complete her coursework at a local university. In her last semester at the university, she got pregnant with her son and decided to take a year off while she considered graduate schools. She began at her university when her son was six months old. She was admitted to a program that allowed her to complete both her masters and her doctorate at the same time. During her time enrolled in graduate school, she was involved in a custody battle over her son. Although she has completed all of the course work that she needs to for her master's degree, she was still working on her thesis research at the time of our interview. In addition, she is taking courses

towards her doctorate and needs to complete research for her doctorate at well. In her interview she raised concerns about being behind on her research due to her obligations as a mother, and she stated fears that she would not be allowed to complete the doctorate based on the decisions her thesis committee.

Beth describes herself as hard working, determined, and committed. Her appearance is impeccable and quite professional. She is clearly passionate about her research and her status as a mother as it coincides with her role as a student of sociology. She seems slightly cynical regarding the plight of the single mother within the university and despite having a sister in the Triangle area who is also a single mother, she does not feel that she derives any real support from that relationship.

### **Lily**

Lily is a 31 year old White female with a five year old son who lives with her in the Triangle area of North Carolina. Although Lily reports being single, her son's father lives in the same apartment and provides care for their son when Lily is at work. As a Child Development major at a local private women's college, she plans to pursue teacher licensure with a potential concentration in special education. Lily began her college work at the community college close to her home, and the bus system provided access to attend classes at both colleges. Currently, Lily works as a receptionist for 25 hours a week.

Lily began high school at an all female Catholic high school, but transferred into a public school and then at 16, she dropped out of high school. At 21, she returned to a community college in New York (where she lived at the time) to attain her General

Education Degree (GED). Upon completing her GED, she did take one semester of college coursework, but she was not interested in continuing her studies at that point. After working for a while, she moved to North Carolina and had her son. Soon after her son's birth, she decided to return to school at the community college close to her home on a part time basis to see if she would be able to manage attending courses and caring for her child. Because of her child care priority, she utilized many online, evening, and weekend courses. She appreciated those options as well because they allowed her to keep a full time job. She completed her associate's degree and then began to look into local colleges and universities. She chose the women's college she attended for several reasons. Lily had a friend who was enrolled there; she was impressed with the small class size; and the school was on the bus line and easy to get to (Lily does not have a NC driver's license).

Lily describes herself as down to earth, bright, and hard working. She appears very friendly and clearly has a strong work ethic, particularly when it comes to her paid work. Lily appears to have a very strong support system in the form of her son's father.

### **Samantha**

Samantha is a twenty-six year old White woman who lives with her seven year old son who lives with her outside of the Triad area of North Carolina. She identifies as single; separated from her husband; and the primary caretaker for her son. She is majoring in Sociology with a minor in Women's Studies at a large public university. She began her college career at the community college close to her home. She has aspirations to complete a graduate degree in Sociology so that she could teach at a collegiate level. Currently she

works two jobs: one on the campus of her university six hours a week as a Research Assistant (she says that this is because it looks good on her transcript) and another for 15 hours a week as a server at a local pizza parlor.

In Samantha's junior year of high school, she withdrew from her high school and moved to a different part of the state. A year after her move, she went to the local community college and enrolled in courses that would allow her to get her General Education Degree (GED). She then moved from the general education courses to college level courses, but did not feel ready for college and so took a break for a few years, tried to climb the corporate ladder, got married and had her son. She said that her experience attempting to climb the corporate ladder showed her that you need to have a degree to make it. Soon after her son's birth, she returned to the community college to take a night class. Based on that success, she took two the next semester, then opted to return to the community college full time and work part time. Upon completing her associate's degree, she applied to her university and was very excited to be accepted to a school that she feels is so well regarded nationally.

Samantha describes herself as studious, busy, detail oriented, calm, and verging on being a perfectionist. She appears interested in and committed to doing research on role overload in single mothers (having just won a university award to pursue the topic) despite the stress she feels that the research causes her. Due to the stress of her research, caring for her son and maintaining her older house, she withdrew from the Fall semester prior to our interview. She had plans to return during the Spring semester (we spoke before the semester

started). She is also quite dedicated to her son, being willing to coach his soccer team despite her own lack of knowledge of the sport.

### **Tina**

Tina is a twenty-six year old White female with one seven year old daughter who lives with her in a rural suburb of the Triangle in North Carolina. She describes herself as single and as the primary caregiver for her daughter. She is a Social Work major with a minor in Criminology at a large public university. She has aspirations to complete a Master's degree in Social Work upon completion of her bachelor's degree. Tina worked as a server at a restaurant close to her home until it was hit by a plane. The owners are rebuilding and have promised to save a position for her, but as she waits for the restaurant to reopen, she is unemployed.

High school courses came easy to Tina, and she often skipped classes. As a disciplinary measure, she was subsequently placed in a program designed for students considered at risk for dropping out of school. After she graduated from high school, Tina took a break because she did not feel ready for college. During that break, Tina had her daughter. When she broke up with her daughter's father, she chose to return to the local community college. She had a friend who was already attending there to show her where to apply for a position in the financial aid office and how to receive student support services. While enrolled, she went through a court battle with her daughter's father. Tina reported that she was very proud to state that she was simultaneously working full time, taking care of her daughter, attending school full time, and managing to stay on the Dean's List. When she was

two credits shy of completing her associate's degree, Tina transferred into her university's Social Work program.

Tina describes herself as hard-working, structured, organized, and flexible. She appears determined, willing to take whatever steps necessary to accomplish her goals, and unwilling to accept defeat or fail to meet her goal for herself. Her tenacity and willingness to continue to attend school in light of losing her job at the restaurant (and therefore all monetary support) shows that she is not someone who gives up easily.

### **The 'Detour' Group**

Often very active in high school, the women in the 'detour group' entered college directly after high school graduation. Yet prior to completing their undergraduate degree, a disruption caused a 'detour' on their college completion plans. Some women fell victim to an overactive social life (i.e. "majored in partying"), which caused them to withdraw from school. In addition, some women left college to get married, and one was 'discovered' as a model. For most women in the study, the decision to return to college was prompted by a divorce or separation. Only one person in the 'detour' group was not divorced.

### **Eliza**

Eliza is a 31-year-old White female with two children, ages eight and eleven, who live with her in a small town. She identifies as divorced and is romantically involved with the man she currently lives with. Before returning to school full time, she divorced her husband and waged a custody battle over her children that spanned the entire two years that she was enrolled at her undergraduate institution. Eliza's undergraduate degree is in English.

She is currently pursuing a master's degree in the medical field at a university in the research Triangle. As an undergraduate, Eliza worked full time as a nutrition buyer at a local organic grocery store. Having returning to graduate school, she now works as discussion leader and grader for a course in her department.

Although Eliza was mainly home schooled as a high school student, graduated from a small private high school. Immediately after high school, she enrolled in a small liberal arts college in California, but after a semester, she was forced to withdraw based on financial constraints. After travelling for a year, she began to take courses at a community college in Arizona. In her second semester there, she found out that she was pregnant. She then continued her coursework on a part time basis while working two to three jobs, in order to provide financially for her child. Upon completing her associate's degree, Eliza worked for two years until becoming pregnant with her second son, at which point she chose to return to school to complete a bachelor's degree. Upon graduation with her bachelor's degree, she worked in the financial aid department at her university.

Eliza describes herself as quiet, introverted, creative, and a problem solver. She appears very self contained and competent as well as passionate about the needs of mothers. Upon returning to her university for graduate school, Eliza started her university's first group for pregnant and parenting students.

**K.B.**

K.B. is a thirty-three year old White woman who lives with her 7 year old son in a town in the Triangle area of North Carolina. She identifies as divorced and currently single.

She is majoring in Nursing at a university in the Triangle. K.B. has aspirations to work as a registered nurse for a few years, then return to school to earn her Master's of Science in Nursing in order to become a Family Nurse Practitioner. K.B. began her collegiate work at a private liberal arts school in Florida. Currently, she works as a server on the weekends for approximately ten hours a week and receives child support from her son's father.

As an honor roll student who took advanced placement courses in high school, K.B. had always expected to go on to college. However, during the latter part of her senior year in high school, she became less confident that she was actually ready for college, but after she was accepted, she chose to enroll, unsure of what she would do if she did not attend college. Although she enjoyed the liberal arts education, she found the social setting a poor fit for her. After a year, she returned home to Georgia, where she enrolled in community college courses. She soon lost interest and withdrew. After working in the restaurant business for several years, she got married and relocated to North Carolina to start a family. When her son was about two and a half years old, K.B. decided to leave her husband and resume taking classes at the local community college. After three years of coursework, she applied to transfer to her university's nursing program. Her application was rejected -- an experience she described as "devastating," but when she reapplied at the next opportunity, she was accepted into the program.

K.B. describes herself as detail oriented, an advocate for oppressed groups, and skilled at judging group dynamics. She appears bright and energetic, open and interested, and highly demanding of herself. She has very high expectations for herself as both a student

and as a mother, and falling short of her ambitious goals sometimes causes frustration. Although she described looking for a girlfriend, she did not self identify as a lesbian during our interview. She lives in a house with passive solar heat, eats organic food, has bumper stickers which remind others to “Be kind to Mother Earth” and “Support Local Farmers” and describes herself as “New-Age-y”.

### **Susie**

Susie is a twenty-five year old American Indian female from the Lumbee tribe who lives with her four year old son in a small town in rural North Carolina. Presently separated from her husband, Susie is in the process of filing for divorce and sole custody of her son. Susie attends a small public university and intends to be an Elementary Education major. She works full time as a substitute teacher in the elementary school that she attended as a child. Susie describes having an aspiration for her son to be able to fill out demographic forms which indicate a parental educational level of advanced degree. Interestingly, she did not include any personal aspirations towards a graduate degree; instead her primary motivation seemed to be her desire for her son to feel that his mother had accomplished something significant.

In high school, Susie graduated at the top of her class and was very involved in numerous extra-curricular activities. After high school, she spent a semester at a university, yet after attending classes sporadically, she withdrew at the end of the fall. Within a month of stopping school, she met her husband, and then got married, and had her son. After a few years of jumping from job to job, she decided to separate from her husband and return to

school. Susie began by taking a course at the local community college, but did not feel that the community college challenged her enough. Having boosted her confidence through community college attendance, she enrolled full time at her university again in the fall of 2007.

Susie describes herself as caring, supportive, introverted and intelligent. She appears very driven, passionate, energetic, and committed to completing her degree as quickly as possible. She shared plans to attend courses not only in the fall, spring and both summer sessions, but also during a shortened semester termed the “Maymester” where all coursework is compressed into a month. Susie describes her desires to attend college and complete her degree in terms of what other people expect. She wants to complete her degree to give her son something to look up to, and to qualify for a teaching position. She elaborated on the expectations of her supervisor at her school that she complete a degree, as well as her desire to make her father proud. Her dedication to completing her studies in less than six years lead her to take coursework on Saturdays and to take classes that she was not interested in simply to earn the requisite credits.

### **Sara**

Sara is a twenty-six year old White female with two children, ages four and a half and one. She and her children live with Sara’s parents in a coastal town. At the time of the participant interview, Sara’s divorce was to be finalized in two weeks. Sara is majoring in Human Resources at an online university. She has aspirations to be an advocate for children within the welfare or foster care system. She currently works nights (6 pm to 3 am)

providing customer service for a company manufacturing home goods. She likes her position, paired with her online degree, because it allows her to spend time with her children during the day.

Directly after high school, Sara enrolled in a public university, but says that she should have majored in partying because that's all she did for the year that she was there. While she was there, she met her ex-husband, and they married the year after she left college. Because her ex-husband was active military, they moved around a lot. During a previous deployment when their daughter was one, Sara lived with her parents and took courses at the community college close to their home. Once he returned, they moved to Texas, and she enrolled in courses at a satellite program near their home which catered to military families and offered courses for four hours one night a week (she took two a semester). Because their family was going to deploy again and Sara had lost several credits during previous moves, she opted to begin online courses at her university, where she has been enrolled for roughly six months. After her first eight weeks of courses, she received a sudden phone call from her husband asking for a divorce; a theme that remained strong throughout the interview, more so than any of the other divorced mothers, perhaps due to the seemingly unexpected nature of the divorce as well as the recent nature of the event as compared to the other women in the study.

Sara describes herself as hard working and dedicated. She appears determined and unwilling to let anything stop her from being a great mother or from completing her college degree. She considers a bachelor's degree essential to her success in securing a good job.

Due to working night shifts until 3 AM and getting up with her kids at 7 AM, she looked exhausted.

### **Autumn**

Autumn is a twenty-seven year old White female who lives with her son in a metropolitan area in the foothills of North Carolina. She self identifies as divorced and as the primary care giver for her son. At the time of the interview, Autumn had just changed majors from Biology to Geography with a minor in Urban Studies. Autumn mentioned aspirations to get a graduate degree. She currently works between 30 and 40 hours a week as a receptionist and does some freelance writing on the side.

In high school, Autumn was a straight-A student. As she was about to depart for school, her parents suddenly divorced, and they both requested that she stay closer to home to help care for her brothers. Unfortunately during her freshman year at the local university, she was injured in a very bad car accident and was forced to miss a great deal of class while she was recuperating. Upon recovery, she was faced with extensive medical bills and “put school on the back burner.”. She got married and had a son. When her son was 3 months old, she separated from her husband and enrolled in the local community college. After she completed her associate’s degree, she considered it necessary pursue a bachelor’s degree at the university near her home. At this time of the interview, she had just completed her first semester (post-child) at her university.

Autumn describes herself as determined, quiet, and introverted. She appears to be very logical, a devoted mother, and a contemplative person. She was very articulate and

stated that had she not chosen to get a divorce, she was relatively certain that she would never have returned to school—her roles of wife and mother were too consuming for her to consider taking on academic obligations. Autumn reported that her mother was an inspiration for her. While Autumn was in high school, her mother returned to school to earn an undergraduate degree and completed her medical degree at age 45. Autumn appeared connected to her school through the mentor that she was provided as a part of the non-traditional student organization, and felt that her mentor’s support was helping her succeed.

### **Valeria**

Valeria is a 42 year old African American female with four children, three of whom live with her (aged nine, eight and five) in a rural town near the Virginia border. She identifies as single and does not report having any continuing relationships with the fathers of her children, aside from her fourteen year old daughter’s father, who is the primary caregiver for that child. Valeria began her college career at the community college close to her home, but transferred to pursue an online degree in Religion at a private religiously affiliated university. Valeria reports aspirations to complete a masters degree in divinity or to attend seminary. In addition to going to school, Valeria works 45 hours a week as a nanny for a local couple.

Valeria shared that high school academic work came relatively easily to her, but that at that point, she was more focused on social outlets like football games and boyfriends. Her parents encouraged her to enroll in the local community college to study Fashion Design, and while on a school fieldtrip to New York, she was ‘discovered’ and offered a modeling job.

She modeled for fifteen years, traveling all over the world, and living what she considered a public life. When she finished modeling, she began working for the State of North Carolina and settled into what she considered a more private life. After about six years, Valeria decided that if she wanted to provide well for all of her children, she would need to return to school to pursue a bachelor's degree. Because of her home situation, Valeria only considered online degree options, and she chose her university based on its religious affiliation, which she found very important.

Valeria describes herself as a people person, a community leader, and someone who refuses to be defined by her circumstances. She is deeply religious, very passionate about her own abilities, committed to helping her children be successful, and outspoken about single motherhood. Valeria is very determined, as demonstrated by her refusal to let her “twenty year old computer” or her own lack of knowledge regarding how to upload files stand in the way of her taking online courses.

### **Brett**

Brett is a 29 year old White woman who lives with her five year old son in the eastern part of North Carolina. She is divorced and considers herself single. Brett is majoring in Sociology with a Marriage and Family concentration at the university near her home. In addition, she is working on a certificate in Non-Profit Management at a private university in the Triangle. She reports having aspirations of getting a graduate degree (either as a Licensed Professional Counselor or in Marriage and Family Therapy) and possibly even a

doctorate. Brett currently works fifteen to twenty hours a week for a staffing company pairing temporary workers with companies in need of temporary staff.

In high school, Brett was very involved in clubs and graduated with several scholarships. She opted to attend the university close to her mother's home and ended up focusing on things aside from her academics. In her sophomore year, her now ex-husband proposed to her, and she opted to stop attending school in order to get married and move to where he was stationed. Upon returning to the United States, she worked for a year before attending a local two year business college to pursue a degree in medical assisting. Upon graduation, Brett got a job in the field, but she soon found that it was not professionally rewarding. After six months, Brett returned to a community college close to their home to take general education courses. She had just found out that she was admitted to a local university when she discovered that she was pregnant with her son. Declining to enroll, she did not pursue any further education until she left her husband when her son was two. At that point, she began attending the community college close to her mother's home with the intention of getting an associate's degree. The counselor there encouraged her to transfer back to the local university where she began her studies years earlier.

Brett describes herself as determined, an "out-of-the-box" thinker, emotional, and an over-achiever. She appears committed, passionate about mother's rights, calls herself "a perpetual student" and seems to be a doting mother. In her sociology courses, she is an outspoken advocate for the needs of single mothers.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear from the participant profiles outlined above that the idea of a single mother going to college is not a ‘one size fits all’ model; there are nuances and intricacies of each woman’s experience that made her story unique. Although the life journey of each participant is unique, the educational pursuits of these sixteen single mothers can be framed by common experiences. Based on varied personal and professional motivations, these individual narratives all reflect efforts to earn a bachelors or masters degree. The intention of this chapter was to highlight the rich and varied background of the participants, thus setting the stage for the next chapter to focus more explicitly on the commonalities between the women’s stories. In the following section, the research findings are placed in social context to outline the unifying themes that shaped the life experiences of the women who participated in this research.

## **CHAPTER 5 -- Research Findings**

While the previous chapter focused on the variations between the pathways that women in this study navigated while pursuing their educational goals, the purpose of this chapter is to focus on the unified themes that emerged in common from the study participants. Within each theme, information was further broken down into subthemes which describe the theme in more depth. Three primary themes emerged regarding the educational experiences of single mothers who work and attend college. The first theme, “finding her way to and through college” focused on four ways in which the women in this study chose to return to pursue further education, as well as their motivating factors, their support network, and their feelings of pride. The second theme, “struggle for legitimacy as a parenting student,” addresses the often overlooked challenges that confront mothers as students: (a) invisibility within the institution and (b) the fact that motherhood is a full time job. The final theme, “striving for balance between multiple roles,” centers around two struggles that mothers in college typically face as they manage their multiple obligations: (a) knowing herself (honoring her abilities as well as her limits) and (b) time scarcity. Each of these themes and subthemes will be explored in depth as they create a unified picture of the experiences of single mothers within institutions of higher learning.

### **Finding Her Way To And Through College**

Choosing to attend college can be an intimidating experience for any student. The selection process itself can be fraught with concerns over identifying both academic and social needs as well as subsequently determining which school would be the best fit. After

choosing a college, she could become apprehensive of the broad and diverse challenges inherent in collegiate work, and could have concerns regarding whether she will be successful at her chosen institution. Finally, when she is successful, many women have a great deal of pride in the overwhelming amount of work that she has done to earn academic accolades. Women in this study made a choice to pursue a university education, some directly after high school and some after having worked for some time. Upon making that choice, they sought out and found support for themselves as mothers and students from a variety of areas. As they navigated the educational system, they experienced feelings of pride in their academic work and in their life as a parenting student. Within the theme of “Finding her way to and through college”, there were three sub-themes: motivating factors, support networks and feelings of pride. As there is a logical progression related to time in college, those findings will be presented in that order. First, the factors which influenced participant’s choice to pursue education beyond high school, secondly, the support networks which were available to her as she navigated the educational system and finally, the feelings of pride that she experienced during her educational journey will be presented.

### **Motivating factors**

As a part of making her way to and through college, women in this study made the choice to pursue undergraduate education for the first time, or return to college. Women in this study chose to pursue collegiate education for a variety of reasons. Some wanted to be a role model for their children or make life a little less difficult for other single mothers. Many felt that college provided an instrumental credential that would be necessary to be

competitive within the global marketplace. Others felt that in order to have the career they desired, they would need the requisite training, provided within the context of an undergraduate degree. Most also felt that a college degree was their best option for securing a higher living wage for their families, and so provided the best possible options for providing financially for their families. Because these motivations were not mutually exclusive, many women cited at least two reasons they chose to pursue further education. Whether their pursuit of a bachelor's degree was primarily motivated by being a trailblazer, working towards a new career, or providing for their families, each spoke with passion about her choice.

*Serving as a role model.*

The women in this study were a courageous and giving group of individuals. They balanced so many responsibilities, yet each chose to participate in this research hoping to influence how decisions were made in higher education. As they began their time within the university system, several were motivated by being able to serve as a role model for their children or families. Explaining to their families the importance of the degree that they were pursuing motivated and inspired them to continue to work hard and set a good example for those who would come after them.

Susie felt that it was very important for her to serve as a role model for her son so that he not only had pride in what his mother had accomplished, but also that he recognize that education was important in her life. By extension, Susie hoped that education would be valued in his life as well.

I realized that a parent is the biggest role model any child has. The parent is the one person they see every day... to say okay, now I can say that I have a career ... I wanted him to be able to look up to his mama and say, My mama is... doing something. My mama has got her degree. I don't want him to say, oh, my mama just graduated from high school.

Sally also felt that it was part of her role as mother to teach her daughter to enjoy learning and to value education.

You know I am in college and ... everything that I am in, all that, I teach it to her and so by the fact that I have this person that I have molded ... I need to continue with it because then she will continue...

Many of the women in this study reflected the desire to be a role model for their child and model the importance of academics at all levels. For example, Valeria held a healthy competition with her sons to see who would have better grades at the end of the term. "And that letter that said I was on the Dean's list, you know, my son was like I have to keep my grades up, I can't let you beat me." Beyond her immediate family, Catrina also felt that she could serve as a role model to her extended family to pursue higher education beyond undergraduate education and into graduate degrees.

[W]ithin my ... immediate family... all the grandchildren, I'm the oldest, and as of today, myself and I think two others only have bachelors degree. And I want to be the first within that ... immediate family to have a master's, to have a doctorate. I, I feel like I should set the foundation for the others to come you know, "Well, you

know, [Catrina], Cousin [Catrina] did this, so I could too” I mean, I don’t want them to feel like it’s unattainable.

Serving as a role model motivated mothers in this study to continue to pursue education despite some obstacles they encountered. Their dedication to teaching their children and families the importance of a bachelor’s degree gave them pride. In some cases, imparting this respect for education was the encouragement women needed to begin their studies, and sometimes it also served as a reminder not to give up. Although having someone looking up to them was a great responsibility, it offered the accountability to their goal of education that some felt they needed. On a related note, many wanted to serve as a role model and to have family and children be proud of their chosen profession-- leading them to think seriously about their career advancement and how a bachelor’s degree might bolster and advance those plans.

### *Career.*

The women in this research were a dedicated and determined group of individuals. All strive to meet academic demands, to become the best parents they could, and to succeed in whatever career fields they chose. Although Samantha exhibited this level of drive to excel in her work, she felt that without a degree, she would be ineffective and unable to succeed regardless of her skill set and her work ethic.

I started working at [local college] through a temporary agency with the intention of climbing the corporate ladder and I’ll show them how smart I am and how good I am

and what a good employee I am. That doesn't work. (laughs) They want you to go to college. So then I decided I was going to go back to college.

All study participants felt that within the current occupational environment, education and the credential that a college diploma represented was critical. As Brett observed, "...knowledge has always been important to me but credentials are very important in this world and ... you know, I could get all the knowledge I wanted from the public library but nobody would care." Her frustration with the job opportunities she had as someone without a college degree was evident. Despite her dedication as a worker, the credential that an undergraduate degree offered was crucial for her to advance within a career. Amongst the women in this study, there was a great deal of overlap between realizing a need for the physical diploma, regardless of degree program, and recognizing pressure from employers to be credentialed. "I knew how to do the work, doing community based work. I had done it. I love it. Where can I use this? In social work. So, I got the experience. So I went after the paper." Queen spoke about how she felt the need to seek out a credential in order to pursue the sort of job that she had done and remained interested in.

Most of the women interviewed for this project had specific career aspirations. For some, the choice to pursue a career was to escape the drudgery of menial labor, and for some there was a drive towards a specific career. In order to meet those specific goals, several of them described a need to pursue further education. Both Queen and Beth reflected upon their previous work experiences as they looked forward to their undergraduate degree. While Queen got a degree that she felt was aligned with work that she had done in previous jobs,

Beth was looking to move beyond the job she had prior to completing her undergraduate degree. Beth spoke about how she felt that her career options with only an associate's degree were not what she wanted them to be. "[T]here wasn't anything I could do with my associate's. It was then sociology and so I didn't feel like there was anything I could do with it that I wasn't already doing which was working in a call center." Sally echoed this theme by seeing education as a way to free herself from the demands of the low-wage work force in favor of a profession in graphic design. In order to do this, however, she needed to develop skills through coursework and an internship. As a shy person, she appreciated having training through a college sponsored internship program which forced her to develop skills to address that working environment. "[M]y first internship ...I kind of admit, that threw me into the working environment where I would have to talk to people. Different people coming in. People calling in on the phone. All types of things." Brett also spoke directly to specific career related skills that she felt she was building through her coursework. Beyond completing a degree that she felt was directly applicable to her interests, she was concurrently pursuing additional coursework to earn a certificate in Non-Profit management to further hone her skills in preparation for her entry into the professional workforce.

I've taken a grant writing class, but that's part of what I want to do in the, you know, while I'm working in the non-profit industry. Kind of get, I haven't actually written a grant yet, you know, and I want to kind of see how that whole process works.

Taking the skill building idea even further, Eliza chose her degree to provide her with skills that she did not already possess. Unlike Brett, who sought out coursework to build a specific

marketable skill that she felt would serve her well in her career, Eliza was intentional in selecting her degree to allow her to build a portfolio of skills through the curriculum she was studying.

[I]n choosing my masters program, ... I had a list of, I wanted to get the following skills. And that was driven more of my own research in the field and trying to figure out what I wanted to do career wise and then filling in the gaps and say this is my ideal job. I kept files of different jobs that I thought were interesting and then going back and saying, okay, what do I have skill wise already and what do I need. And that's how I chose my masters program, to fill in those gaps of what skills I didn't have.

Eliza was very methodical in articulating and pursuing coursework to build a skill set that would allow her to seek out and find a job that she knew would be both interesting and fulfilling to her as well as provide financial support for herself and her children. Not all of the women in this study were as intentional in seeking skills, but most did cite career aspirations, credentialing, or the fulfillment of specific requirements of a given profession as significant reasons for continuing their quest for additional education.

In order to accomplish what she knew would be essential in the working world, these single mothers sought out an appropriate course of study as well as internships to assure that they would be prepared for the working world. This view of education as preparation for a professional position and as a vehicle for developing and honing desired skill sets allowed women to see direct and relevant application of their academic efforts. For many, the choice

to pursue a new career direction was based on the assumption that the new career brought a commensurate increase in salary. This impression of the financial rewards of a professional career was closely related to the participant's desire to provide for her family. This multifaceted concept includes (a) the belief that advancing careers often offered additional salary, (b) greater work schedule stability, and (c) job benefits like health care and sick days.

***Financial provision for family.***

As a single parent, each of the women in this study expressed some level of concern for the financial wellbeing of their nuclear family. One of the major ways this was expressed within the data was the mother's dedication to seeking out a bachelor's degree (or beyond) for the job opportunities and salary improvement that it represented. Many of the women disclosed in their introductions the impetus for beginning undergraduate study, and the most frequently volunteered reason was the perception that in order to get the type of job that she felt would financially support her family; she had to have an undergraduate degree.

Because Phoenix desires to have a better future for her children and to provide greater financial support, she realized that a minimum wage job and living with multiple roommates did not represent ways she wanted to raise her daughter.

I wanted to get somewhere farther than where I was and I was living with my daughter downtown in a three bedroom house with three roommates and I just said, ... I can't work in some minimum wage job and support my daughter so I decided that I had to go ahead and do something about it. Go back to college and get something better for myself... I couldn't provide for my family on minimum wage.

It's just impossible and not live with any, with any luxury at all. You just can't do it on minimum wage. There are so few jobs that somebody without a degree can do... The feelings that she was barely making ends meet and the inability to adequately provide for her children were expressed by most of the women in this study. Danielle's assessment of the value of her college degree was defined by the potential salary she would command and to what extent that salary enabled her to support her daughter.

I tried to work right after high school and not go to school and I paid attention to the pay checks and how much things costs and it just wasn't adding up. I couldn't make it off of a high school degree's education paycheck and provide for my daughter the way I want to. So it just seemed like the right thing to do was just go to school. All of the women in the study felt that having an undergraduate degree would offer access to jobs that were less likely to leave them struggling to pay their rent and feed their families.

The constant stress of wondering where her next pay check would come from and the stress of always being uneasy regarding if or when she might be laid off caused many of the women in this study to seek their undergraduate degree. Intrinsic within the promise of the baccalaureate degree was stability and security. There was more insulation from the shifts of the market and a higher likelihood of being offered benefits such as health care and paid sick and vacation days. Autumn worried in regards to living pay check to pay check and the uncertainty that blue collar occupations often offered. She was focused on providing for her son not only the income but also the stability that came with a professional career.

I wanted to make sure ... that I had the education to get a job where, you know, I don't have to worry about you know, where's the next pay check coming from. How I'm going to pay for day care but I just want stability for my son in general.

Autumn's conversation regarding obtaining her degree (perhaps informed by her period of unemployment while she was in school and supporting her son) focused around earning potential. Lily, on the other hand, felt that she could earn enough without her undergraduate degree; however, she shared Autumn's concern that she could not depend on that work and felt that only an undergraduate degree could offer her the level of stability she was seeking.

I really just wanted to have a better life for us in the future. You know, I mean you can get a decent paying job without a degree but you know, there is no security really ... So I thought it would just be a lot more secure and you know, I would be able to bring in a decent, decent income...

Eliza, on the other hand, expressed concern that she was not going to be able to provide financially for her sons without pursuing the skills that further education offered and the range of positions associated with that skill set.

[W]hen I separated, that's when I decided that I absolutely, positively had to go back full time and finish because I was a nanny at the time. So I took my kids to work with me. I worked full time but I did not want to do that forever and I had no other skills that I could actually support them.

Each of the women in this study saw education as a means to an end, and for almost all, that end was increased earning potential to better provide for her family. The experience

of struggling to support herself and her children without an undergraduate degree gave the study participants in pursuing further education. This focus on wage earning and assuring a standard of living that she felt was workable for her family, led many women to seek out majors that were professionally focused. Alternatively, some participants saw their degree as having more of a ‘sheepskin effect’ of allowing them access to higher paying, more stable jobs regardless of their specific training. Despite what brought them to college, all had to find their way through college—the focus of the next section.

### **Support Network**

Once they made the choice to get *to* college, women needed to make their way *through* college. As they made their way through the educational system, the women in this study relied on themselves as well as a network of individuals and organizations for support. This support took many forms-- sometimes it was motivational messages urging her to continue in the face of challenges, sometimes financial support and sometimes academic support in challenging coursework helped her find success. Many different groups and individuals provided a support network which the women in this study relied upon to continue moving forward in their quest to complete a college degree. Before turning to the external supports, it is worth noting that almost all of the study respondents cited their own dedication and tenacity as a source of support. For all participants, the importance of family -- their family of origin and/or the family that they had created (child or children). Outside the family, many identified the individual relationships they had with faculty members, institutional staff, or their employers providing either the encouragement or flexibility

necessary for success. Finally, many found support through institutional support programs, including academic support, financial support, or mental and emotional support.

*Spirituality and Personal strength.*

Single mothers in this study often had to overcome feelings of frustration, depression, and overwhelming anxiety as they attempted to balance all of their life obligations. Several participants acknowledged their religious faith and trust in God as a resource that saw them through challenges of health, family and academics. This is considered in conjunction with ‘self’ due to the fact that the women who utilized this support described themselves as ‘spiritual’, ‘religious’ or ‘a person of faith’. Additionally, they made choices which allowed them to rely upon their own prayer and faith that requests would be granted. The choice to act upon faith was a deeply personal one which influenced how the women saw themselves and how they were perceived by others. Women who identified as part of the African American community were more likely to cite their faith as a means of support than women who identified as other ethnic groups. When asked what supported her in her navigation of the educational system, Catrina laughed and shared her reliance on prayer as a mechanism for finding inner strength.

Whew, a lot of praying! Lots. Because I didn’t want to do something that I’m not supposed to be doing right now, so I feel like everything you know, had to fall in place for me... I was just like “Lord, you know, I’m a leave this to you, because if I’m not supposed to do it, you know, I know these doors won’t be open” But like I said,

my life is a lot smoother now, versus before, that's how I know for sure you know, I'm supposed to be doing this, that I'm here.

This level of faith and joy in her relationship with Christ (all of the women who cited religion as a support for them professed the Christian faith) sustained Queen through a very turbulent time in her life. While she was attending college, Queen was suddenly faced with additional child care responsibilities when her daughter was incarcerated. In addition to her academic obligations, Queen took custody of her daughter's newborn twin sons.

[T]he most important thing is that um, I have a wonderful relationship with the Lord. He has been, he is my, my rock. He is the reason I am here today. I could not have, I thought um, raising my children was hard and I thought I had a relationship with Him. But I think with the grand babies and dealing with that and the problems I had with my daughter, things that she was going through, has brought my relationship with God to the peak. You know, we are so close. (laughs) He's just so good to me.

Both Catrina and Queen cited the depth of relationship with Christ as a support for their academic progression. Similarly, Valeria saw prayer and her relationship with her God as enabling her to complete her academic work at times when she felt that it would otherwise be impossible. She later shared that she felt called by God to change her major to Religion.

[T]he Lord have just encouraged me because he brought me here in the first place. And I mean I was just like whew, I love to read, you know but there are times I pick up and read a book and I'm like, which part of this is going to be on the test and ... it's just not there this reading, it's not here, and I put it down and I go outside and

pray to God, help me to find the words. ... and then there were times when I would sit down and I would turn the page and I would read you know, 200 pages without stopping and I could do it, it was the Lord and I would make 100 on a test that I knew I was going to make a 60 on.

Each of the women who cited religious faith as a support felt that the support extended not only to beyond being able to complete schoolwork and empowered them to face additional challenges of being a working mother.

Beyond prayer, which was an integral internal support for some women, each woman shared that at least one source of support that she felt in her educational journey was her own persistence, stubbornness, or tenacity towards the completion of an undergraduate degree. Each participant's reason for her determination was slightly different. For example, Sara saw additional education as a means of gaining independence by moving out of her parent's house, whereas Tina reported that withdrawal from school she would consider herself a failure. Along with a sense of persistence, Phoenix reflected on her own role in her success as her own advocate in that she would tell herself what would happen and then by saying it to herself enough, she was able to believe it and make it happen.

I just kind of keep telling myself this is what I am doing. I'm going to do it. That's just that. I tell myself that a lot. This is what I am going to do. This is how I'm going to do it. It's going to get done.

Susie described a similar determination as "like a force was behind me". An "unseen force" propelled her towards her goal of her undergraduate degree. This sort positive self talk and

intense belief in her own abilities provided essential encouragement for several women within the study. K.B. had a slightly different interpretation of the fruits of her determination. She reflected the challenge inherent in being a mother while juggling so many other obligations.

I have simply completed that task each day. You know what I mean. I've never, I've never run away from him. (laughter) I've never taken my child and an overnight bag to someone's house and left him, so yeah, yeah, it's just the simply showing up and persevering and doing it.

Serving as their own advocates and willing themselves to be successful are two strategies used by many of the women to surmount the challenges faced by a single mother working and attending college. Beyond reliance on themselves, many of the women in this study also looked for support from her family to reach their academic goals.

### ***Family.***

Family support from parents or siblings was critical to the success of many of the women in this study. Some families were able to offer free child care or short term financial assistance. This ability to rely on family for financial support, child care, and emotional support allowed the mothers in this study to be successful as parenting students. Sara found her family of origin to be very supportive, not only through the financial support her parents provided by allowing her and her children to live with them, but also by providing child care and moral support:

[Y]ou know, just having family support, my sister lives in town. I mean, she's willing to help with the kids. You know, my parents are here. My brother was here for a while. I mean, my, my in-laws are, or ex-in laws are more than willing to help how they can.

Samantha found that many members of her family contributed in multiple ways to help her be successful: "my Grandmother by keeping my son for me and ... my Dad helped me get a new car and ... my Mom listens." Susie also experienced multiple forms of support from her family.

Without my mother and my father babysitting part-time and my sister babysitting part time and being able to help me when, like this semester and not having enough money to cover the tuition that I needed, they were willing to say, I can help you with this. I'll be willing to pay your car payment if you're willing to go. I'll be able to help you as long as you are willing to do it.

Frequently families provided multiple types of support. Support could take the form of provision of free child care, financial support, or simple encouragement. Beyond the adult family members like parents, grandparents and siblings, many of the women in this study also relied on their children for critical support in their pathway to the undergraduate degree. Children can provide physical support in meeting household needs (such as helping with cleaning or watching siblings), yet the more frequently cited benefit is the emotional support of children provided.

[M]y daughter... she is always there... telling her little brother what to do. Playing little mama. ...'[D]on't get into that. Play with this or do something else'. She's been right there beside me the whole time helping me to get through this and definitely being an emotional support as well... [S]he seems to understand so well everything that is going on. She knows that ... I'm tired, she'll come bring me a water or an ice cream cone...

Phoenix is not the only mother who named her child(ren) as a primary support for them as they navigated the educational system. Being able to rely on their child or children for practical support as well as emotional support or encouragement keeps these women focused on their goal to complete school. Catrina felt very supported when her children made explicit their pride in her accomplishment: "My kids, they're like 'Mommy, we're so happy that you're doing this'..." The way that children supported their mother's educational progress varied—some provided moral support, others provided care for younger siblings and some provided emotional support. Sally spoke about her daughter's support in a less concrete but no less important way. Feeling that she was shaping her daughter's future by attending college gave Sally great joy and pride, but it also supported her in her desire to continue her education.

I will say that my daughter is supportive of me ... watching her grow and like watching her transition, like I can see myself in her. ... there are things that I teach her about life and there are things I teach her about art ... and I think the person she is, is due to the fact that I am in college. You know, she's learning how to draw.

She's learning how to respect people and she's learning about how the world is so diverse. And she's learning all that because I am in college. ..and she like knows so much that is supportive of me doing what I am doing ...

It was clear that families of all descriptions came together and provided support, sometimes emotional, sometimes practical and sometimes financial to the women in this study. The personal relationships within their families were important supports; however, in order to be successful within the academic institution, many women had to develop other individual support networks with important individuals outside of their families as well. The next section of this chapter will focus on those other important relationships.

### ***Personal Relationships.***

While family support was important to the success of the women in this study, many also found support within the contexts of other relationships. Study participants had a variety of relationships from which they drew strength. Some found support in their employers who were understanding of their multiple priorities and provided flexibility which allowed the participants to meet their academic goals as well as being able to provide financially for their family. Beyond support from employers, many had personal relationships with faculty and staff within the institution, beyond the interaction that they had within the classroom or on campus office.

Working, in addition to raising children and attending college, required a great deal of juggling on the part of the women in this study. Fortunately, many found support from their employer in the pursuit of their academic goals. Several employers allowed the mothers in

this study flexible work hours which better fit into their academic schedules. Employers mentioned in this section all provided a flexible option—the choice of some mothers in this study to pursue paid employment that was third shift work is not considered an accommodation or flexibility on the part of the employer and will not be discussed in this portion of the paper.

Autumn felt that she was very fortunate that the architecture firm that where she worked allowed her to do tasks for them at night, a luxury which allowed her more day time hours to attend class, attend study sessions and visit professor's office hours.

They've allowed me to work from home doing things ... like paying their bills, writing letters and transcribing whatever thing they're doing... I do go into the office usually on Fridays because I have early classes. Saturdays, sometimes I go in. Just depends on what they need done in the office so but they've been really good.

While she did go to work during some daytime hours, she felt that her employer's flexibility to allow her to complete some tasks at home in the evenings enabled her to pursue her degree more efficiently. . Beth found employer support not in her specific boss, but in a company policy which provided tuition remission for her university coursework. “[T]he job at Met Life ... had tuition reimbursement benefits so I was able to transfer to ...the university there ...I don't think I would have been able to afford otherwise 'cause it was \$7,000 a semester...” Whereas the support that Autumn found was scheduling flexibility, Beth had more direct financial support from her employer

Susie found support from her employer at a more personal level. Susie's employer is more of an emotional support for her than the more concrete supports cited by the other women. The principal at Susie's school has promised to change her status from a full time substitute teacher to a lead teacher once she completes her degree.

My employer. She is very adamant about me getting this degree. ...And once she sat in my classroom, and actually seen me one on one, hands-on with my children, ... since that day she was like, I want you, I need you, I can't, I cannot do without you. Go to school, get your degree and I am guaranteeing you a position at my school. Whatever you need, whatever class you want, whatever grade level you want it, you got it.

While support from employers took a variety of forms, all allowed the women in this study to provide financially for their families, have time to care for their children and pursue higher education continuously.

These multiple priorities of work, family, and school were also honored by many of the faculty with whom the participants in this study interacted. This relationship allowed them to remain committed to their studies yet provided flexibility to meet mothering responsibilities. For many of the women in this study, interactions with the institution that they attended were largely through her experiences within the college classroom (Haleman, 2004 & Duquaine-Watson, 2007). Within this context of representing the institution, the support of faculty members becomes essential to the persistence and connection to the university that these mothers feel. The support provided by faculty members ranged from

allowing children in class (with prior notice) to a willingness to go over challenging information in depth. Danielle felt that her professors were understanding of the multitude of demands that she had on her time, and given that she performed well academically, they were willing to be flexible with her to better suit her needs.

I had professors who, if you would talk to them about your situation, they were really able to deal with my situation different from a regular, traditional student. Like they understood that although I may not be ill, my daughter might be ill and I have to miss school for that. Things happen in a single parent's life where the school would call and say I need to come, so I would have to come... I miss class or I may be late for class because I have to work and I still need to provide, to keep a roof over my head as well as maintain grades. My professors understood that as long as I did my work, and I always did my work, and keep my grades up, they provided me a little bit of leeway in those areas, you know. And that was helpful.

Several of the women in this study had a similar child care challenge, and unlike Danielle, some chose not to miss class. Instead, these mothers opted to bring their child with them to class (sometimes children were not sick, but simply had teacher work days). While the mothers who did this each felt slightly differently about this accommodation, at least three specifically noted taking advantage of professors who allowed it. Eliza was the most matter of fact in requiring this accommodation, while other mothers were more grateful and impressed by the allowance.

I took my children to class with me a number of times and I just told the professor ahead of time. I never asked. I just kind of approached it as I'm going to have to bring, my son was older. I never brought my younger one, temperament and stuff. But the older son I brought with me a couple of times. He was fine. And the professors were fine with that.

This provision of what amounted to free child care was helpful; however, the more poignant examples of personal support from faculty members came from women who felt that faculty were invested in their academic success. The experience of having a faculty member serve as a mentor was critical to Sally's success within graphic design.

[S]he was my teacher as well and she wasn't my official advisor but I liked the way she carried herself and I liked the way she spoke and everything so I just started ... asking her questions and then she helped me get an internship. Even after I graduated from [community college], like if I had problems like with a file or had a design question, I kept e-mailing her and just like, listening to the things that she was doing. Like she talked about AIG so I joined AIG...

Having a mentor and receiving encouragement about her academic work were important sources of support for several women in this study. While few had explicit encounters with professors serving as mentors like Susie, several indicated that passionate instructors strongly influenced their choice of major and their desire for additional education.

While some participants felt the support they received from faculty members remained within the context of their relationship as an instructor, several other participants

felt supported beyond their role as a student. Tina found support from her advisor when she was considering a withdrawal from the semester. Instead of simply giving her information on withdrawal procedures, her adviser spoke about the concerns that Tina had regarding the loss of her job and her concerns about continuing to attend school while unemployed. “I talked to them about it . . .and they really cared. You know, they really acted like they really cared.” Through conversations with her adviser and other faculty, Tina came to the decision that she could attend school if she were to pursue government assistance, which her adviser gave her instructions on how to obtain. Faculty also helped their students negotiate other aspects of being a mother who works and goes to school. Samantha was appreciative of a faculty member who made her aware of student family housing, having specifically checked into it on her behalf.

Faculty members provided support for the women in this study in a variety of ways from those related to their academic obligations to areas of their lives outside of the classroom. This support both within the confines of the classroom and beyond allowed many of the women in this study to feel cared about and as though their persistence was important. Utilizing the support of employers and faculty members allowed these women to successfully juggle their multiple roles of mothers, workers and students.

***Institutional support.***

The women in this study found support for their academic endeavors in a variety of places. For many, programs that provided financial support such as financial aid, health services and child care were sources of institutional support. Some women utilized the

academic support services provided by their institutions, such as tutoring and academic advising. Support for meeting the obligations of their multiple roles was also received through an institution that scheduled courses at times that were convenient or allowed for online coursework. Another instructional support was recognition from the university for the academic achievements of these women who were laboring so hard to complete their degree while also being a primary caregiver to children and working. Some found support through student organizations geared to address one of their many concurrent roles, because none of the universities within this study had programs specifically for working single mothers.

*Easing the financial burden.*

As single mothers, the women in this study were often the primary providers for their families, a source of great financial difficulty. A support that almost all of the women in this study explicitly mentioned was the financial aid provided, which allowed them to maintain their educational goals while also supporting their families. Another support, which for many was also related to easing their financial burden, was the provision of health services. Many of the participants in this study did not have health insurance, or were underinsured, so being able to utilize the health services provided by their institutions relieved potential financial burden. The provision of some institutional support for child care was an additional relief financially for the women in this study.

All of the women who participated in this research reported financial difficulty at some point in their educational journey. Many cited the provision of financial aid as a contributing factor in their continued persistence. Most of the women in this study relied on

financial aid to enroll in courses each semester. While K.B. did not always find the personnel within the financial aid office helpful, she was appreciative of the fact that as a mother, she was able to qualify for funds that her peers did not qualify for.

[T]here's obviously financial aid, that um, I'm eligible for as a mother that I wouldn't be eligible for otherwise so though it is often a struggle to interact with the folks in the financial aid department, ... once you get that ball rolling then that's a support.

Financial aid was used not only to purchase books and pay for classes; occasionally, women in this study would need to use their financial aid for living expenses. Tina used her university's short term (emergency) loan program when her car broke down at the beginning of the semester. "[M]y car broke down. A week after classes started and I had no way back and forth to class. And they had funds you know, emergency funds or whatever, and they gave me a loan..." Queen also found help for her financial challenges in student support services.

They [student services] helped me beyond, just totally... he went out and helped me with things at my home, he helped me pay my bills. He got grants for me. I mean the student service program here...they are really wonderful.

While Queen and Tina's financial aid use was sanctioned by the university, Danielle admits to enrolling in coursework that she never intended to complete simply to gain the financial aid monies to help with her living and medical expenses. "I got sick [with cervical cancer] in the middle of a semester. That following semester...I enrolled in classes because I needed

the financial aid basically.” This use of financial aid funds to pay for household expenses occurred in Valeria’s home as well.

[O]ne of the perks is when I do get my, my Pell ... [and] Stafford loan most of it’s paid to the school but every, let’s just use January as an example... somewhere between January and March, I will receive about \$23,000.00 from my loan that I have to pay back. That will be left over and given to me as a credit which helps me float this household.

Using refund monies to take care of household necessities allowed Valeria and Danielle to manage the concurrent roles of mother and student. Having that flexibility financially was a great support allowing her to utilize resources as she saw fit.

While Lily did not use financial aid to meet her medical needs, she was grateful for support that her university offered to meet her physical needs. “There is a nurse on campus, luckily... I do go see her. A doctor comes like I think twice a week.” This health care, while a triage solution, allowed Lily to stay healthy at a time when she could not afford health insurance and was not covered by her employer’s plan due to her part time employment status. Tina, who was also uninsured at the time of our interview was grateful to find that her university offered a full range of student health services from gynecologists and general practitioners to therapists.

[W]hen I got sick last week, because right now I don’t have any medical insurance, ... the student health services. ... I went there and um, they were really good, you

know. I like it over there. And I found out that they also have counseling and stuff like that.

While it took Tina getting very sick to discover her campus' health services, K.B., on the other hand, was very aware of the health offerings that her college offered. “[T]here are some services that I have taken advantage of and I have been very grateful for, um, campus health and um, the fact that you can get a massage and have it billed to your student account.” According to K.B., campus health services and the services provided (such as massage) allowed her to be proactive in managing her stress. Brett and Tina were also looking for ways to cope with stress in a positive way, and so reached out to use the services of the counseling center at their universities. Each credited the therapists she saw through student health services with helping her to deal with her stress. The provision of health services (both physical health services and emotional and mental health services) allowed the women in this study, especially those who were under or uninsured, to find a financially feasible way to address their health needs while not unsettling the delicate financial balance of their household.

An additional financial stressor for many of these mother headed households was the provision of child care. Fortunately for some, there was support from the institution for child care, either in the form of subsidies or child care centers located within close proximity to the university. All of the child care support mentioned by women in this study took place at the community college level. Brett was delighted with the child care program that her son participated in while she was in community college.

It was free, basically free day care. It was based on your income. I think I paid like 7 bucks a week.... It was awesome. And it was a great program. My son still loves. I mean, if we ride by the college, because that's where my family is from... If we ride by he's like, that's my school. That where Ms. Barbara was. He was little and he still remembers it. Loved it.

As a parent, Brett was grateful to have the financial support for child care, but she was also quite happy with the quality of care her child received. As outlined by several mothers, child care arrangements offered by their community college included vouchers, on-campus child care, and reduced rates at participating centers. While not all mothers took advantage of these programs due to their own circumstances, all seemed to be aware of them and grateful for them. Sara opted not to utilize the child care center on her community college campus since child care was only provided for time that she was physically in class—not times when she was working.

[Community college]... started a on-site child care center that's depending on what you qualify for as far as financial aid for your school, they'll subsidize it for the child care but, ... they go off your class schedule so that your child is only there while you are in class.

While not all mothers utilized or had access to child care on campus or child care subsidies, those who did have access found them to be useful or at least noteworthy even if they did not use them. While many were not able to take advantage of the child care services provided by the community colleges they attended (community colleges were much more likely to offer

child care services than universities), all women who attended colleges with such services mentioned them as a positive support.

Providing financial support in the form of financial aid, student health services for both physical and mental health problems and offering child care subsidies or on campus child care were several of the ways that colleges and universities supported the single mothers. These very real financial supports allowed participants to turn their attentions away from the stress of affording quality child care or contemplating what constitutes a trip to the emergency room. The services colleges offered to provide financial support in tangible or less apparent ways allowed the women in this study to focus on their roles of mother and student, not simply their role as breadwinner.

*Student support services.*

In addition to providing services such as financial aid and child care, several of the women in this study found support of their mothering responsibilities through various student groups which were focused on their specific needs. Beyond the support that they gained from student groups, universities often offered flexible course schedules which allowed these women to fulfill their roles as mothers, workers and students. Fortunately, universities also offered services which supported academic obligations, with programs such as tutoring services and academic advising. Within the context of being a student, many of the women in this study found great affirmation and reward in their academic endeavors when they were recognized by their institutions for the academic work they were doing. Through a network

of institutional support structures, the women in this study were moving through college with support from their institution.

Most of the support provided at an institutional level was created and sustained by the institution itself. Fortunately, in a few cases, there were student organizations which supported at least one aspect of these mother's identities. For Phoenix, there was a commuter student club which offered support in the form of an occasional breakfast. "They have a... commuter program type thing for people that live off campus and ... they had coffee and bagels out every Wednesday morning..." For Autumn, the support was more direct in the form of being paired with a mentor on campus who could help her with the various concerns of any student new to campus. "[T]hey have a non-traditional student organization that I've gotten involved with. ...they have a ... program for non-traditionals that come back so I've worked with a mentor this semester." Various special interest groups that addressed specific aspects of their identities as students (commuter, non-traditional, parent) served as supports in both large and small ways for some of the women in this study.

While a few of the mothers in this study were involved in special interest groups which supported them as mothering students, the most widely cited institutional support experienced by the women in this study was flexible course scheduling. The provision of online coursework, hybrid coursework or evening and weekend classes were all supports identified by the study participants. Online or at least hybrid coursework was a support that many of the women who spoke about it found to be used to a greater degree within the community college system. Two of the women in this study opted to pursue their bachelor's

degree completely online, a choice which Sara felt was really her only option given her situation.

I saw it was probably my best chance of getting my degree any time soon because having two young kids, you know, I couldn't afford to put both of them in daycare. Just [to] take classes at a college. It would have cost, I mean, I couldn't have afforded it. And I mean, it kind of, it gives me the leeway as far as doing my homework when I can do it as long as I have it in on time.

While not all women in this study were in online degree programs, many had taken online coursework and felt that it supported their goals of being a good mother while also making headway on their degree. This sort of flexibility provided by community colleges was what attracted Lily to consider completing her associate's degree. "I like the fact that they had a pretty flexible schedule, like a lot of on-line choices and evening choices, weekends, and stuff like that..." Flexibility in course offerings was one of several types of support that Lily received from her community college.

Tina was also grateful for the support she got from her community college. She felt that the student support services provided allowed her to be academically successful through tutoring, but also looking more long term to her matriculation to a university. Catrina found the student support services at her community college beneficial as well, especially the academic support services, which provided her tutoring in the Math courses that she did not feel as prepared for as her classmates. The support that Valeria most appreciated helped her meet her academic obligations, but was more technical in nature.

They have this place called the help desk... I didn't know how to copy and paste, I didn't know how to use Blackboard. I didn't know how to attach something ... I would call them at one o'clock at night and they had somebody on that help desk. I gave them my student ID and they were helping me to do whatever I needed to do ... Having a friendly voice on the other end of the line that could help her figure out how to navigate the course management software was critical to her academic success.

Brett was grateful for the assistance that she got when she was at community college; advice which shortened her time to degree. An advisor who was knowledgeable about articulation agreements saved Brett from additional time and expense spent in pursuit of an associate's degree that she did not need to meet her goals of transfer. Sara also found her academic advisor to be supportive, not only of her educational process, but also of the struggles she was facing in light of her ongoing divorce proceedings.

[M]y academic counselor through the [online degree program], they call like normally once a month to check in just to see how things are going, and so I mean he knows what's been going on... the class that I was taking when he [ex-husband] called me wanting the divorce, my academic counselor was actually sent those professors an e-mail saying one of your students is going through this, give her a week or so.

While Sara spoke about her counselor in particular, she was grateful that someone contacted her on a regular basis not just to plan coursework, but also was aware of her needs and concerns.

Sara's comments about her academic counselor show how important it was to her that someone within her university was aware of her and the work she was doing. Like Sara, several study participants found support in receiving institutional recognition, especially when they were academically successful. Autumn was overjoyed to receive a notification recognizing her academic accomplishments.

I got a letter in the mail... I made ... Dean's list and that like was so exciting to me because ... even though I had made good grades I didn't feel like anybody had actually said, hey ... good job... [I]t had my name on it and ... gave me that motivation to say, hey you're going back to a four year university in the fall. Just keep it up. And I mean I still have it framed. It hangs in my room... So I mean that, that thrilled me beyond words.

Recognition from the institution was critically important to the women in this study.

Danielle spoke with pride about having an invitation extended to join an honor society within her major. While she could not make the financial commitment to join, the recognition of her academic excellence made her voice ring with pride as she shared.

I was invited to be in the Omega Psi Honor Society. It's for our major... this was important to me because it was my major and I was happy because I wasn't expecting to be invited to be in the honor society.

Several of the women in this study received academic honors, but having institutional recognition of some sort allowed them to feel that someone beyond themselves and their support network noticed how hard they were working and cared enough to give credit where

it was due. Queen's crowning accomplishment when she reflected back on her college career was "When I graduated. When I found out I was going to be cum laude." Offering this sort of simple recognition provided many of the women in this study with a sense that they were important to their university and that in some way, their university was proud of them.

Universities offered multiple supports to the women in this study through student groups, flexible course schedules, services such as tutoring and academic advising and recognition of academic excellence. These efforts to accommodate women who were mothers, workers and students showed not only that their universities were aware of them and their special needs, but in many cases, that their university was proud of the excellent work that they were doing.

### **Feelings of pride.**

As the mothers in this study made their way through the educational system, they were quite proud of their academic work, and this pride allowed them to continue their hard work, despite the difficulties they encountered. The last section ended with examples of institutions recognizing excellent work on the part of study participants. This institutional recognition was one of several sources of pride for the women who participated in this research. Each of the women in this study had a certain level of pride in herself for maintaining her efforts to complete her degree in the face of many challenges which would have made quitting easy and understandable to any outside observers. This pride was reflected in three areas. Many had pride in her child(ren), and therefore her own parenting capabilities. Pride in her academic work, many of the women in this study reported GPAs

which put them on Honor Roll or Dean's List. Lastly they reported a level of pride that made her want to 'earn' accommodations and assistance from others. This last form of pride made her reject what she perceived as other's charity or sympathy towards her if she did not believe that she had earned what was given.

*Pride in child.*

When speaking of their children, the women in this study often glowed with pride. Some shared photos, others introduced the interviewer to their children. It was clear that having a child or children was a point of pride for each of the women in this study. While clearly proud when speaking of their children, few of them made explicit the fact that their children reflected their own mothering ability. In that way, pride in their children can be translated to pride that their efforts as a mother providing guidance, nurturance and love led to children who reflected well on them (were smart or well behaved or kind to others). When introducing her children to the interviewer, Valeria had them each spell a word or do a math problem to illustrate how gifted they were. This sort of pride in their child's talents and abilities was evident in several interviews. Sally also felt that her child was gifted in art particularly, a great joy for Sally to see as an artist herself.

Because ... she is 7 years old and she can tell ... what's a warm color and what's a cool color, you know and by her knowing that, it, it kind of makes me proud... [I plan] to continue to teach her ... with the hopes that she will be a good person and an artist.

Autumn was asked about her choice regarding the disclosure of her parenting status within classes. Her answer made it clear that she was incredibly proud of her son, and felt that he was an important part of her academic success.

[M]y son, you know, is everything to me. And I can't imagine, I just feel like that would be not giving him credit for who he is and what he does and I am who I am now because of him. So you know, I don't want to hide that from anybody, he's my little man.

Phoenix's quote rings with the same tone—she is very proud of her daughter's skills as a housekeeper, and like Autumn, she feels that her daughter deserves credit in part for helping her be where she is as a successful college student. Phoenix is proud of all that her daughter, who is only seven years old, can do to help around the house. “[M]y daughter. . . she cleans her and her brother's room. She sweeps, she does dishes. You know, you name it. That child can do it.”

Clearly the mothers in this study are quite proud of the children they are raising. What they did not say, but what came across to me, was that they were proud of what they had taught their children. They were proud that they raised children who were gifted, helpful, and kind—all qualities that are taught to children. By taking pride in their children and in who their children were becoming, they are, in some small measure, taking pride in their own parenting skills.

*Pride in her academic work.*

Perhaps because these women were working so hard to manage their multiple responsibilities, they were intensely proud of their academic accomplishments. Some explicitly displayed their pride, showing of letters about Dean's List or speaking of scholarships they had won. A smaller group shared stories that ached with indignation at being underestimated academically, a sort of pride that was wounded when instructors or others assumed that she was not smart enough to accomplish the task at hand.

Samantha felt proud of her grades, but like many of the women in this study, she set the bar very high for herself. Many made comments about how they expected themselves to make A's and were disappointed when they did not.

I went from [community college], being at 4.0 grade point average to [university] having some B+s and A-s. That was an adjustment (laughs) but I'm told that if you get the A- or B+ in [university], it's like an A+ anywhere else. So I should still be proud.

Phoenix was also quite proud of her grades during the semester that her son was born. She shared her pride in being able to maintain her grades while caring for an infant.

February 12 my son was born, which is about a month and a half or month after spring semester began and I still made the honors list that semester. I had my son, the next day I was back at home from the hospital, the next day I was back in the classroom. Now granted only one of my classes was at the college, the rest were on-line but being able to say I made the honors list and I had my son in the middle of the

semester. I was pretty proud of that one. I was very proud of that one. Actually, I made the honors list most of the time I was at [community college] and beginning my [university] period.

This awareness that she was being academically successful while also managing a household and a family was echoed in Tina's conversation, specifically her pride in telling a judge during her custody hearing that she was not only caring for her daughter and paying her bills, but remaining on the Dean's List at her community college.

I stood up there and, you know, I told him. You can't take my kid from me. I'm going to school and I work full time and I go to school full time and I'm on the dean's list and I have my own house and I pay my own bills.

Beth also felt pride relative to the many responsibilities she had as a mother and a student. She reflected on her first year in graduate school—a time of great adjustment academically, and as a mother of a one year old.

[I]t was the first time I took ...a substantive class, and I, ... took the midterm ... and I came into class after the midterm and ... the professor ... said to me, ... [I] had done some good conceptual thinking and ... you don't see that the first year and it was really good and... that felt like a big victory especially considering the year I had had ... that I actually could be capable of it.

Valeria also shared positive feedback from instructors throughout her interview. This quote illustrates the pride that she clearly felt regarding her own academic abilities, but also her indignation that a classmate might not recognize that academic prowess.

[T]here was this one guy [classmate] who is always critiquing my critique ... for mistakes, grammatical mistakes and stuff. And he wrote an e-mail to me that you know, your writing would be really on fire ... if I were to use spell check and check things grammatically. I said well for a woman that has a 3.7 grade point average grammar is not an issue for me.

Catrina had a similar reaction to a community college academic advisor who questioned her ability to excel at her chosen university. She took great pride in being able to show that advisor her acceptance letter, as if to prove that the faith she had in her own abilities was justified.

I could feel myself you know, boiling 'cause I'm like this woman is all but telling me that I'm not good enough to attend this school... the day I received my ... letter of admittance or acceptance I printed it off, and that next morning I could not wait to get to that college I mean, I was getting up extra early and just running there.

Both Katrina and Queen felt that they had to prove themselves academically—a painful experience for women who were very proud of their academic work. Queen was understandably irate when an instructor implied that she might have plagiarized a paper that she turned in; even in recollection, it was clear to the interviewer that her pride was wounded. Her voice shook slightly with righteous indignation over this affront to her academic integrity.

[B]ecause my paper sounded, read as if I bought it. As hard as I worked. I stayed up all night... you mean to tell me ... I'm not capable of writing a good paper?

Woman, I will take you to court. I will sue you for slander... Hard as I had been working? I was working and going to school and raising my two kids and you going to come up there with something like that to me.

While pride was shown over different academic accomplishments and for different reasons, it was clear that each of the women in this study was proud of the work that she was doing. Whether she showed that pride in righteous indignation at being underestimated, or her expectation of herself to earn excellent marks, the women in this study had much to be proud of by way of their academic success in conjunction with their other responsibilities.

***'I don't need your charity'***

Women in this study often desired understanding from others in relationship to their parenting status, but many also felt strongly when they felt they were pitied based on their experience. Responding with sympathy or pity appeared to 'hit a nerve' with several of the study respondents who felt strongly that they wanted to earn all accommodations that they received. K.B. was frustrated by the isolation she felt when people offered their sympathy, and did not generally find it to be supportive of what she was trying to do.

[M]y mom will often say, I'm so proud of you or even strangers will say, gosh, I just don't know how you do it, um, and sometimes that is a source of support but it also has a tendency to be sort of distancing where to some degree what they are saying, is what you are doing is so foreign to me that I can't possibly wrap my head around it... Eliza had a similar frustration with people's reactions upon finding out that she was a mother as well as a student who was working full time because she did not feel that the sympathy

came with any support to help her accomplish her multiple goals of mother, worker and student.

I got a lot of once people figured out, particularly at [university] that I was a student, that I was going to school full time and working full time, I got a lot of wow, how do you that, that's great. Which was interesting because I always felt like, ... my other option is what? ...[T]here really wasn't one. So I actually found it kind of frustrating because it was like people would say it's great what you're doing, ... how do you manage to do all that but yet nobody offered any support or any practical advice or knew of anyone that had done it so I actually found it more frustrating to have people say oh, great.

This frustration regarding being singled out as a parenting student showed that women did not want sympathy for the sake of sympathy. Several women took that concept even further and made it clear that part of the reason they were working so hard to get their degree was in order to assure that she and her child(ren) did not need to be at the mercies of others' charity once she had completed her degree and secured the career that she felt sure would come afterwards. Tina did not feel that as a single mother she deserved anything that she did not earn. She also wanted to make sure that people did not look at her situation as a single mother and feel sorry for her.

I don't hide the fact that I have a daughter or that I'm a single mom. I'm not um, ashamed or embarrassed of it. Um, but I don't think that I should get any, you know, anything ... I don't like people to feel sorry for me or to feel you know like they have

to be sympathetic for me. Because I don't, I don't need that. You know, that's not why, I'm working as hard as I am. I don't want anybody to have to feel sorry for me... So the last thing I want is for anybody to give me anything because I have a kid.

However, even in the midst of attending college and working while parenting, many of the mothers in this study made it clear that they wanted to work for and earn what they got as opposed to getting a 'hand out'. Brett voiced her desire for support but not 'doing for' clearly. She wanted her institution to "provide what it takes to be able to help yourself. Sometimes you just need a little push. You don't need somebody to do it all for you." Sara shared the desire to make it clear that asking for help was not asking for 'a free hand'. "So I guess my big thing is I don't want people feeling sorry for me. I just... if I ask for your help, I am not asking for your help just because I want a free hand..." Danielle's reflection was less about charity in terms of items or financial accommodation, but more within the realm of the classroom. She felt that single parents should be afforded some flexibility, however she made it very clear that she felt such flexibility should be earned, not granted *carte blanche*.

...I think should be different for non-traditional students if you are maintaining grades. That's my big key word. Like if you're getting bad grades and you're still not coming on time, that's a problem but if you are doing good in school, I think that they shouldn't be so harsh.

This desire to earn accommodation, either through hard work or academic excellence was reflected in other mother's comments regarding their own pride and distaste for charity.

Valeria felt that it was important for her as a student to earn any financial provisions that she was given because she did not want to feel as though she was being given charity.

I would like to earn whatever they give me. I don't want them to feel like, okay, you single moms are always begging. Here's some DVDS you know. Um, I would like to earn something. Um, earning it empowers me more to do whatever it is I mean to do.

Each of the women in this study had pride in herself for her abilities, and because of that pride, none wanted to be considered a 'charity case' or accept a 'hand out'. Each wanted to earn her way academically and take only what she needed in terms of assistance from others. Some women noted that having others highlight their multitude of responsibilities only served to alienate them, a concept that will be explored further later in this chapter.

Mothers working and going to school worked hard to navigate to and through the educational system. The role of parent seemed to be the largest factor in determining their pursuit of post-secondary education, either to model the importance of education to children, to assure a professional career trajectory or to improve her family's financial wellbeing. Upon entry into undergraduate education, mothers in this study looked for support. Sometimes that support was within themselves, sometimes their families or children and sometimes the relationships that they had built with employers or faculty members. Several women also found support from their institutions in the form of programs which provided financial support for their college attendance such as financial aid, child care subsidies or student health services. In addition to those financial supports, many women appreciated

student support services which offered support to all aspects of her life, be that student groups which supported her as a non-traditional student or tutorial services to support her as a student or recognition of her academic excellence in the form of Dean's List. As might be expected, recognition from the university of her academic excellence brought her great pride. Beyond pride in academics, these mothers had pride in their parenting abilities as showcased through the pride they exhibited in their children. The last form of pride was a desire for assistance, but a rejection of charity.

### **Struggle for Legitimacy as a Parenting Student**

While the previous section of this chapter has focused upon areas where single mothers felt they were supported as they moved to and through college, they also faced challenges as they worked their way towards graduation. This section of the chapter will focus on the areas where women felt that they did not always get the support they needed. In the previous section, KB and Eliza both commented about how they were frustrated when others pointed out to them how overcommitted they were. While each was proud and did not want pity, they also felt alienated by comments which distanced them from their peers. Unfortunately comments such as those as well as other encounters with the stigma of single motherhood meant that sometimes the women in this study experienced disenfranchisement and a chilly climate within their chosen universities.

In addition to those social challenges, there were situational barriers which made college attendance difficult such as the financial hardship that college attendance brought upon these single income households. As indicated in the previous section, women felt

supported by financial aid and other institutional programs that helped with the financial realities of single motherhood. It should be noted, however, that despite the best efforts of the programs mentioned in the previous section, life without a bachelor's degree as the sole provider for children is marred with financial difficulty. Harkening back to the section on choosing to pursue higher education shows that many women elect to attend college with the hopes that it will allow them to pull their families out of poverty. In the interim, however, while enrolled in college, many of the women in this study struggled with the day to day realities of living at or below the poverty line. This chronic struggle to 'get by' was exacerbated by the cost of repeating coursework to regain lost credits, fees which paid for services that they did not capitalize on and other bills that she could not use her financial aid check to address.

The women who participated in this study have a multitude of responsibilities as mothers, workers and students. Within the institutions of higher learning that they attended, however, awareness of and responsiveness to that fact were limited. Many of the women in this study felt that their voices were not heard and their needs were not met, making them feel invisible within the context of their universities. This played out both from an institutional perspective and from a more social perspective, where individual students interacted in ways that were alienating to the mothers in this study. In response to those realities, several of the mothers in this study took it upon themselves to become advocates for other single mothers in hopes of improving their chances of success both within the university and beyond. Aside from feeling invisible within their institutions, single mothers

also had to contend with their responsibilities as a mother—many of which were all consuming. The fact that motherhood was a full time job in and of itself presented study participants with numerous challenges which will be discussed within the context of their lives as students.

### **Invisibility within the institution.**

A significant aspect of feeling that they needed to struggle to have their needs seen as legitimate within the eyes their university was the perception that their needs and concerns were overlooked or invisible to the administration and faculty of the institution. This sense of invisibility within the university had several aspects which impacted the study participants. To begin, women who chose to attend universities generally imposed some level of financial hardship on their households due to the high cost of tuition, books and fees; some of which was not supported by financial aid. In addition, the costs associated with raising a child were not factored into financial aid packages, leaving them with larger amounts of unmet need than other students receiving financial aid monies.

Beyond the financial hardship, upon arriving on the college campus, single mothers were disenfranchised on several levels. Unfortunately, while women in this study found some flexibility for some of their coursework, this was not consistent and often upper level coursework within majors was only offered at times that were incredibly difficult to manage in addition to work schedules. In addition to inconvenient course schedules, women struggled with institutional disorganization and a general lack of support for their multiple priorities. Lastly, study participants felt that once they had made their way through the

inconveniences of a campus oblivious to their needs, they were met with a campus climate which could best be described as chilly towards the multiple responsibilities of parenting students. Not only did this impact her classroom experience and interactions with instructors, but also her interactions with her (largely traditionally aged) peers, which largely left her feeling alienated, isolated and out of place in her university.

***Financial hardship.***

The choice to attend college was one which brought with it some very hefty financial obligations. The financial hardships discussed within this section are not merely the cost of college attendance (which was an issue) but also include tuition, fees and books. In addition to those financial challenges, many dealt with the cost of poorly implemented articulation agreements, an additional financial burden. Another form of financial hardship was the fact that while all of the study participants, as full time students, paid student fees, many were not aware of what services their fees covered. This lack of awareness of resources to which they were entitled, and for which they had already paid, introduced an additional level of financial difficulty upon the women in this study.

One of the most significant barriers that the women in this study encountered was the cost of continued enrollment in college. Because most of the women interviewed for this project were the sole providers for themselves and their children, their interviews were full of concern with how to manage their multiple financial obligations while attending college full time. In K.B.'s mind, there were times when the opportunity cost of attending college was

almost more than she could handle, and on a regular basis, she wondered if she should continue.

I get to the point where I don't know how I am going to pay the power bill, ...[and I] debate with myself about whether or not I will be able to make it through this semester without dropping out ... can I afford to continue to spend ... my days in school as opposed to making money. ... several times each semester I am making that choice ... to continue to be a full time student as opposed to being a person who is earning their way.

K.B.'s concern about paying the power bill was echoed in one form or another by Phoenix, Tina and Danielle, who all worried about meeting their own (and their child or children's) basic needs. All felt that having additional financial support from their institutions would allow them to focus on maintaining grades without having to wonder about their child's next meal. Danielle expressed frustration that she could not find additional monies to help with her living expenses.

[S]ingle parents, they lose a lot of sleep because you have to work, take care of daughter and go to school. And if they provided that money part then you could take away from working so much to keep your grades up and keep a roof over your head and I think that's really important to understand that they need more money there.

To address these serious financial issues, most of the women in this study received student loans. It should be noted, however, that financial aid is not a panacea. Simply having access to funds, or short term loans from family does not take away the reality of living on the brink

of poverty, and as all of these women were aware, student loans were not free money, and came with a repayment obligation. Sara and Valeria worried about the debt load that they were shouldering in order to obtain their degrees. Sara had a sense of urgency regarding the repayment of her loans upon graduation.

I end up having to take out student loans to help pay for school and then knowing that you know, after I graduate I'll have six months to find a job and then have to start paying that back and that adds to your bills, you know, that, you are already paying all the bills for you and two, two other people.

Phoenix was also concerned about the amount of debt that she had accumulated during her time in college. She expressed concern that very few single mothers had the ability to take on the levels of debt necessary to accomplish an undergraduate degree.

I've got like \$40,000.00 in debt in student loans and \$17,000 grand in debt with credit cards. It's the only way to make it is to put yourself in serious debt and for anybody who didn't have good credit, they wouldn't have been able to do that. So it's not easy, it's really not easy and it's not something that most single moms would be able to do.

Sally was also distressed at the level of debt that she had to incur as a part of pursuing her degree in design. She felt herself in a particularly difficult spot relative to the very expensive design software packages that she either needed to purchase in order to use at home, or utilize at the campus library, spending hours away from her daughter. In regards to her debt,

Sally had this concern: “I am afraid that I’m going to accumulate so much loans, it’s going to defeat the purpose of me working so hard to be here.”

Clearly the women in this study were debt averse, but saw no other way to complete their educational goals. Having to navigate articulation agreements that were not sensitive to the added expense of additional coursework at a university often created the potential for additional loans because each additional credit hour that was required beyond the minimum was an expense that most of the women in this study could ill afford. Several of the women in this study had difficulty with losing credits when then transferred into their universities. Shortly after transferring into her university, Eliza realized “I had enough electives to graduate” and so she worked within the university to find a degree that accepted most of her credits and allowed her to graduate expeditiously. Not all of the women in this study were that fortunate. Sara had a circuitous route towards her bachelor’s degree and expressed frustration that despite having taken a great deal of course work, because she had taken classes at so many institutions, she was still considered a first year student from a credit perspective at her university.

I have enough, I have credit hours as a sophomore. I probably should be a junior but because I moved around so much, I lost a lot of credit hours. I lost 15 credit hours transferring just from the classes I took out in Texas to on-line classes now...And I just got tired of taking classes at a university and then we would have to move ...and then when I would try and transfer, I would lose, ... from 10 to 20 or 30 credit hours.

Autumn ran into a similar situation when she decided that she was going to transfer from community college to a university, she still came in with sophomore standing despite having completed an associate's degree. The fact that her university chose not to accept multiple credits meant that Autumn had to take several introductory level courses at her university. Queen was also left with introductory work to complete when she transferred into her university. Her alma mater did an excellent job highlighting her ability to transfer, but did not mention that she would still need to complete a few of her general education requirements. Unfortunately, she struggled to fit those requirements into her schedule, ultimately delaying her graduation by a semester to assure that she could obtain a required Biology class.

I transferred...like I said, I would not have done it that way if I knew any better. I just took my biology my last year of [university]. Because I couldn't... they don't have enough Biology classes and stuff... I would not have done it that way if I knew any better. I would have stayed and taken all of my classes and then transferred and just taken my social work stuff.

The added financial hardship of completing introductory coursework at her university actually forced Queen to attend part time for a year before completing. The financial hardship of taking coursework at a university was made even more arduous for Susie due to the incredibly prescribed nature of the Elementary Education curriculum. By not being able to take the exact coursework required she extended her time in college, and expanded the expense.

[W]ith the teacher education program, they lay out the specifics. These are other classes you need. Take these exact classes and if you don't take these exact classes ... it's just going to take you ... longer to get there.

Beth also faced financial challenges to her degree progress. As a graduate student, she had been accepted to the doctoral program at her university with a promise of five years of funding. While she was not taking duplicate coursework like many of her peers had, she ran into a problem similar to Susie's in that the institution was not accommodating of her timeline as a parenting student. On account of her multiple responsibilities, her research efforts took her longer than her traditional peers because finding time to do her thesis research and write it up was complicated by being the primary caretaker for her son. Due to her department's lack of sensitivity, Beth was quite concerned that she would lose her funding, despite doing good work academically.

[O]n the academic side, you know, it's taken me a lot longer to finish and um, you know, I mean it's very possible that I could lose my funding next semester because I am not making progress time to degree ... And I mean there's absolutely no consideration for anything, you know, that's outside of the purview of classes and writing your thesis you know, so that's frustrating.

Often women in this study struggled to make timely progress towards their degree, sometimes to the detriment of their academics and quite often to the detriment of their pocketbooks.

A last financial difficulty faced by the women in this study surrounded the fact that all had paid student fees as full time students, but many were not aware of what those fees entitled them to. Many of the campuses that the women in this study were a part of offered support services in the form of campus health services, counseling centers, print quota, and other amenities, however, many of the women in this study were not aware of these services. While these services were supportive for the mothers who were aware, almost all had paid their student fees to fund these programs, and many were unaware of the excellent services of which they could avail themselves. Samantha felt frustrated that she was never informed from an institutional perspective of her access to various accoutrements such as free printing and on campus housing for families.

I don't feel like I was oriented to this school at all. I didn't know anything going in... Free printing. They offer "free printing." Of course, it's paid for by your tuition but you have a certain number of pages that you're allowed to print. I want to say it's \$70.00 worth of printing at 5 or 10 cents a page. That's a considerable amount of printing whereas I was burning up my printing cartridges at home because I had no idea that this was available to me...

In this case, her lack of knowledge that she had already, through her student fees, paid for printing 1400 pages of printing each semester not only cost her the \$70 she paid, but the funds she expended purchasing ink cartridges and paper for her home computer.

Brett was in a state of crisis when she discovered that her university had mental health services that her student fees paid for, and of which she could avail herself.

[Y]ou have the counseling center but , honestly I didn't know about that until I was freaking out one day ... I called the ... County... Mental Health Services and ... somehow I mentioned I was [a university] student and they were like well you have a counseling center on campus and I was like, I do?

While it was fortunate that she was able to utilize the services during that time of crisis, had she not reached out for help, the outcome could have been much worse. Additionally, it is possible that she would not have reached such a point of despair if she had realized that she had pre-paid access to a therapist who could have worked with her prior to her reaching a breaking point. Tina was in a similar state of health crisis when she became aware that she could access student health services for free; a critical service for her as someone without insurance. While both Brett and Tina did eventually find support from their student health services, the lost opportunities to utilize those services prior to their crisis points had a financial and health implication. Lack of knowledge of institutionally provided services inhibited several of the women in this study from flourishing and had a direct negative financial consequence in terms of monies paid for services that were not capitalized upon.

### **Disenfranchised within the university.**

Beyond feelings of invisibility, women in this study struggled to have their needs seen as legitimate, as they were constantly faced with a plethora of ways in which they were disenfranchised as parenting students. The lack of intentionality to make these students aware of the resources their student fees entitled them to is just one instance of a time when participants felt clearly that their needs were not important to their universities. Time and

time again the women in this study shared their feelings of voicelessness, invisibility and disenfranchisement within the university. University policies and practices that did not take into account multiple priorities, class schedules that were not flexible, and disorganization all led to a sense that they were not valued. This disenfranchisement occurred not only at the institutional level, but also at a more individual level when study participants noticed just how differently their motivations and life experiences were from the students that the university seemed to be designed for, and those who were in their classes. “[A] lot of the programs... like [a fall festival] and stuff like that... a lot of things ... the activities are catered towards ... someone who is like 18 or 19 years old.” Sally’s observation was echoed by several of her peers. The disenfranchisement relative to their life experiences made them feel alienated and like an intruder into the university that was built to accommodate the traditional eighteen year old student.

***Walking in from the outside.***

[T]here is so much that goes on here and they live in dorms and stuff like that. So they have their own, like this is like their, their town, you know, and you feel like you kind of walk in from the outside.

Tina’s reflection that as a parenting student, she felt like a stranger in a strange land was echoed by many of the other mothers in the study. On several levels, study participants felt that their experiences were drastically different from those of their peers, ranging from feelings that traditional students were not aware of real-world responsibilities to differences in academic focus and a distinct difference in social life and life experience.

The difference between the life experiences and priorities of the mothers in this study and their peers on campus was sometimes quite striking. Samantha was surprised by her peers' reaction to her confession of her mothering responsibilities.

I was asked to go to ... the party street in [college town] and I said no, I'm going to go read a book and give a bath and tuck a little boy in and I was looked at like I had 12 toes and 9 eyes.

Autumn's (joking) solution to the problem of going out with friends was to go to Chuck E. Cheese. K.B. was bemused by her colleague who referred to 'having a life', something which it seemed she defined quite differently than K.B. or the other women in this study would.

There is this woman in our class ... she said to a group of us the other day, "well some of us have a life" and I just blinked and said, oh, and by life you mean going to the library every weekend and like running up and down [local party street] every weekend because um, when I think of life, I think of like the bills that I have to pay and how I am going to get [son's] after school tuition paid and his student-teacher conference attended and, yea. So my idea and your idea of life are very, very different.

This sense that students were out of touch with the reality that was the 'real world' was a comment that many of the study participants made. Most, like Samantha, felt that this was due to the fact that many students were not having to pay for their own college education,

and so were in some ways sheltered from being aware of all of the responsibilities of adult life.

[Traditional students are] out of touch with what the real world is. It's just kind of, they went there straight after high school because it was the next logical thing that their parents told them they were going to do. And I've overheard so many people, I'll just put it on my dad's credit card or I'll just, you know, I'll just go get my dad's car or my mom's car. They just seem so care free and no concern of bills and the yard that needs to be mowed and it's just out of touch with my reality. (laughs)

Many of the mothers in the study felt that because they saw the long term benefit of getting their degree in terms of being able to better support their families, they were more committed to academic excellence than their more traditional peers. Danielle felt that paying her own way through college made her take the work she was doing more seriously than the other students in her classes.

[E]ducation means something to me differently than I think most of the traditional students there. Like I have to pay for school to go there. Um, I have to worry about keeping a roof over my head and those others things that make college so much more important to me.

Similar to Danielle, Beth felt that paying for her education made her value it, but the fact that it was a distinct choice on her part—different from the people she grew up with also added value. While Danielle was the first in her family to go to school, Beth was the first in her

peer group to attend college, giving them both an added appreciation for the opportunity to pursue their degree.

I mean I went to, I don't know anybody else that went to community college and ... worked through undergrad and things like that... I didn't come straight to undergrad so to be here, I feel really really lucky ... and it is something that my peer group, you know the people I graduated high school with, ... didn't even go to community college. Who didn't have any degree at all. So for me to be here, it's, it's not where I came from.

The feeling that she was coming from a different place than her more traditionally aged peers was echoed in Brett's comment on her academic priorities. She saw a distinction between her dedication to her schoolwork and that of her classmates, because in some ways, she felt that she had to 'prove' herself as a single mother.

[Typical students are] not as focused on school as me. (laughs) .... They are not as prepared as myself or the older, the other older students... [They are] more carefree and [have] less responsibility... They still, ... had reasons for being in school but it wasn't as important to them to do what had to be done, you know. They could care less, C or an A either way, they're going to pass that class. You know. And here I am trying to prove single moms can do it and do it well.

Many of the women who were interviewed for this research felt that they had very different priorities than their peers. This intersection between disparate priorities and disparate life

experiences lead the women in this study to feel that they were outsiders at their chosen universities, a fact that shortfalls in institutional programs did not help to combat.

*Institutional barriers.*

Several different factors such as disorganization, lack of support, and inconvenient course scheduling played into the study participants feeling that their university was not interested in supporting them as parenting students. Many women shared their frustrations at the lack of organization within the university, requiring that the mothers in this study, who were already pressed for time, dedicate inordinate amounts of time navigating confusing systems or completing needless tasks. In addition to the confusing organization of the university, many women ran into difficulty with scheduling courses at times that would also allow them to work and care for their children. While the previous section highlighted the support that parenting students found in evening and online coursework, unfortunately, online and evening courses remained in the minority of courses offered, and so many of the women in this study struggled to find classes at times they could attend.

The lack of coursework at family friendly times further assured study participants that their needs had not been considered when creating the academic schedule. On top of disorganization and difficulty academic schedules, some women came up against university policies and majors which were simply unsupportive of their goals to balance family life with academics. This lack of institutional support, bordering on blatant disregard for their multiple obligations, made them feel unwelcome and unappreciated—disenfranchised and invisible within their chosen institution.

While navigating the educational system, several women in this study encountered barriers due to disorganization within their college or university. This ranged from an occasional annoyance to a significant obstacle to academic progress depending on the individual who encountered the problem. Brett was frustrated with her community college's registration system. "They lost, like every time I would go to register, I would have to run around and find my own paperwork because it wasn't where it was supposed to be and stuff. It was horrible." K.B. also had a negative experience with lost paperwork, nearly going home from her orientation session convinced that she had not, actually, been admitted to her program. Upon beginning her nursing study, she continued to face frustration due to being a part of a January entry cohort, a program which she was a part of the inaugural class for—and in some ways continued to feel as though she was a 'guinea pig' within as they figured out the new system.

[O]ne of the things that has been really challenging about coming in ... and being the first group of students that came into the school of nursing ... in January, they completely changed the curriculum and the timing of the curriculum and so, they didn't know what to call us, what to call our group. They were set up on this traditional, ...the juniors do this and the seniors do this and so, ... they had to come up with new ways to talk about the students. They have to come up with new time lines and things like that and that's been really difficult for me to sit patiently while it happens. I really expected ya'll to have all that worked out ... I'm starting to realize that there were a lot of details that hadn't been worked out before I got here.

Similarly, Danielle was a victim of an adjustment process. When she began taking online courses at her university, they were still adjusting to the content management system and several professors had not been trained in its use.

[O]n-line classes... because as I started taking them, I guess they just started. They were having problems with the system being down, the teachers not being trained on how to use different functions and stuff like that.

Catrina's complaint was potentially much more serious in that due to disorganization in how faculty members were made aware of campus policy, she very nearly missed the opportunity to receive a medical withdraw from a semester.

I had spoken... [to my] professor, and they were like, "Well just finish out the semester, and see if you can do a freshman repeat." I said "But you can only do two classes or so with that" and I said, "I'm talking about a whole semester" and I, you know was going to have bad grades.

Had she heeded this professor's advice, she would have had failing grades in courses on her transcript with no means of repairing the damage to her grade point average. Each of these different areas of disorganization served to inconvenience and frustrate the mothers in this study.

These feelings of frustration were even more evident when they discussed the timing of course offerings. Because most worked as well as attended college, coursework which was offered only in the middle of the day presented challenges for them. Danielle found it a

struggle to take coursework in the middle of the day and expressed frustration that within her major, she had a required course that was offered at a set time in the middle of the day.

[Y]ou have classes for my major, for example, we don't have classes that are offered at different times. Like we have that one family policy class for that one semester that meets at 2:00 o'clock, no matter what, you don't get two family policy classes to choose at different times.

Danielle's frustration with finding major courses that fit her schedule was shared by other women in the study. Phoenix was particularly irritated by the fact that when her major chose to offer coursework in the middle of the day, not only was it difficult for her to work, but it created child care issues for her as well.

[T]here were definitely some needs that weren't quite as well met such as class times and things of that nature when kids get off the bus at 2:45 and you can't get out of class until 3:30 and that leaves 45 minutes that you have to pay for full time child care just to cover 45 minutes two days a week. That's kind of a pain. Especially for single parents that don't have anyone else to count on to cover a 45 minute gap twice a week. So for about a year and a half, I paid for day care for full time just to cover an hour and a half a week.

Lily also wished that her college had more online classes and evening course work because attending college every day made it very difficult for her to find any job aside from a minimum wage earning position.

[T]he schedules are not as flexible. It's very traditional. So there is really not an option of any evening classes, any weekends, no on-line classes which I could not believe. So it was like when I went there I ended up from being able to go to school just two days a week, I had to go every single day, you know, and was there pretty much all day. So, I mean, that was, that was a problem. Still is a problem...

Like Lily, Susie also ran into difficulty in scheduling courses and being able to work, however, instead of being willing to work at a minimum wage job in order to go to school, she opted to take general education requirements that she was not very interested in so that she could continue to make progress towards her degree.

I need 7 courses but the courses that I needed were not available at the times that I would be able to attend. So it's like either quit your job to go to school or just not take that course and take something else. And that is basically what I had to end up doing. Not taking the course that I really wanted, but taking one that was, oh well, not something that I was very interested in taking.

The challenges of coursework that was offered at inconvenient times served to verify for the women in this study that their needs were not even 'on the radar' for their institution when making decisions.

The feeling that decision makers do not even seem to be interested in becoming aware of their needs as parenting students left many feeling disenchanting and disenfranchised within their university.

I mean there just aren't a whole lot of parents and so that right there makes it something that I think everyone talks about and it's acknowledged but only on like a real kind of surface level. Like, oh yeah, that must be hard. There is really no day care, there is no additional funding, there is no, you know, additional monies to be had besides loans and so, yeah. And there's really not a whole lot of sympathy for your additional responsibilities like that's on you (laughs) you know.

Beth's experience was unfortunately, not atypical of the women in this study. While the reasons that women did not feel supported by their institution varied, the sense that their institution saw them as just another student, a number, or did not care about their situation was voiced by almost every participant in this study. Eliza was frustrated because she never felt that she was offered advising services, and so simply chose her own courses to the best of her ability. "As far as advising, like I met an advisor once." Queen was frustrated to find that the career services office at her university was very limited in her mind. "[T]heir career, their career services don't work. ... they got one person running the entire, the career services stuff so if he's not there, you are just out of luck." K.B. had significant concerns about the emotionally traumatic nature of the nursing program that she was a part of, and felt strongly that there was a lack of support for her emotional wellbeing as a part of the nursing program on the part of the institution.

Well, I think that if the school is going to send me into a clinical situation that is really emotionally difficult, then I expect for the school to be set up to handle my reaction to that situation and if I am going to send 6 hours in a NICU um, caring for

intensely sick infants, um, I think the statistics are about 40% of um those kids will die. I'm going to need for you to have a system in place, um, so that I am not on my own, coming home in the midst of trying to deal with getting dinner together and doing the laundry and I can't get dinner together and do the laundry because I'm sobbing...

Beth also felt that her major in particular was amazingly unsympathetic to students who were playing the role of both mother and student. Beth took the opportunity to speak with a prospective student about her experience within the department as a mother, and also listen to the prospective student's concerns.

[S]he was told well maybe you just need to bite the bullet...like no kid has ever become like an axe murderer from spending too much time in day care or something like that and so I mean that's the attitude of ... it's almost glossed over by this liberal kind of ideology that, you know, sure you're a mom but you, we are beyond you having to care for your child all the time. You can just stick put them in day care because, you know, to not do that is not to be enlightened, like to stay home with him is not to be enlightened. It's not to understand... And so it's almost like instead of creating an understanding it's almost like, if you are holding onto that, if you're worried, because she was worried about, you know, not spending every day with her child that she spent every day with for the last six months, you know. And which is a huge emotional and you know, physical and everything. It's just a huge upheaval for her and her baby and the attitude seems to be no, no, no, you're getting caught up in

some sort of emotional mommy-ness (laughs) which is not what we do. You know. And in so much as we acknowledge that you are a parent, we also acknowledge that you know, we are modern enough that you can put your child in day care and not feel guilty about that. You know, so that's a little story (laughs) of the sympathy that's available.

Her story reflected her unease and distrust of her department to provide any sort of support, awareness or even real acknowledgement of the multitude of responsibilities she, or other mothers had in addition to academic obligations.

### *Chilly climate.*

Beth's story in the previous section gives a sense of the chilly climate she perceived within her department. While she felt that they were aware of the challenges she faced as a mother, she felt that her concerns were belittled and made to seem unimportant. This sense that classrooms and the larger university climate were not hospitable to women who were mothers that worked and attended school was unfortunately pervasive. This sense came from insensitive faculty as well as peers who were unaware or aware and contemptuous.

I don't feel that any initiative has been made to say, hey welcome. We want you to be comfortable. We want you to be welcome and you know, feel part of this university. I mean the college experience. I felt more like I was pushed under the rug and pushed to the side. Still looked at as a taboo, you know, and it's like this is the

year 2007. I'm here. (laughs) Deal with it. You know and I don't even feel like I'm being dealt with, much less welcomed as an asset to the university.

Unfortunately, Samantha was not alone in feeling that her university swept her under the rug and ignored her needs. This sort of benign neglect of her needs as a mother permeated the experiences of the women in this study. Because they were juggling so many various responsibilities, many looked to their professors to be aware of and accommodating to their academic needs. Eliza desired understanding from her professors, and drew the distinction that for her to focus on things other than her academics would be to the detriment of her children and home life.

[A]n understanding that academics are not everything and that students have other areas of their lives... Just an understanding that you have other things going on besides the course work so while the course work is very important to you it may not be your first priority and if it were, that that may not be in the best interest of you, ... as opposed to this is your, particularly at [university] there is the view that you are a student and that is all you are doing.

This idea that to focus on academics to the detriment of her other responsibilities might be a poor choice was one that many of the women who participated in this research would endorse. Susie felt that it was critical for non-traditional students to get accommodations from their professors for their outside obligations.

If I am late for class, don't mark me absent. I will be late. Maybe some day I'll come in 5 or 10 minutes late. Maybe the school bus is running late and I can't get out of

class on time because my students are still in class. So don't say, traditional, freshmen should not have the same rules as a non-traditional student should. It's just not fair.

Lily also shared the perspective that different rules should apply to parenting students, however, she did not feel that this was often the case. "[W]hen you look at, even two girls who are the same age, one that has a kid and one that doesn't. ... they have very different experiences in life and that's not really taken into account." Autumn also felt that there should be a certain measure of leniency afforded parenting students because the reasons that they were asking for extensions were likely to be vastly different than the reasons given by peers.

I know this paper was due at 2, I didn't turn it in until 4 but my son was sick, kind of thing. Could you give me a little, you know, side with me a little bit just, know that you know I am not here staying up partying all night. There's, I'm, I'm a whole different person as compared to most of the people in class.

Catrina was also looking for understanding from her professors and classmates in regards to her academic obligations in addition to the requirements of motherhood. She was frustrated by professor's reliance on group projects due to the difficulty she had, as a parenting student with meeting her group members outside of class to work on the project.

Well, understanding as far as when, a prime example would be group project... a single mom in a group project can't meet you know at certain times. They have other obligations. It's not that they don't want to do it, they can't do it, you know, but they

have other priorities. And I just feel like people need to be more understanding you know to that whole combination.

Valeria also felt that professors needed to ‘tweak’ some assignments or projects to make them more accessible to her as a parenting student. Her difficulty in completing the paper as it was assigned was due in large part to the requirements of raising her children.

Okay, the cultural observation paper. We had to go out and do things that a single mom doesn’t do. I haven’t been to a sporting event in 20 years... I can’t go to a high school football game and drag all four of my kids out to a high school football game on a very cold night and sit there and observe youth, you know, it is impossible for me to do.

The feeling that faculty were simply oblivious to the needs of parenting students contributed to the experience of a chilly classroom climate and invisibility within her university.

Attitudes of faculty, staff and other students made the university one that did not always feel welcoming to the mothers in this study.

Sometimes experiences of chilly climate went beyond benign neglect into active discrimination. Autumn overheard one of her professors making a disparaging comment about non-traditional students. Despite her best efforts to do exemplary academic work, her professor made this remark to her. “I have gotten a comment ... people who come back ... who have families, have other things to worry about and often don’t put that much work into it [academics].” Beyond the simply insensitive remarks which make assumptions about priorities and choices, some women ran into difficulty with logistical problems. Eliza had a

logistical challenge when her sons had strep throat and no one besides her to care for them. Eliza felt that she had no recourse to address the blatant disregard of her additional responsibilities due to the professor's authority within the department where she was getting her degree.

So I had one professor who was very unaccommodating who was actually in my department and who dropped me a letter grade for missing two classes in a row because my kids had strep throat. So, because it wasn't me that had it, then he didn't consider it as a special situation. So that a little bit rough for him but and he was also very big in the English department so that was a bit frustrating cause I felt like that was very difficult. I never did anything about it but I didn't know who to do to complain about it because he was so high up.

K.B. ran into a challenge regarding the assumptions that her professors made about her when they discovered that she was completing her first undergraduate degree. She mused that as a nursing student, while her age did not set her apart, her degree status did.

[T]hey look at me and they may guess that I am older than the traditional student. It's funny that they often assume that I already have a degree. They often assume that this is a different degree for me and as soon as I say, no this is my first degree. I can really see this change in their face, so, oh, you're that person. You had a really hard life and you never thought that you were going to go to college did you? You have waited tables your whole, you know, you waited tables for 10 years and went and got pregnant real early ... and the first couple of time that happened to me, I jumped right

in there. I was like, no I took AP courses in high school and I'm super smart and always thought I would go to college and I guess sort of got off the track... I get the sense that they make lots of assumptions about what kind of a student I am... somebody said, ... "Oh this must be a real, a real change for you or this must be a real culture shock for you" or something like that. And I was just like, oh, okay...he assumes that I came from uneducated parents... So it's really bizarre to find myself trying to reassert, no, I am totally middle class. You know trying to reassert all of this privilege that I normally would try to divest myself of.

K.B.'s internal struggle regarding privilege and the assumptions that people make about her based on her age relates to Lily's struggle to adjust to an all female college where she feels that there is the common belief that "women have a traditional role. That these, you know, you should go to college right after high school and you know, you shouldn't be, you shouldn't have kids if you are not married." The sense on campus that women had traditional roles meant that Lily was not always comfortable interacting with her classmates. Susie also struggled with feeling that the others students on campus were not welcoming. "I have not... met a friendly person on campus yet. Maybe one or two." Sara felt that lack of accommodation for her needs as a mother contributed to a chilly climate that made her feel unwanted. "I just think that ... if you can't tell your professors what's going on and them have a little bit of understanding, then you just you don't feel like you want to be there." Samantha characterized this alienation or isolation as a tangible barrier between herself and others that she met at her university.

I haven't felt like I've connected really, ... [I] felt like there was something... some tangible barrier between me and this other person... I haven't really connected with the student body at all. Um, most of the time when I say to anyone there that I am a single mother or that I am 26 years old, I get a really strange look and that's pretty much the end of most of our conversations for the remainder of, you know, the semester...

This sense that she is not welcome within the campus community and is even shunned or at least disregarded contributed to the perception of a chilly campus climate for single mothers.

### ***Advocacy.***

In response to the perceptions of invisibility within the university predicated upon her by the chilly campus climate, several of the women in this study rose to action. In order to prevent others from being disenfranchised or assumed to be less than, study participants advocated on behalf of single mothers, especially single mothers within universities. Sally began by attempting to support and encourage single mothers to realize that education was within their grasp, despite their circumstances.

I am doing it all by myself ... So if you ... remember anything about me, remember that like, the world comes across a lot of single moms that are in different situations, but I think that if I can do it with no type of support at all, no financial support at all and to go to you know, a very expensive school, I think that anybody can do it. I think that no one has room to say that because this happened to me, that I can't continue my education. I came from a dysfunctional family. I, you know, was in a

bad relationship. I am a single mom. I support my daughter by myself. You know, and I will be a college graduate.

Several other mothers in the study followed Sally's lead and wanted to if not serve as role models for, at least make the educational process easier for single mothers. Brett saw her major as a way to speak out about the needs of single mothers. She mentioned that her focus for most of her research centered around issues faced by single parents or child care.

I did most of my research in this area... and, any chance I get to talk about the unjust world that we as single parents live in, I do it. Just because I think we are a very huge majority that are very under-represented... I mince no words about it... half of marriages end in divorce so you have that aspect but then, single mothers by choice or who just weren't married. That's growing and growing by leaps and bounds and you know, it used to be such a stigma attached to it. And it's kind of lost that but still I don't think that society in general has realized that it is different, that it does require different rules at times ... for a single parent... I just want people to know. I didn't know and... I had to learn the hard way. So... I kind of want them to know that it is not easy.

Because Eliza also felt strongly about the issues faced by single mothers, she opted to start a student organization on her campus that could advocate for parenting students.

I've started a parenting support group for pregnant and parenting students. My initial goal was to aim it toward single parents. I am actually finding there are a lot more

married parents that are more pro-active than the single parents are. So I'm trying to figure out how to incorporate those single parents within the group also.

Lily also saw the needs of parenting students being ignored at her university and was taking active steps to help the university address this shortfall. "[Something] I'm working on at [university] to try to change or improve on is ... help with child care. Because they don't have that at all." Phoenix also saw a problem with the way her college was addressing the needs of parenting students, and took the opportunity to speak with the potential chairs of her department to assure that the concerns of mothers within the Social Work department were better addressed. Autumn saw her major as an opportunity for advocacy for single mothers beyond simple help with educational issues, but relative to designing cities in ways that put resources within easy reach of those who needed them.

I want to be an urban planner. Um, basically, I'll help build cities in a more... I want to be more accessible to all sorts of people, um especially single parents with day cares, where schools are placed um, medical folks, making them more friendly, sidewalks, and all that stuff.

Out of the goodness of their own hearts, or in response to their own negative experiences with chilly climate within their university, women in this study chose to challenge the system and advocate for the needs of mothers such as themselves.

### **Motherhood as a full time job.**

As they struggled to have their needs as parenting students seen as legitimate within the larger institution, women in this study continued to parent, and see their children as their

primary and most important priority. The sense that her child served as a point of separation from her peers was pervasive within the data generated by the study. A large part of was the fact that for all of the women in this study, as a single mother, the responsibilities were all consuming. This fact created challenge to her academic obligations, but in no way diminished her sense that her child/ren were her primary priority. This difficult juggling act was made even more complicated for some of the mothers within this study who had to contend with difficult custody issues in addition to the day-to-day responsibilities of taking care of children.

***Academic challenges created by mothering responsibilities.***

Due to the fact that motherhood and the accompanying obligations were so consuming, the women in this study were constantly required to juggle their mothering responsibilities with their responsibilities as a student. Many shared stories of how they felt that their parenting responsibilities took away from the amount of time they were able to give to their studies, often causing them to feel that their academics were negatively impacted by their obligations as a mother. Based on their numerous responsibilities, many desired some accommodation from their professors or majors that would recognize their multiple priorities.

For some of the women in this study, in addition to the responsibilities of being a parent and a student and a worker, there were the challenges of negotiating custody arrangements for their offspring. For K.B., custody arrangements actually stopped her from applying to nursing school at a university that was not close to her ex-husband.

I briefly considered [nursing school further from her home]. Um, and totally freaked out [son]'s dad when I started talking about that because it would have been ...[son]'s at [his father]'s house at least 2 nights a week um, as it stands now. So it would have been a big change in how we handled our custody arrangements for us to travel back and forth to and from [town where other school was] or meeting half way ... when I mentioned the idea to [ex-husband], that I was thinking about applying at [other school], he said, oh, well, that means that I just won't see [son] for months on end and, you know, that was like this big, I don't know, this whole big passive aggressive craziness um and so that quickly fell off the idea of possibilities.

Some had to navigate the legal system to assert and assure custody of their children. This struggle was even more invisible than her other responsibilities, but often came with a great deal of stress, as Beth clearly stated.

[Son]'s dad sued me for custody like two years ago... so I have been dealing with that as well. Which has been like an additional burden financially and emotionally and all of that as well. [T]hat's been a big additional thing that also has not been really acknowledged... just kind of this attitude like that's an excuse and I feel like it's related to... the whole mothering thing too. Just that they don't really know what to do with the fact that you have a kid and so they acknowledge it but the standards are the same.

Beth, Eliza, Tina and Samantha all discussed how their custody struggles were ongoing for at least a year of the time that they were enrolled in college. While Samantha and Tina both

acknowledged it simply as a process of going back and forth to court, Eliza felt that it impacted her education in that she needed to be able to show an income that could support her sons in order for the legal establishment to feel that it was legitimate for her to attend college.

I had a custody battle that lasted two years and that lasted through the entire time I was an undergraduate. It actually resolved itself the January after I graduated... So that was, that was a huge stressor but also a huge motivating factor. Because I needed to do very well in school and during my custody battle there was, we had to get what they called guardian ad litem, so a social worker to come in and assess each [parent]. So I had a high standard to meet also as far as I needed to successfully be a parent. I needed to successfully be a student. I needed to show an income that was viable enough to say, to justify the fact that I would go to school full time.

The feeling that being a mother and completing her assignments were in direct conflict led Valeria and other students to express frustration she often felt her studies suffered as a result of her motherhood. She sometimes felt that in order to get her academic work done, she needed to 'bribe' her children with toys to keep them occupied. "[I]f I need to take my children and bribe them into buying them a new game boy game to keep them quiet for an hour... trust me, I will do it." Sara also saw her children as needing her almost constant attention, a fact which she feared sometimes negatively impacted her academic work. "But that still leaves you no time to study or ... get your papers done or stuff like that... I mean you can't write a research paper when you've got a 2 or 3 year old running around

screaming.” Tina dealt with the same lack of time to study due to her multitude of responsibilities as the primary caretaker and breadwinner for her daughter. Managing the multiple responsibilities of raising her daughter and keeping her household running meant she could not focus on her academics as much as she would have liked.

[F]inding time to study was rough because when you are the only one bringing home the money, plus cleaning the house, making sure everything is done, at first I was getting home from work about 10 or 11 o’clock at night. And starting to clean the house and everything, I might sit down and study until one.

Beth also felt that her academics suffered based on the requirements of motherhood. She felt that part of the reason she was behind in her progress towards her master’s degree was due to her additional responsibilities.

Having [my son] probably impacted it more than anything. ...when I started graduate school with him and he was six months old, like, it was wholly different. Like I wasn’t able to maintain the level of work that I had as an undergrad. I mean, I was a really good student when I was an undergraduate and you know, I worked really hard and always did my reading. And in graduate school, that just wasn’t the case.

Because I had two competing priorities that were, you know, huge priorities and so, you know, I haven’t probably read everything assigned in a class since I started (laughs). ...Like, I don’t feel like I am committed to my academics as I was, as I once was.

Susie shared her frustration that while she was committed to being academically successful in college, she felt that oftentimes, her attention was divided, causing her to be less focused on her academics than she would have liked.

Well, I don't get as much time to devote to study because I can't shut myself away from him for hours at end, ... So it's not like I can focus on one subject a lot of time. It's something I can only, I can't sit down and devote all my time to study and all my time to doing what I am supposed to do. I have to basically jump around.

Catrina, also struggled with managing her responsibilities as a student with the needs of her child. For Catrina it was not a question of fragmenting her attention, but instead of placing a priority on her daughter's needs over her own.

[W]henever I would get off work, I would have a late day, we'd have a surgery or something and I get home and my daughter has a slew of homework, or this project. Now she has more projects than I can ever remember doing. And of course she does some of it, but the finishing touches, I'm up to all times of the night working on her project, knowing I have a project to do too, but making sure her stuff is straight, you know has me neglecting mine.

These are some of the stories the students in this study shared—indicating their conviction that their multiple roles impacted and sometimes even compromised their best efforts to be academically successful. The strain that the women in this study felt to attend to the full time job of mothering while also maintaining their academic standards was made more difficult by

the sense that the struggles of parenting students were not considered legitimate by the administration of the universities that they attended. Clearly women in this study struggled with the dual responsibilities of mother and student—additional discussion regarding how women in this study negotiated amongst their competing priorities will be addressed later in this chapter. Each of the women in this study was a dedicated mother, committed to providing the best life she could for her children. Just as clearly, the academic dedication of the mothers in this study was unquestionable, however, the amount of time and energy which they had available to dedicate to their homework, studying for tests and writing papers was drastically different from that of their peers.

*Child as primary priority.*

Catrina's story is one of many where mothers prioritized their child's needs above their own. Many made sacrifices in order to better care for their children, often to their own detriment. In addition to the feeling that they needed to put their child's needs above their own, many also reflected up on the fact that having a child changed their priorities dramatically, and for some made education more important to them than it had been previously. As Catrina reflected in the previous section, most mothers in this study had the sense that she sometimes neglected her own needs in order to be a mother.

Brett's sacrifice for her son centered around her ability to attend graduate school, a strong desire of hers. She did not feel that she could give her son what she wanted to provide for him while attending graduate school and working part time, and so she opted to pursue online graduate studies in order to take a full time job.

I had decided that well I am already used to being broke. I might as well stay broke. But as it turns out, I can't continue to stay as broke as I am. My um, my child's getting older. He likes to do, you know, tee ball and he wants to do karate and gymnastics and all this stuff costs money and, yeah, so I, I've started looking at grad school options on line. Which will take me a lot longer but I think in the long run will be worth it.

While K.B. did not have to change her academic plans because of her son, she did feel that her son's needs influenced her choice of major and career. Due to her commitment to provide for her son, she felt that the career she selected need to provide financial security, something that she felt nursing was sure to do.

I needed a job that I could depend on um, and that I kind of felt like by leaving [ex-husband] and sort of setting up my own household there was a lot of inherent risk in that... I wanted to pick up a profession that will give me the best chance that I could, you know what I mean? That I couldn't pick something, I couldn't pick anything that had the hint of um, risk...I would have loved to have gotten a massage therapy certificate and tried to be successful but I'm not sure how that pays the rent.

Autumn also had concerns about how her chosen major might impact her son. While she had a passion for Biology, she had recently changed her major to Geography with a concentration in Urban Development so that she could assure that she could spend time with her son.

I wanted to do biological research. I wanted to work in a lab. Um, but a lot of the people I had talked to over the semester, it's a lot of work you have to put in a lot of

extra hours. Sometimes you have to work over night. I still want time to, you know, to be with my son. Not have to work every weekend or worry about, you know, one guy's doing um, research on Ebola right now. I mean, be around a lot of dangerous things...Even though biology was like a huge passion, it came down to, you know, will I be happy doing something else?

This focus on her child as the primary impetus pursuing education was shared by many of the women in this study. Danielle felt that her daughter was her reason for pursuing education, and felt that her classmates who were not parents did not have that perspective on their studies.

It made me appreciate being a student more, because I am not doing this just for me. I am doing it for my daughter. And, that means more to me than anything to be able to provide a better life for her.

The birth of Lily's son was also a turning point for her in how she valued education. She was a self reported high school dropout who did not feel that education was terribly important until her son came along.

[F]rom the age of 16 when I dropped out of high school, I had always been working full time. So, school really wasn't something that was important to me. ...I'm making enough money to pay my bills and hang out with my friends and you know, I wasn't really worried about it but then once I had my son ... [I] decided that I wanted to provide a better life for us.

Queen felt strongly that her perspective on education shifted when she got custody of her grandsons. Prior to receiving custody, she was enrolled in community college, but she described a dramatic change in perspective once her grandchildren came into the equation.

Before I just wanted the paper and it was just me. But now, my thoughts are giving them a good life so the priority has changed, switched from me to them. And not only just the two of them, but to all my grandchildren. It's switched to my grandchildren now.

Susie also reported that her son was her sole focus as she decided to pursue her degree and that having her son changed her life and her priorities so dramatically that she could not even articulate how vastly different they had become.

[H]aving a child, I think about the future. Not just the present. I focus a lot on the future because I know that somebody else depends on me. Somebody else relies on me. It's not just me. Having, being a mother changes you very dramatically, very, very, very dramatically. Things that I say and do are shaped by my experiences being a mom and seeing what my child sees with his eyes. I think about, if my baby sees me or if my baby heard me, if my baby knew this, or I mean, I always, you just, um, it changed my life so dramatically it's just, words, it's hard to put it into words just how dramatic a change a child has done for me.

Clearly each of the women in this study had a priority to provide for their children to the best of their abilities. This often meant that their needs were put on hold and their efforts were focused on making the most of her resources of time, energy, talent and money. This also

meant that despite their seeming invisibility within their institutions, they continued to persevere because they were committed to their degrees for the opportunity it represented to them and their children.

While this research was conducted from a perspective which attempts to highlight success, women in this study encountered barriers and had to struggle within the educational system. While they did get some support from financial aid and some from their families, life as a single mother and primary breadwinner was a life fraught with the stresses of near poverty. The choice to attend college brought with it additional budgetary hardship into any already precarious financial situation. In addition to the challenges of unmet financial need, all women in this study grappled with disenfranchisement within the institution. In some cases, this was due to her sense that she was an outsider based on priorities wildly different from those of her peers. In other cases, this disenfranchisement came from institutional challenges such as disorganization, lost paperwork or course times that were incompatible with mothering or working. Beyond those challenges, most women faced a chilly classroom climate which ranged from benign neglect and inattentiveness to the issues of parenting students all the way to outright discrimination against students who had child care responsibilities. In reaction to these challenges, several women in the study mobilized and became committed to action to raise awareness and advocate for the needs of parenting students. This inclination to advocacy was specifically in response to her status as a parent, a primary role for all study participants. The sense that motherhood was her full time job and therefore highest priority created a challenge to her academic obligations. While all mothers

felt that motherhood was her priority and often sacrificed in order to meet the needs of their child(ren) all also seemed to feel that this was as it should be. The tricky balance between her often conflicting priorities will be explored next.

### **Striving for Balance Between Multiple Roles**

As working mothers who were attending school, the women in this study had many responsibilities which required their time and attention. The process of navigating between all of these obligations required a great deal of confidence and diligence. This balance required that the women were intensely aware of their own talents, strengths, abilities and shortfalls. Occasionally some of the challenges of single motherhood were intense and study participants faced the challenges and continued to press forward. The successful navigation between competing priorities, and the idea that not all priorities would be met with equal diligence was a fact that the women of this study took in stride. Given that knowledge, all developed their ability to prioritize and successfully juggle their many priorities in order to best accommodate all of the tasks that they needed to accomplish as mothers, workers and students. This theme focuses not only on the challenges of balancing multiple roles, but on the efforts made and the success celebrated in the fact that many were able to successfully navigate the complicated network of concurrent and often conflicting priorities.

### **Knowing herself**

An essential part of the balancing of multiple roles was a keen sense of self awareness. As students in college who happened to also be responsible for a multitude of other tasks as mothers and workers, the ability to know what they could expect from

themselves and what they were best at made their transition to college easier. For many, part of being aware of her abilities was to take into account the multiple stresses (physical and psychological) of her life. This chronic stress led to poor health for many of the women who participated in this research in forms as benign as sleep deprivation and in forms that were more malignant such as serious psychological issues or cancer. Having an awareness of her own health and the limitations that came with her state of health was critical to success as a student and mother.

Having an awareness of the limitations of her life as a single mother meant that many women made pragmatic choices regarding college attendance and to a lesser extent, major selection. Self awareness meant that many of the women in this study came directly to majors which they felt best fit their skills and abilities. It also meant that they could be realistic about what they could and should try to accomplish in a given day, be that academically, socially or as a parent. Having an awareness of the limitations that her life placed on her as well as her own skill set made each woman in this study able to best balance between a desire to earn a degree, an obligation to care for her child or children and her need to financially support her family.

### ***Overcoming health problems.***

Many of the women in this study had negative health impacts based on their stress from balancing their multiple roles. All had overcome health issues that ranged from simple sleep deprivation to panic attacks to diabetes and cancer. The following quote from Beth, could have been drawn from almost any of the women in this study, as sleep deprivation was

so rampant. “I actually stay up usually until like one or two studying at night and so I wake up in the morning and I’m exhausted”. The level of chronic fatigue that the women in this study operated under was best addressed by Sally who exercised to keep alert and awake, but could not tell me how many hours she slept in a night, but instead opted to think about her sleep in terms of a week.

I have to exercise because I have to stay up for so many hours that I have to have the energy and ... while I’m exercising I could think about... projects. I think about, you know, I get ideas... [L]ike on a Monday, I would get 3 hours of sleep, so. I would say out of the whole week, 20 something I just from the whole week 20 to 25. Because I’ll sleep like before class. Because I get off work at 8 and I have my first class is at 9:30, so I honestly I don’t go to sleep, but if I do, it’s falling asleep. But on the days, like if I have class at 11, I get like 2 hours of sleep and then maybe like before work, I’ll get another 2 hours so on those days, I get 4 and then on the opposite days, I’ll get like 2. Something like 20, 25 hours a week.

Sally and Sara both worked in the evenings to accommodate providing for their children and attending school and both spoke to having to overcome their sheer exhaustion at all times of the day. Sara was grateful that her online degree program allowed her to turn in her coursework by midnight Pacific Coast time, giving her what she perceived to be an additional three hours to complete her work, but with her full time job in the evenings and her need to care for her children during the day, she felt that she could never catch up on her sleep.

I work 6 p.m. to 3 a.m. and then, you know, my kids get up at 7. So you know, for me you know, just being mentally and physically tired most of the time, is, you know, something that is really hard to overcome.

The combined lack of sleep and stress from the multiple responsibilities that require her attention lead Susie to become ill, and at the time of our interview, she had a terrible sounding cough that she reported she had been attempting to treat with honeyed tea and lemon drops because she could not take the time to see the doctor with work and classes.

Many of the study participants had dealt with, or were currently facing illnesses of varying degrees. Some were as simple as the cough that Susie and Tina both shared, but some were more significant such as the diabetes that plagued Queen or the serious surgeries that Danielle and Catrina needed to address their health issues. Queen did not discover her diabetic condition until she was under stress related to her daughter's incarceration.

[S]ometimes it gets hard on me. I have diabetes. I have high blood pressure. You know, so I am on all this medication... I went to work one day and still going to school, still caring for the boys, but she [Queen's daughter] would just give me so much problem ... I'm telling you. It was a mess. And I went to work ... and I couldn't see the people walking down the hall and I went into the emergency room and that's when I found out that I had diabetes. My sugar was over 300 that day.

Queen found that when she felt that she was under significant stress, she had difficulty with her health. Upon being diagnosed as diabetic, Queen began to take medicine, but also eat differently and exercise more to overcome the obstacle of poor health. Due to these

proactive steps, she was able to continue attending classes without interruption. Danielle and Catina were not so fortunate, and their significant health issues lead to surgery for each, and the need to take time off of coursework to heal from the surgery. Danielle had a difficult time during that period, but maintained her enrollment and requested extensions from her professors in order to keep up her academic obligations.

I went to the doctor and I found out I had cancer on my cervix and I had problems with cancer on my uterus and I became really ill and in and out of the hospital, um, it was like 3 or 4 months of me just being in and out of the hospital. They finally cut the part that was cancerous and then I had to get better. So at that time, I was going to ... [hospital] and I was still here and I was fighting with myself on if I should go home and be with my grandparents and just put school on hold until I got better or just stay here. I chose to stay here because my faculty and friends were behind me. Danielle spoke of the difficulty she had in completing the incompletes that she had to take while she was healing, but was proud that she had been able to maintain her enrollment, and by the time we spoke, she had completed all of her coursework from that semester. Catrina made a different choice and opted to withdraw from the semester in order to recover from her surgery.

I had like really bad headaches and my menstrual cycle was all messed up, I mean it hurt so bad. And I'd just be poppin' pills trying to get through the day with the headaches and abdominal pain and back pain and what have you. ...[I] found out I had tumors, fibroid tumors and um what I ended up doing was withdrawing because

my blood count was so low. He was like “I don’t even know how you’re walking around” ... it was really horrible. So he recommended an emergency hysterectomy, and I was like “Well let me just try to get through the semester” and um, he was like “No” and so I had to go ahead and withdraw. He said if I hadn’t done it willingly “I’ll make you do it”.

Catrina noted that while she wanted to complete her semester before trying to address her health issues, her physician felt that she needed to withdraw from the semester. She expressed some relief because she admitted that while she was feeling so badly, her grades had dropped somewhat, and so she was grateful to have the medical withdraw instead of having poor grades on her transcript. Upon returning to school, she was proud of the work that she could do when she was not combating the pain and fatigue of her fibroid tumors.

Brett also struggled with her health while enrolled, largely due to the stress of striving for balance between her obligations. Her challenges were both physical and mental.

[W]hen I first went back to [community college] I tried to work full time, take a full load of classes and I was all alone with my son. And, actually I had a boyfriend. And we were kind of in to break up thing, I actually had like a breakdown. Like I had a seizure. Had to go to the hospital. Had to go to a neurologist. Had to be on a lot of medicine.

She shook her head as she recalled this time of her life, and went on to share that she had learned from that experience that she could not do everything. She also took the opportunity afterwards to continually work with a therapist to help her keep realistic goals. Several

mothers in this study did not have physical difficulty while pursuing their degree, but had significant emotional strain, which lead a few to seek psychological help. Samantha had withdrawn from the Fall semester prior to our interview, she felt in part due to the significant stress of her own life, but also partially due to the challenges of studying Sociology.

[I]t's what I am passionate about so, actually that major has been driving me crazy for the last, this past semester. Um, it's such a flood of so many social problems. I had a friend of mine tell me you know if I had to learn about this stuff every day, I would be depressed. And I looked at him and I said I AM. You know, it is very depressing to learn about this stuff all the time. On top of your own personal problems at home and challenges that you face everywhere else and you got to worry and think about all of the problems of everyone else in the world. It's a big burden to carry.

At the time of our interview, Samantha was still recovering from the withdrawal, but follow-up contact has shown that she continues to persist in her goal of completing her undergraduate degree. She was not alone in feeling that she was overwhelmed and needed support in addressing her multiple challenges; several women sought help from therapists, friends and family to lend emotional support. Tina also struggled to maintain her commitment to school and caring for her daughter, feeling that sometimes the burden became overwhelming. "I have been seriously depressed and was admitted into the hospital ... for having panic attacks...". While each of the women in the study reported some negative health impact from stress, all also reported some sort of positive coping strategy to deal with the health impacts from seeking help from AA to doing exercise. Despite the challenges of

limited sleep, stress and other illness, the women in this study sought help and overcame the medical challenges, relying on their own knowledge of their limits and abilities. In this way, none of the women in this study let the health challenges which stress brought into her life stop her from successfully being mother, worker and student.

*Educational pathways.*

Unlike their characterizations of their more traditional peers as attending college ‘because it was the next logical step’ or because their parents told them to; the women in this study were very intentional in their decisions to pursue undergraduate study. They took into account the limitations of their lives when they made the choice to attend, and so were very self aware as they opted to undertake collegiate coursework. For all of the women in this study, that coursework began at the community college, a place which most found appropriate and supportive to them as parenting students. All moved from the community college to the universities where many were enrolled at the time of our conversations. Once within the universities, each remained aware of their own talents, skills, abilities and limitations when selecting their major. Many continued to use that self awareness as they moved forward to consider or pursue graduate level coursework.

The mothers in this study chose to attend community college for a variety of reasons, some geographic, some financial, and some to build up their confidence in their own academic abilities before they went to a university. Through having an awareness of their own skills and needs, and finding an environment, such as a community college, that would best match those needs, these women showed their own agency. Phoenix addressed the very

practical reasons that she chose to begin her college career at community college.

“Community College was... [near home]. It was a lot cheaper than starting out at [university].” The fact that community college courses were often closer to their homes than the university they attended and almost always less expensive was a benefit that many of the women in this study highlighted. Their awareness of the limitations of their lives in terms of geography and finances meant that instead of disregarding their dream for additional education beyond high school, they looked for alternatives to meet that need and community college was a perfect solution for many. Another benefit which community college offered that fit well into the needs of this particular group of parenting students was an academic schedule that accommodated evening, weekend and online coursework. Autumn (much like almost all of her peers in this study) found the flexibility of the community college schedule to be helpful to her in meeting her obligations as a mother and as a student. “[S]tarted back at community college because a lot of classes were on line or they were at night. On Saturdays, a lot easier to go to.” Because she knew the limitations that she needed to work within and was aware of her work schedule, she was able to seek out educational opportunities that were complimentary to her hectic life. Some of the women in this study also needed some additional support in the classroom; something that many found within the smaller classes and expectation of instructor availability at the community college. Katrina found that the atmosphere at community college allowed her to build confidence and ask for clarification when she was confused without feeling subconscious.

But in the evenings, you could go, and everything is laid back, ... and you could ask ten thousand questions and no one would care. “You know, I had that same question, girl!” You know, so, it was a little bit better that way.

Tina felt that community college was a supportive place to begin her education, a place where she was more likely to succeed while juggling her multiple priorities.

I mean it was a very good, you know, step towards college. I think if I had of come straight here, I would have definitely probably fell on my face because of all the stuff I had going on. You know, and that was like a safe place.

Sara, K.B. Susie, Lily and Brett had similar stories with regards to early college failure and consternation with returning to their chosen university based on their previous failure.

Because Sara had been in college at 18 and not been successful, she felt that taking the time to begin at a community college was a good way to ‘test the waters’ and give her confidence a boost.

[W]hen I got that first set of grades and I had like a 3.5 GPA or something like that. You know, I mean, that was probably the best feeling. Just because I had, because that was a huge fear for me. Was going back, starting over and then failing again. And of course, I was you know, six or seven years older and had kids and had more things to worry about then just where the party was at night...

This confidence allowed her to feel comfortable going forward to her chosen university to further explore her interests and skills. That opportunity for discovery was another benefit of community college, the first steps for Danielle on her pathway to her chosen major.

I liked the community college because the classes I took, they were general ed courses but, um, I also got to like take some electives like counseling course, or education courses. Cause I took education courses and a counseling course my community college year and it helped me to decide if that was the path I wanted to go on.

As students, these mothers used what they knew about themselves to find majors that fit in well with who they felt that they were as students and people. This self awareness is what the literature might more typically call Person-Environment fit. They sought out places where their personality traits, skill sets and interests were most aligned with the mission and interests of the programs and other students. Catrina spoke about her choices in selecting a major in psychology or social work. “I was torn with Psych and Social Work, actually because ... I’ve always had like a helping nature” As it turned out, she did not choose, but opted instead to pursue both as a double major. Phoenix, who shared the same double majors had an explanation for why she chose them based on her personality as well as her life experience.

[E]verything that I went through even at a younger age that led to me leaving home at 15, kind of led me to the field of psychology and social work... I find that I am very empathic towards others and there is not a whole lot of situations that I haven’t been through so I can understand where they are coming from. And I know what it’s like to be there.

This intersection between formative life experiences, skill sets, interests and passion also impacted Tina and Danielle, both of whom had childhood difficulties which introduced them to a role model whom they would later base their major and career plans upon emulating. For Beth, Brett and Samantha all three, being able to enjoy reading her course materials, engage in lectures with her professors and make connections to the real world made her feel at home in Sociology. Beth's commentary on Sociology reflects well the sentiments of each.

I had some ... great professors who were just like, that was the class that I did the best in and the classes that I really enjoyed what I was reading. It was interesting to me and, um, you know, I was good at it. I could make those connections...

[Regarding students studying in Sociology] We are all interested and have a passion for like, you know, the social world and social problems and things like that. And so, I mean in that way, you know, I fit in very well.

Like Danielle who took a few courses at community college to gauge her interest in the subject before selecting her major, Eliza tried out some coursework within Public Health (where she wanted to pursue her Master's degree) only to find that it was not the best fit for her personally.

I took classes... through the program that I am now doing as a graduate student... so that I could fine tune and see what areas I was interested in and what areas I was interested in but wouldn't necessarily match up with my skills ... I am interested in health education, health behavior but when I did the course work it just didn't fit with my personality.

In a similar way, Sally's love for art caused her to observe classes at the university she was considering before she made the choice to attend to assure that they fit with her learning style.

I visited the art department and I liked how their classes, the class was very artistic and it stayed true to the elements of historical design & art so I thought this would be the best place for me.... [Describing her classes within her major] if I spend all night working on a project, it's, I'm getting to the point that it doesn't bother me. Like, I enjoy doing it and it doesn't feel like work... I don't dread going to class even though I'm going to school with like maybe 2 hours of sleep out of the whole day, I am wide awake. I'm the person in the class answering the questions. I'm like attentive because this is where I want to be.

Sally's comments that she felt that she was where she wanted to be when she was in her major classes sums up the importance of knowing herself, especially within an educational context. It was that awareness of her own skills and abilities that drove many of the women interviewed for this research to push harder and to even consider pursuit of graduate degrees.

Catrina was not alone in her expectation that she would go further with her education. When selecting her major, she considered what fields she could go the furthest in.

[I]t's my passion to do it, it's just that, and also and then also just trying to find a major that I knew that I could get a doctorate in, because I was interested in going to the highest level that I could.

This desire to take things to the highest level she could drove Catrina, Danielle, Samantha, Phoenix, and Brett to have distinct plans for attending graduate school within a year of graduation. Others knew that they were interested in pursuing graduate education but had not yet set forth concrete plans for the attainment of a graduate degree. There was yet another group of women who had never considered graduate study, but at the time of the interview had begun to turn the idea over in their minds. Lily, Queen and Sally all expressed the thought that their undergraduate study had made them aware of how much more there was to learn and open to the possibility that they might pursue further degrees at some later point. Sally's description of her own growth as a part of her academic progress indicates that her priorities might be shifting.

But since I've been at [university], ... I've done so many things that I never thought I could do and so like I am kind of like considering [local design school] for grad school. And it's like I said, I never thought I would do that. I'm thinking about it.

Susie's developing self awareness allowed her to consider academic options beyond her undergraduate degree. Utilizing her knowledge of her life's limitations and opportunities allowed each of the women in this study to best balance what obligations she could reasonably take on. This applied to the choice that each made to attend community college in light of the geographical and financial limitations of their lives. Self awareness also impacted their choice of major and even their desires to attend graduate school. Having self awareness helped the women in this study to fit their educational endeavors within the context of their otherwise full lives.

*Pragmatism.*

As a working mother returning to school, many of the women in this group felt that they had to make choices about academic environments in a very pragmatic way. While some may have wished to attend college in other locations, the physical, financial and time constraints that their status as a primary caretaker required simply did not allow them to follow those dreams. Brett is one such example. While she might have wished to attend school somewhere besides her current university, she was limited in her university choices because of her need to have family close by to offer child care. “[Son] actually picks on me. He’s like well if you’re such a big Tar Heels fan, mom, why aren’t you going to UNC. Ah, because I can’t. We don’t have anybody in Chapel Hill to babysit.” This pragmatism takes several forms—many women chose universities close to their homes and families, convenience of attendance (such as being close to work, or offering online degrees) and many considered how many of their courses from previous college classes would transfer in to the university. Autumn was concerned with cost when she looked at her options for college. In addition to the cost, she was also intentional in her choice to be close to her family.

[O]ne was it was it was still around you know, my family. I didn’t want to move too far away especially with everything that was going on. Um, you know, at the time, just comparing colleges cost-wise, [university] was a little less expensive even being a state school compared to [alternative university], there was still a difference in

tuition. So you know, that was a little less expensive.... [and] it's not going to take me a long time to complete my degree.

Family and geography were also very important to Danielle, who wanted to be close to her twin sister. Geography was a critical part of Samantha's decision making process when selecting her university, however, her choice was impacted by where her child was enrolled in school because she needed to plan her academics around dropping him off.

[University] was the only school I applied to um because it was the only one that I knew I could feasibly commute back and forth to and have my son in school in ... County. I have to drop him off at 8 in the morning and pick him up at 3. There is only so many classes you can squeeze in on top of the commute. An hour there and an hour back, five days a week...

Convenience played a large role in Sara's choice to attend an online university.

“[Online university] is easy because, ... I can do my homework when the kids are asleep or I can take my laptop to work and do it on my breaks at work or because I work nights.” Lily also chose her college partially because it was convenient. Because she did not drive, her college selection was more limited than some.

I don't drive so I really wanted to go to [neighboring university] but just to get there would have been so hard. So it just sort of added like 5 extra hours of traveling to my day. So, um, that was another reason just because it was convenient... The bus right up on [street]. Takes me straight there.

College selection was not the only time when women in this study had to be pragmatic. Several of the women in this study shared that one of the aspects of knowing themselves was to know what they could and could not handle. This was particularly relevant within the arena of occasionally needing to lower her expectations of herself. While each of the women in this study wished to excel in all areas of their lives, many had come to the realization that in order to maintain their sanity and complete some of their many tasks, they were going to need to lower their own expectations of what should and needed to be done. K.B. spoke about how she had to lower her expectations of herself relative to keeping up with laundry.

I will get it stuck in my head that we have to have the laundry done this evening and that's in fact, not essential and we can go to bed without the laundry being done. And unfortunately, sometimes that means that the laundry isn't done until, until a week later and we are digging down into the bottom of the barrel in the clean underwear drawer but um, but the idea of changing my expectations and getting down to the very bare minimum of (laughter) what I can get by with.

While K.B. laughs about needing to be willing to accept less from herself, it is this skill that allows her to make the most of what precious time she has. Lily came to a similar realization that in order to accomplish all that she needed to, she needed to give herself a bit of a break and not expect perfection in her schoolwork.

I guess just giving myself like some room to like make mistakes and not be perfect. You know, I realized that okay, this is good enough. You know, my paper isn't

perfect but it's done and it should get me a good grade and so it, you know, like just, yeah, like letting myself not be perfect...Just because you know there is just not enough time sometimes to get everything done perfect. So it's like ... you do one thing perfect and the other thing not at all. You know, or you can do both things kind of in the middle...

Phoenix also found that middle ground for her was to eliminate her study time and to not purchase her textbooks. While she wished that she could give her studies the time needed for her to regain her 4.0 GPA, she gave herself permission to 'let things slide' in this area of her life.

I stopped buying textbooks a long time ago. Because I never read them, I never had time. It's about the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3rd semester at UNCW is when I just decided why keep buying them if you're not going to read them. I don't study... I would love to still be that 4.0 GPA. Now it's like a 3 right now. And I am kind of glad that it is. I am surprised that it's that good. Like I said, I am happy if I pass these days because but it's like a 2.8 or 3, somewhere out there. So I think that's accomplished a lot just saying that I can still, you know, hold that ground and not study.

Valeria also lowered her expectations of herself within her home life in order to make time to complete her academic obligations. She gave herself permission to use the cleaners to get her laundry done so that she could spend the time she needed to complete her assignments. "If I need to send their clothes out to be washed and I don't have time to wash

them, then I can send them out to be washed.” Eliza also made a choice to pay for help to accomplish household tasks like cleaning her house.

Beyond lending a sense of pragmatism to getting housework or homework done, having to balance multiple roles caused single mothers who took part in this research to take a longer view of priorities. Eliza reflected on how motherhood gave her a different perspective on her coursework in terms of what she needed to do in order to be successful. She also felt that her sons were a big consideration when she considered her future plans, both academically and beyond.

Your priorities are different. Um, you take school seriously in a different way. I think you see the long-term implications a little bit more, you don't obsess about the day-to-day things, um, of the individual paper, ...you are more confident in your ability to kind of think on the fly. Out of, out of necessity but you become in tune to doing that so that if you have to do a paper in two hours, you don't panic. You just do it. And the results are what they are and you don't really stress it. So I guess, it's a priority thing mainly. Values are completely different... [Y]our goals are never your own goals completely. You always have to consider other people within those goals so your outlook is a lot different. Like I'm not thinking of when I graduate I'll do x, y, z. It's like when I graduate I will do this because it will accomplish these multiple goals or because it will enable me to work a job that gives me enough money to support my children's education versus because it will let me travel.

As a strategy to balance their multiple roles, the women in this study needed to be pragmatic. This meant that they made choices about where their time and energies were best spent, sometimes sacrificing the amount of time they had to do a paper, sometimes the sacrifice was in the form of being willing to eat fast food instead of cook, or being willing to tolerate a messy house for longer than was desirable. In these ways the women in this study were lowering their expectations of themselves to balance their often competing priorities, and account for the many pulls on their time.

As a strategy to balance their multiple obligations, women who were interviewed for this research relied on their knowledge of themselves—their abilities, their limits and their own shortcomings. In order to know what sorts of job to accept, how long it might take to write a paper or how much time they needed to budget to give a child a bath, for example, each woman needed to know her own body and the amount of stamina she had and could expend towards the given task. Beyond being aware of her own health and its impact on what she could and could not do, each relied upon her own knowledge of the requirements of her life and its obligations to make choices about her education. Oftentimes those choices centered around not only awareness of her skills and interests (used to guide major selection) but also around the practical concerns of being a mother who worked—how to get a child to school or where she could rely on family for child care. Beyond being aware of the limitations of her life for the purpose of making educational choices, they were aware of what they could and could not expect of themselves from a practical perspective. This self awareness allowed many of the women in the study to let go of unhealthy expectations of

what she should be able to accomplish. Self awareness of this sort allowed women who were already overcommitted release some expectations around academic excellence or levels of cleanliness in order to balance the multitude of obligations which were a part of her daily life as a working mother who attends college.

### **Overcoming Time Scarcity.**

The willingness that the study participants showed to lower their expectations was one of many ways that they were continually prioritizing where and how they spent their time. In order to balance the obligations of motherhood with the demands of being a student and worker women in this study worked to make optimal use of their limited time. Many of the women spoke about what will be called time scarcity. This concept is also called 'role overload,' 'role stress,' or 'role strain' within the literature (Gigliotti, 1999; Goode, 1960; Home, 1998). To utilize the term time management would imply that with proper management, it would be feasible for the women in this study to accomplish all of the tasks that their multiple roles require. This would be a misnomer due to the large number of roles these women maintained concurrently. It is considered more apt, therefore to label these conversations about time scarcity because even with appropriate management it is likely that there is not enough time in each day to accomplish everything that they want to at the level that they feel is optimal.

Each woman spoke about her struggle between her several competing priorities. In order to accomplish the many tasks required of a woman who works and attends school multitasking is an essential skill that each woman utilized. While most admitted that they

were not perfect at doing this, beyond multitasking, many women strived to balance their competing priorities. This delicate act of juggling multiple priorities required attention to detail and a willingness to compromise sometimes in terms of either the time given to a task or the quality of the expected outcome. Fortunately there were many times when the women in this study were able to balance their multiple tasks successfully.

*Negotiating between competing priorities.*

Each mother in this study spent time considering the obligations that she had as a working mother who attended college. No matter how efficient or effective she was, there were always multiple priorities which were all important but could not be satisfied concurrently. Queen bemoaned the state of single mothers in the institution because she felt that there was no escaping the challenges and obligations that each had.

That's the hardest thing in the world, to have to work, go to school and be a full time mother because that's what you are. You can't escape being a full time mother. Then you got to put on all those many hats, having that family.

Danielle was succinct when summing up the challenges in her life as a single mother.

“[S]ingle parents, they lose a lot of sleep because you have to work, take care of daughter and go to school.” Autumn was very clear about how being both a mother and a student was a double- edged sword for her. She felt that in some ways, being a mother made her a more dedicated student, while in others, it made her less able to concentrate on her schoolwork at all times.

I think I am a better student because I am more determined. I do want to do better. I want to set a good example for my son. Um, I understand, I mean, I really understand how important it is to get my education. On the flip side of it though, I think it, can sometimes make me a worse student because I have other things that I think about constantly, I have things that impact whether or not I can study or how much time I can put into a paper.

Beth also felt that she was constantly juggling her priorities, feeling that she, too was sometimes a dedicated student and sometimes a dedicated mother but rarely both at once. She struggled with the feeling that she occupied those roles to the detriment of both her academics and her son at different times.

I definitely constantly feel like I am having a pull of my priorities. Even like on days when I have [son] and I have stuff to do and then I try to do that stuff and he wants my attention and then, you know, he's irritable and it makes me a worse student... I feel like, sometimes I don't give [son] the attention that I would like to give him because I am totally distracted by what needs to get done.

Catrina spoke not only about her own academic obligations, she spoke about other important relationships that she felt unable to adequately maintain due to her myriad of other responsibilities.

'Cause the day is just so full, and then when I look in my book bag, it's like, you know, a lot of times I would just pull it out and at least work on a little something. And God forbid if my boyfriend came over there, and I'm like, I'm sorry, cause, he's

sitting there, watching the game, and I'm writing away. And he's like "Are you going to pay me any attention?" I'm like "I can't, I'll call you later" you know, so he's like, "OK, I'm a go home then."

Lily had a hard time taking time away from the important relationships in her life (her son and her son's father) to attend school because she could not see the immediate benefit (unlike paid work). "[I]t's hard to leave your kid and I mean, I am sure you know that. You know, it's just hard and like I said, especially when it's not something where you're bringing in money for." Valeria also spoke of the tenuous balance that she maintained between giving her children attention and attending to her own schoolwork.

Because you feel like you are taking time away from your kids and you have to kind of balance that and yes, I want to sit down with my kindergartner who is just learning how to read and spend two hours with her helping her read "cat", "bat" "fat" and "mat" and "that" but if I don't finish up this midterm, I'm going to get a B and I don't get to. (laughs) I mean, you know, yeah, I wanna take you guys to the movies but if I don't, I'm going to be up until 2:00 tonight taking test and later.

Phoenix felt that finding a balance between her multiple obligations was a very elusive goal. Much like Valeria, she was distressed that she felt that spending time playing or doing something fun with her children was the place where she found herself compromising.

And it's madness trying to balance all these things. You know, just being able to spend some time with your kids is almost impossible. Because when you are at home, you're doing school work, you're doing research for papers or writing papers,

you're doing assignments and you're trying to clean and you're trying to cook and, there is no time left to take kids to the park.

Brett also struggled with the multiple priorities in her life and was very conflicted regarding her choice to be a student as she saw that choice impacting her son.

I became a single mom and it was like, wow, I have all these responsibilities and plus, if I want to make a better life for us, you know, I have all this other stuff I have to do to throw in the mix and it is very overwhelming...I am often unsure of myself, whether I am making the right decisions. Um, if I'm really doing the right things for [son]'s life because I know I could have a job that makes a whole lot more money than what we have right now. And sometimes I wonder is school, you know, is it really going to be better in the long run. Did I make the right choice.

Brett's concern that she has compromised her son's quality of life was echoed by others in the group, however, many felt that the best way to address their competing priorities was to attempt to multitask in order to be more efficient in completing multiple obligations concurrently.

### ***Multitasking.***

"I mean, you have to, you have to be able to juggle many things. Multi-task I guess. You have to be able to juggle anything that comes at you." This quote from Tina summarized the way that most of the women in this study felt they had to operate in order to have any sort of success in managing their multiple roles. Lily hoped that she would get down time at work where she could both do homework and be available as a secretary.

“[J]ust trying to fit in if there is any dead or down time at work, trying to fit in getting any other work done, any other school work done.” Autumn had a similar strategy for accomplishing multiple tasks, but because her job did not require that she be physically present, she chose to do her paid work between her classes.

I have a couple of classes, ah, during class breaks, depending on the day, if I have any, I do a little free lance work and submit it hoping that it gets picked up. Any, for the architecture firm that I work for it’s really small so they call me and say, you know, can you make this call or do this. So, you know, do a little work in between that.

In addition to juggling her academics and her work schedule, Sally spoke about how she was responsible not only for making sure that her daughter’s schedule was maintained as well.

[W]hen it comes to time, I can manage my time a lot better because I am not just managing my homework, I’m managing my household, I’m managing a budget, I’m managing, she has, she has things that she, cheerleading and all this other stuff. She has her own personal schedule that I have to keep up with. So I think because I’m a mom, I can, um I am able to take on a lot just like that mother, that thing of being a mother. I remember my momma having it just, being able to be some type of super woman, you know, just to be able to grab so many things and just run with it.

The idea of SuperMom seems an apt one reviewing all of the conversations with each of these students. While some spoke of maintaining a very strict schedule so that they could accomplish all of their tasks, others discussed needing to juggle many things concurrently. In

order to get all of her homework done, Susie felt that she needed to do her school work both when her son was awake as well as once he went to bed. When he was awake, the process of doing their homework together made her homework take twice as long.

It is very hard but I have to be able to manage him doing his homework and me doing my homework. And a lot of times we sit down and we do our homework together. And because he's 4, I have to help him with his homework. He can't help me with my homework so it's kind of, I'm helping him learn to write his letters so while I am writing my essays, I'm telling him, write A, write B, draw me a circle, draw me a square. And that's, and I mean, I am writing, I'll write a paragraph. And I'm like okay, Listen draw me a circle. He drew his circle and I'm back writing. Oh, mama I'm done. Okay, I'll stop again if I have to. It's juggle, it's a big juggling act for me.

Beth felt that her life as a mother and student was a delicate dance of competing tasks all needing her attention. "I try to get laundry done. And multi-task in those kind of ways ... playing/ working/ going to the grocery store, chores..." Queen also reported having to manage multiple tasks while she was getting her grandsons ready for bed in the evening.

I'd pick the kids up from the day care, went home and I went through and while preparing dinner, I was ... bathing them and while dinner was cooking or whatever, clothes would be washing at the same time, giving them their baths, ... I did kind of all of ...[that] together and then by, in the winter time, by 7:00 o'clock they were in bed.

Within the realm of using multitasking as a way to accomplish several tasks at once, Danielle praised the online classroom as a place that allowed her to tend to multiple priorities. Being able to take online coursework allowed her some leeway to accomplish both academic and household tasks concurrently—making the most of her precious time.

And the classes met once a week and it was for like two hours but I could do it at home. So like right now I have to fix dinner. I could fix dinner and still be in the classroom so I could multi-task a lot better at home than sitting in the classroom. Because my time is really valuable. So it works out really well if I can do things at home. Like I can be typing and in the classroom and helping her with her homework. The sense that there was always another task which needed attention and required time and energy pervaded these interviews. This struggle to give partial attention to many different areas of life was the best way that the women in this study could manage to approximate balance.

***Balancing priorities.***

On the recruitment flier for this study, a woman balanced on a ball and juggled a child, a pot of food, a computer, money, a house and a car. While not all students who were interviewed came into contact with this flier, many did speak to the juggling act or the requirement for balancing their multiple priorities. Sally spoke directly to that juggling act as she assessed the plight of the single mother who had so many things to manage at once.

[I]f you are a single mom and you can go to college, that takes some kind of, ... motivation, but that takes a very special person that can be able to juggle that kind of life and continue to go to school.

Autumn's candid assessment shared that despite her best efforts, finding a balance for her competing priorities was often an elusive goal. She reported that while she maintained the priority of attending her courses, she felt that she was not always as attentive as she would like because she was distracted by the other obligations in her life. "You kind of just have to learn to balance it." Eliza felt that balance was important when she considered her opportunities for paid work that would also accommodate her parenting and working responsibilities.

I did 'odd jobs' that fit into my life as a student or parent. The job had never come first---no career plan but simply a need to work for money and still be able to accomplish my parenting and educational goals.

Lily felt that especially when her son was very young and she was going back to school for the first time at community college, she struggled to balance all of the priorities in her life. "I had to leave my son in day care...And then having to come home and then take care of the house and everything else. So it was just like trying to balance everything..." Tina shared a time when she felt that she had been very successful in walking that tightrope. Tina was quite proud of herself when she was able to not only handle challenging coursework, but also maintain the standard of living that she wanted for her daughter.

[B]y my third semester, when I was hitting a little harder classes and it still, I was still doing it, you know, and being able to handle everything else that was going, I, that was really, you know, I was proud of that.

Much like Tina, Danielle had a very positive experience being able to balance her obligations as a student and as a mother while still being able to partake in the ‘college experience’ around homecoming.

So like I have to balance my life but I still have the college student part of me and I still have the mother part of me. And like for homecoming I was able to do the events and still be mom. And that meant a lot. I am still a college student and I got to go to the homecoming concert and do the homecoming stuff but I also was able to be like a parent, go to PTA meetings in the afternoon and make sure she got to school. So it was good to be able to be both.

Danielle’s experience of balancing her two worlds, college student and mother, is an excellent example of what many of the mothers in this study were looking for; a way to have ‘the college experience’ while remaining true to their role as mother.

As mothers who worked and went to school, women who participated in this study were chronically pressed for time. All worked to overcome this time scarcity by carefully navigating and negotiating between their competing priorities. Many also worked to assure that their time was always being utilized to the fullest by virtue of multitasking in all sorts of ways—often making sure that household tasks were running concurrent with child care responsibilities or academic work. While not always possible, many of the women in this

study shared times when they felt that they had been successful in balancing their multitude of priorities in a way that allowed them to concurrently be student, mother and worker without disadvantaging any of those roles.

Each woman in this study was a student but also a mother, and most were also working. To concurrently occupy those roles required that they be incredibly aware of their own abilities, skills and talents as well as all shortcomings and hang-ups. Only through a critical awareness of her own abilities and the limitations of her state of health (given chronic exhaustion or the stress induced illnesses that many had to cope with) could mothers in this study make choices about their jobs or their academic pursuits. Additionally, it was essential that all take into account the lived reality of life as a working mother attending college as they made selections of their colleges and even majors. Personal preferences, skills and abilities also helped hone major choice. Beyond the educational choices that the mothers in this study made, each had to be incredibly self aware to know what practical concessions would be necessary for her to function. Which areas of her life could she lower her standards on and 'cut herself some slack' so that she could give the time she gained to another important area. That ability to prioritize and be practical about what had to be done and what could be ignored or outsourced was a critical way that study participants overcame time scarcity. The negotiation between those priorities was ongoing and often women resorted to multitasking in order to accomplish their multiple goals. Through this delicate dance of parenting obligations, academic requirements and paid work, these women struck a precarious balance between the multiple and sometimes conflicting roles they all occupied.

## **Conclusion**

Women in this study were incredibly dedicated, diligent, giving people who were very motivated to complete their undergraduate degrees. They worked their way to their chosen universities and were making their way through by relying on themselves and their rich support networks. In order to support themselves in college, these women relied upon and cultivated relationships with family members who could help both financially and with child care. They also found support from children and from bosses and instructors. Within their institution, they found support from financial aid and other services which lightened their financial burdens as well as student support services that focused on enabling them to excel academically. As they worked their way through their bachelor's degree, many felt quite proud of their multitude of accomplishments, both as a parent of smart or kind or giving children and as a student who excelled academically despite a multitude of factors which made excellence challenging at best. Because of the fierce pride that many had in their own abilities, most rejected what they saw as charity and desired instead to earn any academic accommodations they needed.

As our conversations began to focus in on their experience of their academic institution, many felt that they needed to struggle for legitimacy as a parenting student due to the seeming invisibility of their concerns within their university. Despite the support that most found within their institution in terms of financial aid, all shared that the choice to attend college was one fraught with financial hardship. The choice to attend college came with an opportunity cost which precluded (for most) working a full time job, and so our

conversations were full of the concerns of a family on the edge of poverty. Beyond the financial difficulty introduced by poor articulation agreements and unmet financial need not associated directly with college attendance, women in this study were met with a less than cheery welcome at their universities. Within the hallowed walls of academia, women ran into disorganization and course offerings which made it a challenge to work while attending school. Beyond the institutional issues, mothers ran up against instructors who were unaccommodating and colleagues who were insensitive at best and contemptuous of parenting obligations at worse. A chilly climate pervaded the academy predicated both by simple unawareness of the needs of parenting students and sometimes the more malevolent intentional disregard of the stated needs of single mothers. This experience of chilly climate motivated many of the study participants to act, choosing to advocate for the needs of single mothers on campus and within the larger community.

As they resolutely met their academic obligations, women in this study never forgot what most termed their primary role—that of caregiver to their children. They described the challenges of being a student while simultaneously caring for children who placed constant demands on their time, resources and energy. Each shared a sense that the needs of her child/ren occasionally made it difficult to meet her academic obligations at the level she would have liked to. While none complained, or even seemed to feel that this hierarchy of priorities was improper, all noted that motherhood was a full time job, and that her role as a caregiver was her primary priority, for better or worse. Often, putting children first meant

that the women in this study deferred their dreams in order to best meet the needs of their children.

In order to balance the multiple roles of mother, student and worker, women who participated in this research had to be acutely aware of the limitations of their lives as well as their own skills and talents. This self awareness helped them to concurrently manage multiple roles by not overcommitting, but being aware of the multitude of ways she could work within the boundaries of her own limits and abilities to accomplish what needed to be accomplished. For some, significant health issues occurred due to the chronic stress of lack of sleep and multiple obligations. It was particularly important for these women to be aware of what they could and could not reasonably expect of themselves as they strode to be mother, breadwinner and student. As they entered the educational system, the mothers took stock of their lives and made practical choices about what community colleges and universities were within their reach. Once they arrived at their chosen universities, they once again relied upon their knowledge of their skills and abilities to find majors which resonated with their interests and talents. Within the context of attending school, working and caring for children, study respondents had no choice but to be pragmatic about what they could conceivably accomplish given their limited resources and finite amounts of time. For many this meant letting go of unrealistic expectations of themselves as housekeepers, cooks or essayists. This awareness of where her efforts could be most impactful allowed her to prioritize where her time and energy was best spent. This intentional use of time and energy allowed her to overcome the negative impact of time scarcity. She carefully negotiated

between her concurrent roles and made choices about often competing priorities. One of the most often utilized tools to transcend the sense of constantly competing priorities was to multitask and accomplish multiple tasks concurrently. Through prioritizing and remaining continually aware of her own strengths and limitations, women in this study reported successfully balancing the myriad of roles that she held as she worked, cared for her children and attended college.

Women in this study worked hard within the contexts of their multiple obligations, concurrently being mother, student and worker, and they did this with grace. They encountered challenges from their institutions and from their peers, yet they did not let these obstacles deter them from their goal of a college degree. They cared for and nurtured children, read and created scholarship and worked to feed their families. This study highlights the many ways in which single mothers who work and attend college are extraordinary, but also highlights several areas where institutions and individuals can reach out to provide better support. The findings of this research in many ways corroborate the findings of other research, but also bring to light new knowledge. The conclusions of this research and connections to current scholarship will be discussed in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 6 -- Discussion and Conclusions**

This study was undertaken to highlight and celebrate the ways in which women who were concurrently mothers, workers and students successfully balanced those multiple roles in such a way as to complete undergraduate degrees. Only five of the sixteen women in the study had completed undergraduate degrees at the time of the interviews (two of whom were still pursuing a second major and two of whom were enrolled in graduate study). Follow-up contact has shown that eleven have gone on to complete their degree. Not all study participants were available for contact, so this information is incomplete, but four were still enrolled (one was completing her second major) in undergraduate study and a fourth was taking a break, but planned to return. This research focused on highlighting positive information and showcasing the success of single mothers in college. In the midst of those stories, however, were several conversations about what universities are not doing well and how they could better serve parenting students. Each of these aspects of the data will be discussed, however, to remain true to the aim of appreciating achievement, more attention will be placed on those stories which showcase success. This is also being done because while there is a plethora of literature regarding what universities are not doing well, there is a dearth of information on services that support and enhance the experiences of single mothers in college. Relative to the literature within the field, all study findings will be integrated with the information that was presented in the literature review.

This chapter is organized around the themes presented in the previous chapter. Each theme will be presented as a heading and the findings from that theme and its subthemes will

be discussed within the context of the literature that appeared in the literature review. The themes identified in the previous chapter were “Finding her way to and through college,” “Struggle for legitimacy as a parenting student” and “Striving for balance between multiple roles”. Within “Finding her way to and through college,” information regarding motivation, support and pride will be synthesized. Under “Struggle for legitimacy as a parenting student”, topics surrounding voicelessness and invisibility within the institution will be covered as well as the challenges of motherhood within the context of her life as a student and worker. Lastly, under the subject of “Striving for balance between multiple roles”, self awareness and time scarcity will be discussed.

### **Finding her way to and through college**

This theme relates to the first research question in this study: “What are the experiences of single mother who work and attend college as they navigate the educational system in pursuit of the baccalaureate degree”. Once they made the choice to attend college, they experienced support from various sources from family to educational programs as they made their way through the educational system. Beyond those experiences of support, women in this study also ran into difficulties, which will be discussed further in the next theme presented later in this chapter.

The women in this study chose to complete baccalaureate degrees for various reasons, but upon arrival to their campuses, both community college and university, they sought assistance from their institutions. Many also looked to family and friends for support for their academic and parenting obligations. Once they had found support from their

community and their university, they often excelled in their classroom work. This led to feelings of pride not only in their academics, but also in their own abilities as mothers.

**Motivating factors.**

Undertaking undergraduate study for the first time or re-enrolling in undergraduate study after having a child is often motivated by a variety of factors. For some, the opportunity to act as a role model for her children in regards to the importance of education was a motivating factor. “I wanted him [son] to be able to look up to his mama and say, My mama is... doing something. My mama has got her degree.” Modeling good behavior for children and teaching them to value the importance of education was a consistent theme in the research of the Parents as Scholars program in Maine (Butler & Duprez, 2002; Butler, Duprez & Smith, 2003; Duprez, Butler & Smith, 2004). Some parents pursue undergraduate education largely for the credentialing power of the degree (Mathur, 2004; Strawn, 2007). While not all of the women in this study felt that way, some expressed their purpose for attending college was “to get that piece of paper and go to the next thing.” While that level of cynicism regarding education was uncommon, the matter of fact realization that credentials were important was common. As Brett pointed out: “...knowledge has always been important to me but credentials are very important in this world and ... you know, I could get all the knowledge I wanted from the public library, but nobody would care.” Previous research shows that attaining education that can be documented helps low income individuals to attain professional positions, a fact which many of the women in this study clearly articulated (Mathur, 2004; Watts & Schaefer, 2004).

Her displeasure with an unfulfilling service sector job spurred one participant into action to seek her degree. “My goal was to still get a degree. I had to because I [was] working at Denny’s at a restaurant, third shift, and it was hard. People were drunk and abusive...” Some women completed associate’s degrees and opted to continue to pursue their undergraduate degree because of the lack of promise that they saw in their career options with only an associate’s degree. “I didn’t feel like there was anything I could do with it [associate’s degree] that I wasn’t already doing which was working in a call center.” The dissatisfaction with blue collar or low wage work is a common theme within the literature regarding low income mothers seeking additional education (Miewald, 2004; Riemer, 2004). This focus on career options was often driven by the recognition of disparities between the earning potential provided by an undergraduate degree as opposed to the earning potential without the degree (Kienzl, 2004; Strawn, 2007). This faith in the earning potential of an undergraduate degree was well placed (Duke & Strawn, 2007; Kienzl, 2004; Mathur, 2004; Zhan & Pandey, 2004).

This financial focus was largely driven by their desire to provide for themselves and their children. Research has shown that workers without a degree beyond high school earn 28% less than those with associate’s degrees and 39% less than those with bachelor’s degrees (Grubb, 1999; Kane & Rouse, 1995). As the primary providers for their families, single mothers need to exhibit the potential to earn enough to feed, clothe and shelter both themselves and their children. “I couldn’t provide for my family on minimum wage... There are so few jobs that somebody without a degree can do...” This perception that taking care

of their family required the earning power of a degree was consistent across the study participants, and is reflected in the literature (Kahn, Butler, Duprez & Polakow, 2004; Miewald, 2004). The realization that “I couldn’t make it off of a high school degree’s education paycheck and provide for my daughter the way I want to.” was the a primary motivation for single mothers to begin considering further education (Barrett, 2005; Katz, 2002; Van Stone, Nelson & Niemann, 1994).

Multiple studies have verified that non-traditional students tend to pursue higher education with a financial goal (Chao & Goode, 2004; Kahn & Polakow, 2004, Kienzl, 2004 & Strawn, 2007). According to Kahn & Polakow (2004), post-secondary education provides opportunities for single mothers to assure economic independence long term—which in turn, offers the opportunity for single mothers to provide for their families rather than rely on government subsidy programs. While few of the mothers in this study utilized government assistance, data regarding their desire to ‘not take charity’ indicates that the attitude within this study population is similar. Single mothers are interested in advancing their career opportunities and often select education as a method for providing that advancement (Jennings, 2004; Riemer, 2004; Watts & Schaefer, 2004). It is the attainment of credentials which enables those avenues of possible career advancement to open and provide the financial benefits that the women in this study expect (Mathur, 2004; Strawn, 2007). Mothers in this study pursued undergraduate degrees not only to model the importance of gaining education to their offspring, but also to improve their career opportunities—something they knew would improve their wage earning capabilities. While this financial

motivation might have urged mothers to begin their degrees, they needed more than the desire for a larger paycheck to remain engaged. In order to remain engaged and to be successful, mothers in this study had to maintain and cultivate relationships with family members, employers and faculty. Having made the choice to attend college, mothers in this study sought support from important individuals to be successful, an idea which the next section of this paper will explore further.

### **Support Network.**

As they made their way through the educational system, the single mothers in this study looked to their own fortitude, family, employers, faculty and their respective institutions for support. The reliance on family and community support is well documented within the literature on single mothers pursuing post-secondary education (Vann-Johnson, 2004; Van Stone, Nelson & Niemann, 1994). This support took a variety of forms, reliance on her faith, employers who provided flexible schedules, financial support from family members or recognition of a job well done by the institution. Without this sort of encouragement and practical support, many of the women in this study felt that they would not have been able to persist and succeed. The vital importance of a strong support network has been illustrated throughout the literature (Home, 1998; Schlossberg et. al., 1995; Vann-Johnson, 2004).

In times of challenge some women searched for strength within the context of their lives as Christians. “I have a wonderful relationship with the Lord. He has been, he is my, my rock. He is the reason I am here today.” This reliance on their faith was mentioned only

in passing in other literature, where one mother spoke of the support she received from her church and her own faith as she pursued her education (Clarke & Peterson, 2004). Other women focused on their own role within their persistence as a sort of ‘cheerleader’ for themselves. She fulfilled this role for herself either by simply believing that she could succeed or simply not allowing herself to fail. “I said I was going to do this ... and that’s just all it took. Just raw, sheer, pull up your boot straps, ... you’ve done everything else and now it’s time for you to do this.” This faith in herself and belief that she would be successful is not discussed within the literature on single mothers pursuing post-secondary education reviewed for this study. This is likely due to the strong tendency towards sociological research and review within the current scholarship on single mothers in post-secondary education—a tendency to look at the larger supports and barriers, as opposed to individual strengths. This focus leads such studies to potentially overlook psychological support mechanisms such as positive self talk and determination.

Support from families was seen as a critical factor supporting success in college for single parents (Vann-Johnson, 2004; Van Stone, Nelson & Niemann, 1994). As they looked to their families to support them, they found support not only from their families of origin, but also from their children. Sometimes families of origin provided assistance with child care or money, yet sometimes encouragement was all that families could offer. In some cases, women found all three forms of support from family—“my Grandmother [provides support] by keeping my son for me and ... my Dad helped me get a new car and ... my Mom listens.” Family support has been found to be a contributing factor in the educational

progression of single mothers (Vann-Johnson, 2004; Van Stone, Nelson & Niemann, 1994). In addition to those practical supports, oftentimes the children were sources of emotional support as well. “My kids, they’re like ‘Mommy, we’re so happy that you’re doing this’...”. Feelings of pride from children were cited as supports for some of the women in Ratner’s (2004) study. Within Burns, Scott, Cooney & Gleeson study (1988), twenty percent of single mothers cited their children as support, the most common source of support cited for single mothers. While most children provided emotional support and the occasional ice cream cone for encouragement, some children helped around the house. “She helps me cook, she helps me clean, she cleans her and her brother’s room. She sweeps, she does dishes.” Holyfield’s (2002) study is the only study reviewed for this research which cites (albeit anecdotally) the support that single parents find in an older child who helps to care for siblings. Studies mention the support which individual parents find in the pride their children show in their accomplishments, however, this phenomenon is not well explored in the literature (Butler & Deprez, 2002; Ratner, 2004). Many studies indicate that a commonly cited reason for undertaking post-secondary study is to improve her life and the life of her children, aside from Van Stone, Nelson and Niemann (1994), however, improving her children’s life is not explored as a support within those studies (Holyfield, 2002; Kahn & Polakow, 2004; Ratner, 2004).

Beyond the support of their families, many women also found support from their professors who offered flexibility with assignments or attendance policies to allow single mothers to manage their multiple priorities. Faculty awareness of individual circumstances

was seen as a critical component to making mothers in college feel welcomed and valued (Sharp, 2004). Employers also provided support through the recognizing multiple responsibilities and accommodating them. This flexibility either within paid work, or in the classroom greatly improved single mother's ability to manage their multiple roles. "They've allowed me to work from home doing things" and other employers "let me come into work for a couple of hours and then go take my class and then come back to work". This sort of flexibility allowed her to be effective as both a mother and a student without having to choose where to put her time and attention. Support from employers is also essential in assuring educational persistence for low income workers (Kahn & Polakow, 2004; Morris & Coley, 2004; Newman, 1999; Newman & Tan Chen, 2007). The same sort of flexibility was present within the classroom when professors "understood that although I may not be ill, my daughter might be ill and I have to miss school for that." In addition to providing excused absences, sometimes women were able to bring their child or children with them to campus. "I took my children to class with me a number of times"; an accommodation which allowed her to avoid childcare expenses. These small concessions to her role as a mother allowed the women in this study to maintain a commitment to their academics as well as to provide for their families. Unfortunately, as Sharp (2004) points out: "The classroom domain, a domain in which all students necessarily participate, remains largely autonomous of university administrations, although the culture of the institution influences faculty recruitment and classroom practices." (p. 127). Sadly, this means that such concessions or accommodations are made on an individual level, and any mother could be denied or accommodated based

solely on how the individual professor perceives their obligation as instructor (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). This haphazard approach to accommodation means that there is no standard which a mother can rely upon, meaning that the same woman can have vastly different experiences within the same semester based solely upon the instructor she is dealing with at any given point.

Institutional support, both financial and academic, was a critical component of success for the study participants. Financial support services ranged from student health services to on campus and/or subsidized child care. Many of the women were grateful for “financial aid, that ... I’m eligible for as a mother that I wouldn’t be eligible for otherwise”. Providing financial aid to single mothers drastically increases the ability of low income mothers to attend college (Heller & Bjorkland, 2004). The financial aid refund check not only provided support to purchase text books and pay tuition, but for some women gave them the flexibility to utilize those loan monies to “float this household.” The practice of using refund monies to apply to expenses outside of the realm of education is a trend that has been reported within the literature (Bjorkland, 1999; Heller & Bjorkland, 2004; Kaufmann, Sharp, Miller & Waltman, 2000; Vann-Johnson, 2004). While the services which are currently offered for the financial support of undergraduate mothers are helpful, an important gap between what is needed and what is provided becomes evident when one considers the common practice of utilizing financial aid refunds to help with household expenses (Bjorkland, 1999; Heller & Bjorkland, 2004; Kaufmann, Sharp, Miller & Waltman, 2000). Given this shortfall, the practice of having emergency loan programs, and grants for use in

paying utilities or rent can contribute significantly to not only the retention of single parents, but their perceptions that they are important to their university and their needs are understood and taken into account (Sharp, 2004). Beyond the provision of actual funds, several mothers benefited from university services which they received as a part of their fees—allowing them a type of ‘safety net.’ “I got sick last week, because right now I don’t have any medical insurance, ...[I went to] the student health services”.

This discussion of the use of student resources such as student health, print quota, family housing and other financial supports or subsidies provided by the institution are largely lacking from the current literature, aside from information regarding child care subsidies. Perhaps because such resources are not geared specifically at single parents or parenting students, these supports have not been highlighted in previous studies which have looked at the experiences of single mothers in college. Despite the fact that programs such as student health, family housing, print quota or the services of a counseling center not applying solely to single mothers, they do provide a form of support for these students. Additionally, because much of the research that has been done on single mothers in post secondary education focuses on community colleges, it is possible that these services were not cited as support because often, these services are not available at a community college level.

Several mothers took advantage of subsidized day care services, which presented significant cost savings over traditional child care centers. Many community colleges offered “basically free day care. It was based on your income. I think I paid like 7 bucks a week.” As compared with the average cost of day care within the US which is roughly \$150

a week, this represents significant savings to the mothers who were eligible (costhelper.com, 2007). Affordable childcare is essential for women pursuing undergraduate education, whether single parents or partnered parents (Mather, 2004; Kaufmann, Sharp, Miller & Waltman, 2000). The assistance which universities offer in terms of securing child care for children under five is also critical to the retention of single mothers, and by the same token, the most often cited barrier to continued persistence within the university system is lack of adequate or affordable child care (Austin & McDermott, 2004; Butler, Duprez & Smith, 2003; Clarke & Peterson, 2004; Kahn, Polakow, 2004; Mather, 2004; Sharp, 2004).

Institutions also provided academic support services like academic advising, tutorial services and academic recognition such as Dean's List. In addition to these institutionally supported programs, several women benefitted from student organizations which provided support in various forms to the students at their universities. These ranged from programs for commuter students to support for non-traditional students. The parenting students group "would offer babysitting so you could study, ...[and] little pot luck dinners so that you could sit around and just socialize with other parents". This sort of institutional support was critical to the success of single mother's according to Sharpe (2004):

Interacting with an institutional agent or program that teaches students how to be students and contributes to their sense of belonging to the educational community can be instrumental in transforming these students' identity. Many of the students describe how coming to college and finding institutional support were central to their

feeling positively about themselves in general and about their ability to succeed in their educational endeavors. (p. 126)

Some women reported that the scheduling flexibility introduced by online or hybrid course formats facilitated academic success. Likewise, classes scheduled during evenings and weekends or online best accommodated the demands of personal and professional responsibilities. “I was able to stay home ... with my daughter and take the on-line classes ... which eliminated day care concerns”. Vann-Johnson (2004) highlighted the importance of providing flexible course scheduling opportunities for single parents who must work to support their families. Home’s (1998) study found that taking advantage of online course offerings decreased feelings of role strain in her study of female graduate students.

Institutional support of her multiple roles in the form of support services allowed women in this study to concentrate on their academics while still being aware of their other obligations. “I needed ...tutoring, which was free...through that program. ... [T]hey also ... helped you set up a plan for ... getting to a four year college”. Sharp (2004) articulated the critical importance of having programs and institutional agents as support mechanisms to allow single mothers to integrate into the university system. Van Stone, Nelson and Niemann (1994) showed that programs to support single mothers not only provided community but also allowed those mothers to inform one another of campus resources such as the counseling center. Provision of support services in the form of financial aid and child care assistance are critical components of the retention and support of single mothers in college (Duprez, Butler & Smith, 2004; Heller & Bjorklund, 2004; Kahn & Polakow, 2004).

These supports for her academic progress were incredibly important to the women within the study, as was institutional recognition of the hard work she was doing. “I got a letter in the mail... I made ... Dean’s list and that ... was so exciting to me”. The concept of recognizing academic excellence is touched upon in Miewald’s (2004) study of single mothers in rural Appalachia, where she notes that women are proud of their achievement of Phi Beta Kappa in light of their single mother status. The current literature surrounding institutional support for single mothers rests largely on what can be termed ‘hygiene’ factors that are important for access, but less tied to motivation (ex: transportation, financial aid) (Herzberg, 1964).

This study is one of few which identifies the importance of the motivational factor of institutional recognition that made women feel that their institutions were invested in their success. This was a critical component for single mothers to experience Schlossberg’s concept of ‘mattering’ (Schlossberg, 1989). By getting recognition in the form of a scholarship, Dean’s List or an honor society, a single mother can have the experience that she matters to her institution, and that someone at the institutional level notices the hard work that she is putting forth. This is an important factor in her sense of ownership and belonging, and therefore retention (Miewald, 2004; Tinto, 1993). Single mothers have a great deal of pride in the work that they are doing academically in addition to their other responsibilities. Institutional programs such as Phi Beta Kappa and Dean’s List offer recognition of this dedication to academics, and universities would do well to identify additional areas that

highlight the efforts of single mothers, contributing to their sense of being valued within their university community.

### **Feelings of Pride.**

A common theme voiced by the women in this study was pride in their efforts and their accomplishments. A form of pride that was voiced was pride in her child or children and their accomplishments; a disguised form of pride in her own mothering abilities. Another form of pride that women mentioned was pride in her own academic prowess, particularly in light of the multitude of other responsibilities she was facing. The last form of pride was more of a righteous indignation at being underestimated.

All of the women in this study cared for children, and most shared personal stories about their children with the interviewer. As a part of that conversation, many expressed pride in their children, although only one made the direct attribution to her own parenting skills. “[W]atching her grow and ... watching her transition, ... there are things that I teach her about life and ... I think the person she is, is due to the fact that I am in college.” While this mother was the only one who took credit for her child’s success, many mothers wanted to share their child/children’s accomplishments. “[A]ll my children are very talented. And when you have children that are over-achievers ...there are times that you have to pay.” This mother chose to couch her pride in her children’s gifts in terms of a complaint regarding the expense of extracurricular activities, however, the pride in her children was evident as she spoke about them and introduced them to the interviewer. Whether it was to show off a picture or share stories about her child’s extracurricular experiences, the pride that these

mothers had in their children was evident. Jenning's (2004) study of single mothers on welfare who were in high school or college found that her study participants perceived themselves as 'good' mothers for choosing to pursue education as opposed to 'laying around making babies'. While this touches the concept of being a good mother, or having pride in her choices, this does not truly do justice to the pride women in this study displayed. To my great surprise, pride in children or pride in her parenting abilities is largely absent within the literature on single mothers pursuing post-secondary study. Within the interviews, this pride in her children was never asked about explicitly. The questions which elicited responses full of pride varied, however, there was a sense from almost all study participants that they were very proud of the children they had raised, and by extension, their own ability as parents.

Academics were clearly a central part of these women's lives due to the fact that almost all were considered full time students. Given responsibilities surrounding childcare, academics and work, the women who were academically successful were understandably proud of their achievements. "I work full time and I go to school full time and I'm on the dean's list". It is in addition to their parenting duties and their paid work that these women carried out their academic coursework, however, many not only did the work, they did it exceptionally well—something they were understandably quite proud of. Women who are able to succeed academically despite the multiple obstacles in their academic pathway often exhibit pride in their ability to overcome the multitude of difficulties they encounter (Bjorkland, 1999; Haleman, 2004; Heller & Bjorkland, 2004; Kaufmann, Sharp, Miller & Waltman, 2000). It was perhaps her pride in her own academics that made the suggestion

that she might have cheated sting so violently for this study participant. “[B]ecause my paper ... read as if I bought it... I was working and going to school and raising my two kids and you going to come up there with something like that to me.” This affront not only to her dignity but also to her ethics wounded her well founded pride in her writing abilities. This frustration with being underestimated, assumed to be lazy, or presumed unworthy of help due to her status as a single mother was pervasive and found to be detrimental to the woman’s self esteem and willingness to continue her education in a place where she did not feel valued (Clark & Peterson, 2004; Haleman, 2004; Sharp, 2004).

Along with her pride in her parenting and academic abilities, many of the study participants had a sense of pride which was frustrated or hurt by her perceptions of others charity towards her for having a child as a single parent. Having this fact highlighted served to alienate and aggravate many of the women in the study, as opposed to the potential intention of praising her for the work she was clearly doing so well. “[P]eople would say it’s great what you’re doing, ... how do you manage to do all that but yet nobody offered any support.” It was this sympathy without any intention to assist behind it that many of the women in this study objected to vehemently.

Beyond the frustration at the perceived pity, many women expressed an earnest desire to earn any accommodation which they were provided. This desire to do for themselves and not be ‘done for’ was clear—as articulated by this mother. “So the last thing I want is for anybody to give me anything because I have a kid.” The strong desire to earn accommodation was not that surprising, but does not have any real grounding in the literature

reviewed for this study. Holyfield's (2002) exploration of the Single Parent Scholarship Fund in Arkansas highlighted the fact that the program was not an entitlement but a scholarship, and she made reference to her own feelings as a scholarship recipient relative to being grateful to *earn* accommodation. Beyond Holyfield's work, there is not specific mention of wanting to earn accommodation, however, there is a great deal of literature which supports the fact that single mothers on welfare wish to earn their way (Holyfield, 2002; Ratner, 2004; Watts & Schaefer, 2004).

While the women in this study were not welfare recipients, per se, many did disclose financial difficulty, indicating the same sort of rejection of a 'handout'. The resistance to being essentialized as a single mother who was managing multiple priorities was a surprising finding for me—and caused me some consternation. Going into the research, part of my unspoken objective was to highlight for single mothers the numerous responsibilities that they were juggling yet managing to have some success. This feedback made me rethink how I articulated my respect for them. While I still articulated my gratefulness for their time at the conclusion of the interview, I did not couch that in terms of the multiple role obligations I knew that she was juggling in order to speak with me. Additionally, when I set up time and place for interviews, I took great pains to ask the interviewee for her suggestion for time and place, and to make it clear that she was welcome to bring her child along. In these ways I was attempting to normalize her status as a mother, or at least not alienate her through my first verbal encounter.

Women in this study were a proud group—proud of their efforts towards improving their own life and the lives of their children. They chose to pursue education either as a positive example of the importance of education or because of the career and financial implications the undergraduate degree had for being able to support a family. In order to be successful at this transition to and through college, study participants relied on their own determination and faith, their families of origin, their children and their institutions. Within the institution they were grateful for programs which helped to ease the significant financial burden of attending college while caring for a child. Mothers in this study were also grateful for the student support services encountered which supported academic success and highlighted academic excellence. The pride that a letter heralding Dean's List honors brought was just one of many forms of pride the women in this study felt, from pride in their child (therefore parenting abilities), pride in her academic accomplishments and indignation at being underestimated.

### **Struggle for legitimacy as a parenting student.**

Oftentimes women in this study struggled to feel that they were important within their institution. These negative feelings present the other aspects of the first research question not covered in the previous section on support. This research question explored “What are the experiences of single mothers who work and attend college as they navigate the educational system in pursuit of the baccalaureate degree”. These feelings of invisibility and disenfranchisement made them feel unwelcome within the context of their university and often made them feel that they were unimportant. Given that 17.2% of community college

students are single parents (6.3% of public university students, and 9.0% of public not for profit students are single parents), this group is clearly a legitimate and important portion of the population of students pursuing post-secondary education (Department of Education, 2003-2004). According to Vann-Johnson (2004), “More women (69%) than men (30%) reported being single parents. (p.1)” These data indicate that ignoring or disenfranchising this group of students is not only unkind, but financially unwise, as these proportions continue to rise each year.

In addition to the challenges of feeling voiceless and invisible, the women in this study labored to accommodate their full time job of mother. This created multiple challenges to her academic work and often her attempts to reconcile her roles of mother, worker and student left her feeling overwhelmed and defeated. As a reaction to these feelings of defeat, humiliation and neglect, many women took on a role of advocate for other single mothers, becoming active agents of change on their campus or beyond within the larger community to which she belonged.

### **Invisibility within the institution.**

As discussed at the outset of this chapter, the aim of this research is to focus on areas within the lives of single mothers in college where they met with success and accommodation. While that remains the focus, it would be inaccurate and dishonest to ignore the information which was gained regarding the challenges single mothers in college faced. This section on invisibility within the institution contains information regarding

barriers and struggles faced as the mothers in this study grappled for legitimacy as parenting students in their respective institutions.

While not all of the information represented here is negative, many of the challenges and difficulties reflected to me by these parents are presented. Interestingly, there were several areas in which some women found support in the previous section, yet also felt stress or challenge, leading me to address both of these emotions and experiences around the topic. For example, within the previous section, the importance of financial aid and other supports was presented, in this section the stress and challenge of living at or below the poverty line and the debt burden required to attend school will be presented. Within the previous section, children were seen as a source of support, either for their pride in their mother's efforts or as a physical help with household chores—in this section, the challenge of continually remaining aware of and responsive to the needs of a child lead to 'downsized dreams' (Ratner, 2004). This seeming paradox represents a reality which encapsulates the good with the bad. Concurrently they feel gratefulness to have financial aid which allowed them to pursue their dreams of education while also harboring chronic concerns regarding if and when power to their home might be discontinued. These shades of grey present an accurate picture which acknowledges that while children are the pride of their mother's lives, they put restrictions on what she can accomplish, and how long it might take her to accomplish her goals. Both of these truths exist together—utter devotion to her children, but a quiet realization that having children makes her wants and needs secondary at best.

In the previous chapter, many women in this study struggled with the expenses that college education introduced (Heller & Bjorklund, 2004; Vann-Johnson, 2004). To remain enrolled in college was a continual choice for many of these students. “I don’t know how I am going to pay the power bill, ...[and I] debate with myself about whether or not I will be able to make it through this semester without dropping out”. Along with the concern for meeting basic living expenses, all shared that to attend college had required that they take on a large burden of debt. “I am afraid that I’m going to accumulate so much loans, it’s going to defeat the purpose of me working so hard to be here.” All struggled with chronic concern for how they would meet their own and their children’s basic needs while attending college full time. Multiple studies have shown that attending college is an incredible hardship financially for low income single mothers (Heller & Bjorklund, 2004; Ratner, 2004; Sharp, 2004; Watts & Schaefer, 2004; Zhan & Pandey, 2004).

Many of the scholars who publish on issues surrounding single mothers within post-secondary education identify the financial hardship which comes with the choice to pursue education beyond high school (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Heller & Bjorklund, 2004; Sharp, 2004; Watts & Schaefer, 2004). “The student financial aid system does not take into account the expense of caring for children. Correcting this inequity would... help women on welfare get resource to support their families while going to school...” (Watts & Schaefer, 2004. p. 204) While most of the women who participated in this study did not utilize welfare, the truth remains that financial aid projections do not often take into account the costs of having dependants. Raising children is an expensive undertaking, in financial resources, time and

energy. It is clear that within institutions of higher learning this fact is rarely, if ever, considered by the financial aid office, perhaps in part due to the difficulty in identifying parenting students based on FAFSA data which does not ask about dependants.

While college education costs have continued to rise, need based aid has decreased substantially in favor of merit based aid and loans (Burdman, 2005; Heller & Bjorklund, 2004, Ness & Tucker, 2008; Thomas & Wingert, 2010). While loans to pursue education are readily available, many of the mothers encountered within this research were loan averse, had poor credit scores or already felt that their loan burden was beyond their comfort level. Given the intersection of these factors, it is clear that the availability of additional need based aid would greatly enhance the college experience of mothers who are currently overcome with the requirements of work, school and children (Heller & Bjorklund, 2004). Unfortunately, due to the decrease in need based financial aid in favor of merit based aid, the persistence of single mothers is directly impacted if their academic performance drops below the point of eligibility for merit based aid (Heller & Bjorklund, 2004; Ness & Tucker, 2008; Patterson, 2009; Thomas & Wingert, 2010).

A bulk of the current literature surrounding single mothers within post-secondary education focuses specifically on those who are welfare recipients; however many of the women in this study hovered slightly above the cut off to be eligible for such assistance. This precarious financial position filled their lives with stress regarding paying bills, providing safe child care, remaining healthy and paying for her studies. Within the context

of those outside stressors, the cost of attending college and the loans which most had to undertake just to attempt their degree was a source of great concern.

The educational journey of the mothers in this research was made even more difficult by the requirement that many women repeat courses that they had previously taken at another college or university due to poor articulation agreements. “I was a little disappointed that a lot didn’t transfer,” was a common complaint. McQuay (2000) found that poorly worded or publicized articulation agreements often disadvantaged transfer students who were more likely to repeat coursework they had already completed. Sadly, many students who transfer to a university discover that many of their transfer credits do not accompany them to their new institution (Hagedorn, Lester, Garcia, McLain & May, 2004; Kienzl, 2004).

In addition to this institutional failure, many institutions required that their students pay fees, but did not publicize well enough what those fees paid for. This omission caused several women to either forgo or pay for services which they could have accessed on their college campus without additional cost. “They offer “free printing.” ...you have a certain number of pages that you’re allowed to print. ... I was burning up my printing cartridges at home because I had no idea that this was available to me.” The lack of awareness of campus resources which she had paid student fees to access has not been addressed within the literature reviewed for this study. Within the colleges students in this study attended, the percentages of fees paid as a portion of total bill (calculated only for public universities, fee information was not available for private institutions in this study) ranged from 28% of the total bill to 51% of the total bill [totals calculated based on in-state, undergraduate, 12 hour

attendance]. The median value was 43% of the total bill and the mean was 41% of total bill. Because fees are commonly included with tuition rate quotes, and financial aid packages proportionally apply to the total cost of institutional attendance, it is possible that this significant cost has not previously been examined in depth as a stand along factor. The practice of bundling tuition and fees could also account for the fact that many of the women in this study were largely unaware of what their fees paid for, thinking of her bill as the cost of attendance, not as the individual good or services it represented.

It is disheartening to know that despite the huge amount of time, money and effort the women in this study put into their education that their accounts of interactions with the institution consistently illustrated that they were disenfranchised within their universities. This took the form of feeling that they were strangers within their chosen universities or simply running up against college policies which did not take into account their multiple priorities. Sadly, multiple studies also verify that single mothers within institutions of higher education often feel disenfranchised by college policies and procedures which are insensitive to their special circumstances (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Haleman, 2004; Sharp, 2004).

The feeling of otherness was often predicated upon experiences where peer students made clear that mothering responsibilities were foreign to their experience of the university. This was made very apparent when one mother was invited to go out with friends and had to remind them of her other responsibilities. “If I want to see my friends, I have to ... say come to Chuck E. Cheese ... it’s not like, ... stop by the bar and we’ll [have] a couple of drinks and let our kids run around”. This disconnect between her expectations and experiences and

those of her peer students was further reflected when the women in the study described the other students on their campus. “[T]heir parents are paying for it for them... they don’t even know what financial aid is... they don’t care how much their books cost, they just use mom’s credit card”. This drastic difference between the experience of single mothers in the institution and their peers who were also attending college made them feel that they did not belong and made them feel that they were “walk[ing] in from the outside”. Duquaine-Watson (2007) found that beyond the benign lack of awareness that the traditional students who interacted with study participants showed, there was active animosity towards single parents in the institution where her research was performed. This sense of being out of place contributes to the high rates of drop out amongst single mothers within post-secondary education (Austin & McDermott, 2004; Kahn & Polakow, 2004; Riemer, 2004).

In addition to the feeling that they were strangers in a strange land, institutional policies alienated and disenfranchised them. Sometimes that disenfranchisement came from institutional disorganization and sometimes that came from intentional policies, such as the scheduling of courses at times that it made attendance very difficult for mothering students to accommodate (Sharp, 2004; Vann-Johnson, 2004). As a student in a new cohort program in the Nursing program, K.B. was quite frustrated with the disorganization and confusion that surrounded almost all aspects of her degree completion. “They have to come up with new time lines and things like that and that’s been really difficult for me to sit patiently while it happens. I really expected ya’ll to have all that worked out ...”. Beyond the administrative challenge of unclear policies and expectations, many women encountered degree

requirements which indicated coursework offered only at times which were quite challenging for a mother who was working. “[C]ourses that I needed were not available at ... times that I would be able to attend... either quit your job to go to school or ... taking one that was... not something that I was very interested in...” The challenge of courses being offered at times that were incompatible with work hours is consistent with the findings of Vann-Johnson’s (2004) study. There was a pervasive sense of frustration that while the institution was aware of her situation they were not responsive to her needs. This fact made many of the women in the study frustrated and many felt that they were neither important nor valued within their institutions.

[T]he attitude seems to be no, no, no, you’re getting caught up in some sort of emotional mommy-ness (laughs) which is not what we do. You know. And in so much as we acknowledge that you are a parent, we also acknowledge that you know, we are modern enough that you can put your child in day care and not feel guilty about that.

This sense that they were neither important nor valued lead to the demoralization of the students in this study—feeling that their needs were not being accounted for by the institution and that their peers had no understanding of their lives. This left them feeling marginalized, and put them at risk for failing to persist (Schlossberg, 1989). Van Stone, Nelson and Niemann (1994) also found that peers had an impact on the perceived success of single mothers through providing support in the form of sharing notes and being accepting of the single mothers as students. Duquaine-Watson (2007) also found that peers had a dramatic

impact on the perceptions single mothers had of the welcoming nature of their university, citing an often chilly climate for single parents. Aside from those studies, however, there is limited information regarding the impact of traditional students on the experiences of their non-traditional peers within the literature reviewed for this study. Due to the impact found by this study and others, it is clear that traditional peers can have either a positive or negative impact on how welcome non-traditional students such as single mothers feel within their universities. As the non-traditional population, especially female students, continues to rise at colleges and universities, it is in administrator's best interests to assure a hospitable climate for those students as climate is an important indicator of potential satisfaction for incoming students.

The sense that the institution was inhospitable was predicated by insensitive instructors and university policy, facts which cannot be denied as a serious hindrance to the education of single mothers (Austin & McDermott, 2004; Duquaine-Watson, 2007). This sense that neither their peers nor their professors had any understanding or desire to understand their lives as mothers led to a chilly climate on campus for single mothers. Much of this climate was attributed to the stigma that was associated with the status of single mother. K.B.'s experience with this phenomena was similar to her peers:

[A]s soon as I say, no this is my first degree. I can really see this change in their face, so, oh, you're that person. You had a really hard life and you never thought that you were going to go to college did you? You ... waited tables for 10 years and went and got pregnant real early ...

While not all of the experiences of chilly classroom climate were as explicit about the stigma surrounding single motherhood, many felt that they needed to have professors who could understand their situation or else they felt completely invisible. “I just think that . . . if you can’t tell your professors what’s going on and then have a little bit of understanding, then you just you don’t feel like you want to be there.” There was a sense that if professors could not understand and be responsive to her multiple responsibilities, the women in this study perceived the climate within that classroom and by extension the university, to be almost inhabitable in its chilliness. The ability of professors to set the tone of a classroom as either accommodating or inhospitable has been illustrated within the literature about single mothers (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Sharp, 2004).

Van Stone, Nelson and Niemann (1994) found that single mothers were frustrated with the auxiliary services offered by their institutions and found that they were often insensitive to the needs of students with families (social activities not family friendly, food served in campus dining establishments not child friendly). Sally spoke for most of the women in the study when she expressed frustration that “a lot of the programs . . . a lot of things . . . the activities, are catered towards like someone who is like 18 or 19 years old”. This frustration with the lack of family friendly activities was yet another way in which the women in this study felt that they (and by extension their needs) were invisible to their institutions.

In the face of a challenging and sometimes inhospitable climate on campus, many mothers within this study reacted by taking action. There was a strong desire amongst the

women in this study to improve the experiences of single mothers, especially those who were like them, working and going to school. “[Something] I’m working on at [university] to try to change or improve on is ... help with child care. Because they don’t have that at all.” Interventions ranged from serving on a selection committee for a new Department Head to starting a program for parenting students. Some students took their advocacy beyond their institutions, and one saw her major as an opportunity to raise awareness off the needs of single mothers. “I’ll help build cities in a more... I want to be more accessible to all sorts of people, um especially single parents with day cares, where schools are placed...”. Due in part to their experiences which often included a lack of consideration for her multiple roles, women in this study wanted to change the climate on their campuses and beyond to be aware and more accommodating towards the needs of single mothers. Miewald’s (2004) study of single mothers pursuing education in Appalachia also showed that single mothers were passionate about improving the situation of other single mothers. Additionally, her research showed that such efforts on behalf of others were transformative and empowering, yielding great personal growth and self esteem. This passion for sustaining change on scale beyond themselves or their families, but within their communities or even at a state or national level has been found within several studies of single mothers (Clarke & Peterson, 2004; Miewald, 2004).

Women in this study experienced their universities much like most single mothers in the research do—places where their needs are often overlooked. Some of this feeling was due to the financial difficulties that college attendance caused, some due to institutional

barriers and some due to the sense of being an ‘outsider’. This sense of ‘otherness’ often came from students and professors who did not understand or take into account the priorities of a parenting student—leading those students to feel that the climate was chilly towards them at best and downright hostile at worst. As a response to this inhospitable climate, some women were stirred to action on behalf not only of themselves, but of other single mothers struggling to get by. This identification with and desire to assist other single mothers indicates the primacy of the mother role for the women in this study. The feeling that her role as a mother was all consuming will be discussed further in the next section of this chapter.

### **Motherhood as a full time job.**

This subtheme addressed the research question: “How do these single mothers experience the intersection of their multiple roles?”. Women in this study found that their role of mother was all consuming, and could not be pushed aside momentarily as easily as roles of student or worker could be. “Low income single mothers in particular face an array of obstacles to both initiating and completing degrees... lack of adequate student financial aid and family resources, child care problems, discrimination and racism, internalized stigma...” (Sharp, 2004. p. 115-116). Beyond the feelings of invisibility and disenfranchisement, all of the mothers in this study made it clear that for them, motherhood was a full time job, requiring vast amounts of time, energy and patience. Unfortunately, this full time job was often in direct conflict with her life as a worker and (more germane to this research) her academic obligations. The sense that mothering responsibilities often came into conflict with

her studies was a clear theme. Additionally, many women shared their sense that upon becoming a mother, their priorities shifted significantly and their child/ren became their highest priority.

All of the women in this study struggled to balance their obligations as a mother with their work selves and their studies. “Well, I don’t get as much time to devote to study because I can’t shut myself away from him for hours at end, ... So it’s not like I can focus on one subject a lot of time.” This sense that the pressing obligations of parenthood often took priority over her studies was echoed by all of the women in the study. Several women expressed concern that their multiple priorities precluded them from doing their best academic work. “[You have] no time to study or ... get your papers done ... I mean you can’t write a research paper when you’ve got a 2 or 3 year old running around screaming”. To a greater or lesser degree, each woman was impacted by the needs of her child/ren. “I haven’t probably read everything assigned in a class since I started (laughs)...Like, I don’t feel like I am committed to my academics...as I once was.” While this quote could have come from any of the mothers in this study, there were a significant number of women within this study who not only had the challenge of her childcare responsibilities and schoolwork, but also had a challenging custody battle to overcome in addition to her other responsibilities. “[T]hrough the first year that I was at [university], there was still a lot of ... separation and ... a lot of back and forth about visitation with my son.” This was an added dimension of stress and challenge for some of the study participants which often taxed their ability to excel in the classroom due to time out of class for court hearings and the emotional strain of home

studies to determine her fitness to serve as the primary caregiver. The stress of work, parenting and sometimes pursuing government assistance—often lead to a decrease in the academic performance of single mothers (Bowl, 2001; Kahn & Polakow, 2004). The divided attention and feelings of role contagion (considering the obligations of one role while completing the tasks of another role) created challenges to the focus that collegiate study requires (Bowl, 2001). Findings regarding decreased academic performance were anecdotal within the cited studies, but this research bears out those findings. While there is a good amount of information regarding the challenge of not receiving child support payments within the literature, other aspects of the single mother divorced household (such as the strain of custody hearings) as they impact academics are not addressed within the literature (Holyfield, 2002; Kahn & Polakow, 2004).

Despite the frustration that many women expressed over their tendency to focus on the needs of their child above their own needs, each shared the sense that this was as it should be. Each of the mothers in this research felt strongly that their child should be and was their primary priority. Not only did they feel this way, but many illustrated this by sharing a sense that with their child's birth there was a change in their perspective. "So, school really wasn't something that was important to me. ... but then once I had my son ... [I] decided that I wanted to provide a better life for us." The young mothers on welfare within Jennings (2004) study also maintained that having a child increased their dedication to their studies. Even for Queen, the lone grandmother in the study, this sort of shift occurred when she got custody of her grandsons. "Before I just wanted the paper and it was just me.

But now, my thoughts are giving them a good life so the priority has changed, switched from me to them.” There was no sense of frustration or desperation in the conversation, simply the sense that this was as it should be. For some, this meant that their aspirations changed to fit within her role of mother. “I couldn’t pick anything that had the hint of ... risk...I would have loved to have gotten a massage therapy certificate ... but I’m not sure how that pays the rent.” The fact that occasionally the multiple requirements of parenting, working and caring for children lead to revised goals and ‘downsized dreams’ was consistent with Ratner’s (2004) study. Austin & McDermott (2004) found that mothers in their study saw their children as their primary priority and of those within the study who withdrew from college without completing their degrees, reasons often centered around the needs of their children. The clear priority for the women in this study was her child/ren and the sense that motherhood was her full time (and most important) job meant that she often had to struggle for legitimacy within her university.

As the mothers who were interviewed made their way through their chosen institutions, they struggled each step of the way to have their needs seen as legitimate in the eyes of their professors, their peers and the policies of the university. Not only were each of the women plunged into varying levels of debt to afford their degree, but once they had made that investment their reception within the university was chilly at best. This occurred for a multitude of reasons, some of which were at the institutional level and some of which were on a more personal level from peers or professors. Oftentimes this poor reception spurred women into action—opting to become advocates for the needs of single mothers on their

campus and beyond. In addition to feeling that her needs were invisible to the larger institution, the parents in this study also faced the challenge of meeting the needs of her child, her first priority, while also maintaining her academic standards.

### **Striving for balance between multiple roles**

As the previous section made clear, student mothers are juggling a plethora of responsibilities which intersect and often conflict. Much of the information within this theme relates to the second research question “How do these single mothers experience the intersection of their multiple roles?”. In order to successfully navigate their multiple roles, women had to be intensely aware of their own strengths and shortfalls, both as they chose their educational opportunities and as they set realistic expectations for themselves. Beyond having realistic expectations, maintaining their incredibly full lives required that they navigate carefully amongst competing priorities through multitasking.

### **Knowing herself**

As a part of her choice to return to school, a single mother has to be incredibly aware of herself—the practical limitations of her life, her health, her finances and her own desire and strength. This awareness of herself and her strengths played into how the women in this study dealt with the challenges of poor health, selected their majors and made realistic choices about what she could and could not accomplish. Each was aware of her skills and limitations, as well as the specific challenges of her life. These ideas all reflect the ideas and answer the third research question asked within this study “How do single mothers enact their own agency through the pursuit of academic environments that fit their needs and

aspirations?’. Single mothers in this study were acutely aware of their own strengths and shortfalls and enacted their own agency through seeking out community colleges which met their needs, as well as majors which aligned with their skills, interests, abilities and limitations.

Due to the extreme amount of stress that comes along with being the primary caretaker for children, the primary breadwinner and a student, all of the women in the study suffered from some level of health problem. All were chronically fatigued, because most, if not all, put their needs off until after they had cared for their child/ren, tended to housework and paid all of their bills. “[J]ust being mentally and physically tired most of the time, is, you know, something that is really hard to overcome.” Being aware of her own energy level and physical abilities was critical to maintaining or improving her level of health. Beyond the all pervasive fatigue, many women dealt with emotional and psychological challenges brought on by the extreme stress of their lives on the brink of poverty. These psychological health challenges manifested themselves in the form of depression, alcoholism and panic attacks or seizures. The stress of working, caring for children and attending college has been identified as causing stress and stress related conditions in single mothers within Kahn & Polakow’s (2004) study. Other women had poor physical health to contend with in the form of diabetes or cancer. “I became really ill and in and out of the hospital, um, it was like 3 or 4 months of me just being in and out of the hospital.” Serious health difficulty caused three of the study participants to take medical leave from their institution. However, this level of involvement with so many priorities did lead to health complications, often stress induced,

for low income single mothers pursuing post-secondary education (Kahn & Polakkow, 2004; Ratner, 2004).

Beyond needing to be aware of physical limitations imposed by health, women needed to be aware of her skills and interests in order to assure a good fit with the degree she chose. Some women found majors which they felt played into their skills, some found majors where they found “the material was wonderful and interesting and fascinating”, but all looked to find majors where they felt interested and invested. For many, as they approached the end of their academic careers as undergraduates, they began to consider a pathway towards graduate study based again on their awareness of themselves and their own skills and abilities. Single mothers pursuing post-secondary education remained aware of their own talents, strengths and abilities as they chose their major, not the paycheck they could expect upon graduation (Riemer, 2004). While some literature shows that low income student’s choices of major are more instrumental in nature and focused on the salary that the major might command, this research did not find that to be the case (Fenske, Porter, DuBrock, 1999; Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Kienzl, 2004; Reay, Davies, David & Ball, 2001). Like many other studies of Person-Environment fit, the women interviewed for this research took stock of their interests and abilities and attempted to select majors which would best fit their personalities (Feldman, Smart & Ethington, 1999; Umbach & Porter, 2002). Upon arriving within her major, most were pleased with their choices (although several reported changing majors after arriving at their universities). Fortunately, where many felt alienated within the larger contexts of their universities, within their departments they reported feeling

supported, listened to and valued. The feeling of having found ‘family’ or an academic ‘home’ within their majors validated these women’s choices to consider their interests and skills in selecting their majors. An additional interesting finding was that where many women in this study made pragmatic choices regarding college selection, they were more likely to consider personal experiences and talents when selecting majors, sometimes changing majors within their university to better fit their specific skills and interests. The intersection between passion and pragmatism as it related to major choice will be explored in more depth later in this section. Regardless of what mixture of pragmatism and awareness of personal passion informed major choice, self awareness of personal circumstance and individual talents was critical for success within the group of women interviewed for this research.

This self awareness also extended to their choice of college. All of the women who were interviewed for this research began their college careers at community college, often a choice of convenience. “[S]tarted back at community college because a lot of classes were on line or they were at night. On Saturdays, a lot easier to go to.” They were aware of the limitations of their full lives and made choices which accommodated their lifestyle. Beyond being aware of what she could reasonably expect from herself, women in this study used pragmatism in selecting their colleges and universities. Often the women had family or jobs in the area, and so while they might have made different choices for their undergraduate education without those limitations, given that they were mothers who wanted to be students, they made choices that fit into their lives. “[Online university] is easy because, ... I can do

my homework when the kids are asleep or I can take my laptop to work and do it on my breaks at work or because I work nights.” The use of online education making college attendance less stressful and easier to accomplish is consistent with Home’s (1998) study.

Single mothers often chose to attend community colleges and universities close to their homes and families because of the support networks that they have already established within those communities (Freeman, 2006; Kienzl, 2004; Reay, Ball & David, 2002). The community college provided education close to their homes, were less expensive than universities and allowed those who had been in the ‘detour’ group to regain their academic confidence before they began taking coursework at a university (Freeman, 2005). All of the women in this study attended college in or near the town where they lived at the time, aside from the two who pursued online education.

The cost of credits at a community college is significantly less than at universities, making them more affordable educational option for low income mothers (Mathur, 2004; McQuay, 2000). Unfortunately, for some single mothers who pursue post-secondary education with the help of government subsidies, some major choices are not financially supported. This fact caused low income single mothers to make the pragmatic choice and change their selections from their passions to something that is attainable or as close as she can get to her passion within the context of the welfare system (Kahn & Polakow, 2004; Ratner, 2004). While no women in this study changed majors based on government subsidies, some did make choices based on practical concerns such as salary upon graduation, but all reported that the most important consideration was their interest and skill

set within the chosen field of study. These choices were most often rejections of career fields seen as 'risky' as opposed to embracing careers which were perceived to be moneymakers.

I started off as an education major. Um, decided that I wouldn't get paid enough for the time and effort that I am putting into school. So I decided that I still wanted to work with children... And I thought that a youth counselor would be a better fit because I would still be able to have a decent life for my family as well as help children.

Danielle's pragmatism in terms of her major selection was reflected by several other mothers in the study. All seemed to feel that while they were not going to pursue the most high paid career fields they could identify, they all considered the occupational outlook of the field of their degree before completing it, entering into their occupational field with their eyes open to the earning potential. This blending of self awareness and pragmatism indicates that major selection for single mothers takes place within a bounded system, constrained by the needs of their children, the earning potential within their chosen field and their own skills and interests. While on the whole, single mothers did consider their skills and abilities when selecting majors in keeping with the suppositions of Person-Environment fit, their choices were more nuanced and informed by a multitude of factors beyond their simple skill sets.

This pragmatism in terms of college selection played out in other areas as well. Often, for the women in this study to be successful in their roles as mother, worker and student, they had to be willing to let go of perfection in some area of their life. This willingness to lower their expectations of themselves had a great deal to do with their success

in striving for balance between their multiple roles. In addition to having a practical perspective on college attendance, many women also found themselves needing to allow themselves to be comfortable with “changing my expectations and getting down to the very bare minimum of (laughter) what I can get by with.” This sometimes referred to a willingness to allow her children to eat fast food, or to have someone else clean the house, or to spend only an hour on an upcoming paper and be willing to deal with the academic repercussions of that choice.

A willingness to lower her expectations of herself was a way that the women in this study balanced their multiple roles without imposing undue stress on themselves. This need to prioritize between her multiple obligations was consistent with the findings of Marks and MacDermid (1996) who that students who successfully navigated between their roles of full time worker and full time student were found to have better sociological and psychological outcomes. Their study indicated that the successful balance of multiple roles lead to higher feelings of self esteem and lower levels of depression and slightly higher GPA (Marks & MacDermid, 1996).

### **Time Scarcity.**

The feeling of being chronically behind, the feeling of having too much to do, the feeling that too many people need, want and deserve her attention and the feeling that she could never quite catch up were all common within the interviews undertaken for this study. These feelings of inadequacy and frustration stemmed from the fact that as mothers, workers and students, study participants were quite likely to be experiencing role strain, role overload,

role stress or role contagion (Gigliotti, 1999; Goode, 1960; Home, 1998). Women struggled with their multiple priorities— often having to shift focus and move between priorities to accomplish the multitude of tasks that each day required of them. Mothers within universities, especially single mothers, experience ‘second shift’ where their paid work responsibilities are compounded by primary homemaking responsibilities, yielding an overwhelming number of roles which all vie for her attention (Hochschild, & Machung, 2003; Home, 1998). In an effort to mediate the requirements of multiple concurrent obligations, many of the women spoke of having to multitask in order to assure that tasks were accomplished. Beyond using multitasking as a solution, some mothers had found small ways in which they could successfully balance the roles of mother, worker and student.

As a parenting student who needs to work in order to provide for her family, it is unsurprising that mothers in this study discussed their conflicting priorities. “[S]ometimes I don’t give [son] the attention that I would like to give him because I am totally distracted by what needs to get done.” This sense that she has too many priorities to fulfill even one the way she wishes she could was not an uncommon sentiment amongst the interviewees. In addition, there was a good amount of what seemed to be guilt around the fact that many mothers felt that due to their multiple obligations, they often did not give their children the time or attention they desired. “[W]hen you are at home, you’re doing school work, ...and you’re trying to clean and you’re trying to cook and, there is no time left to take kids to the park.” It is not uncommon for single mothers in college to feel that she is chronically behind, or that her priorities and obligations are fragmented and difficult to address concurrently

(Home, 1998; Morris & Coley, 2004; Shaw, 1999). The experience of role strain among low income mothers increased as they added education into their already full lives (Morris & Coley, 2004; Riemer, 2004).

The last quote makes it very clear that there are often many competing priorities in the lives of single mothers who work and attend college. In order to meet her obligations, she must be able to juggle many things and often multitask. One mother folded laundry while she was being interviewed, another was working on her mending. In these small ways, multitasking allowed her to accomplish more with the scarce time that she had. “[W]hile preparing dinner, I was ... bathing them and while dinner was cooking or whatever, clothes would be washing at the same time, giving them their baths...” Being attentive to multiple tasks concurrently allowed the mothers in this to fulfill their roles as student, mother and wage-earner. “I am not just managing my homework, I’m managing my household, I’m managing a budget, I’m managing, she has ... cheerleading and all this other stuff. She has her own personal schedule that I have to keep up with.” It was the confluence of all of those priorities that each woman had to learn to navigate, and juggle so that each received at least some attention. Balancing and trading off between priorities created difficulties for single mothers pursuing post-secondary education— because they could not concentrate on their academics as their primary priority and had to instead focus on caring for their families, especially being cognizant of their financial wellbeing (Kahn & Polakow, 2004; Watts & Schaefer, 2004).

From time to time the women in this study felt that they were successfully able to balance all of the requirements of her life. When this occurred, the women were understandably quite proud of themselves. “I have to balance my life but I still have the college student part of me and I still have the mother part of me. And ... for homecoming I was able to do the events and still be mom.” These triumphant moments where she is able to successfully meet her obligations give each mother hope that balance is attainable and often validate the choices that she has made. “[I]f you are a single mom and you can go to college, that ...takes a very special person that can be able to juggle that kind of life and continue to go to school.” The knowledge that she is a special person by virtue of being able to balance the many requirements of motherhood with the requirements of working and going to college made the women in this study proud of themselves and the amazing work they were doing. This navigating deftly between multiple roles of provider, parent and student, allowed the women to feel pride (and some stress) in all that they were accomplishing in spite of their multiple roles (Home, 1998; Morris & Coley, 2004).

Self awareness and the ability to work within her limits was a hallmark of the success modeled by the women in this study. Being aware of their own physical limitations from lack of sleep or more serious psychological or physical illness was one way women in this study made choices which allowed them to excel. Furthermore, they were aware of the practical limitations of their lives and their own interests and skills as they chose colleges and majors. Practical concerns regarding transportation and childcare allowed them to maintain the delicate balance of all of their multiple roles. This was accomplished with great care to

negotiate between priorities, to multitask and to strive for balance. The importance of being self aware as it relates to success in balancing or managing multiple roles is not directly addressed in the literature reviewed for this study. Because research on roles strain tends to focus on individuals who have multiple concurrent roles, it is possible that the import of self awareness is overlooked. This could be due to the fact that without such levels of self awareness, it would be simply impossible to manage the number of multiple roles reflected in the studies reviewed for this research. As Eliza said “my other option is what?”—women in studies of single motherhood do not see themselves as doing anything remarkable by remaining aware of and working within their own boundaries and strengths. For this reason, it is unlikely that they would share or bring up comments regarding this to researchers without prompting.

### **Chapter Summary and Conclusions**

Women who work, go to school and care for children are the unsung heroes of the American dream. They toil to provide for their children, they study hard to perform well in their coursework, and they work to feed and clothe their children. They have put their faith in the power of education to improve their circumstances and move their lives from the brink of poverty. Unfortunately this faith in education, while well founded in the long term in regards to higher rates of pay, does not always pay off in the short term as she strives to earn her degree (Duke & Strawn, 2007; Kienzl, 2004; Mathur, 2004; Zhan & Pandey, 2004). In the context of the classrooms and common spaces of universities, the needs of parenting

students are invisible and less than; an afterthought at best, particularly within classrooms where group work and mid-day courses are the norm.

Despite this chilly climate and feeling of “walk[ing] in from the outside” single mothers continue to persist despite the odds. They are supported by families and employers, by children and faculty. They are proud of their hard work, as well they should be, and glow with pride when their institutions stop for a moment and recognize them. They manage to juggle their schoolwork with their parenting responsibilities as well as their paid work through a series of compromises and concessions, but they do not let this dampen their ardent desire for their degree.

In the final analysis, these women are success stories, heroes of the modern educational system who should be lauded, raised up and cheered for. However, if that is too much to ask, they should at least be asked for their opinions so that the arduous task of gaining a degree can be refined and made less difficult for those who come after. Given the body of knowledge that exists surrounding the needs and concerns of single mothers providing realistic opportunities for single mothers to attend college is possible. This is a particularly pressing concern given the current financial climate, where providing single mothers with viable options to provide for their children is essential. As research clearly shows, the pathway to secure work with health benefits that will feed and clothe a family lies through an undergraduate degree (Kienzl, 2004; Freeman, 2005). Given the ever swelling number of non-traditional students and women who have sought out higher education in the midst of the economic downturn, providing support for this group is not only the

compassionate route but is also a financially intelligent action for colleges to make in order to earn that market share. As close to one of every five community college students report being single parents, being intentional about catering to this group is a very financially savvy choice (U.S. Department of Education, 2003-2004). With this understanding, colleges and universities may look for practical suggestions regarding working with single mothers, many of which can be found within the next chapter of this paper in addition to areas for further research and scholarship.

## **CHAPTER 7-- Implications & Recommendations**

Throughout this research, the struggles, agency and compromises of single mothers who work and attend college have been highlighted in various forms. This chapter will take the stories shared by the sixteen study participants and integrate that information with the current literature to inform research and practice. The implications will be laid out within four specific yet interrelated categories. First, implications for current best practice as it relates to single mothers within the academy will be reviewed. Secondly, best directions for policy adaptations will be suggested. Third, information pertaining to current theories that this study utilized will be addressed. Finally, the chapter will conclude with recommendations for further research based on the findings of this study.

### **Best Practice**

Clearly single mothers who work and attend college struggle to do so. While there is a certain amount of struggle that is inherent in being a mother who attends college, there are also specific practices which the mothers within this study found to be very helpful to them. The suggestions for practice emerging from this research center around four core areas: providing recognition for academic excellence, raising awareness of currently provided student services, providing a community for parenting students and addressing child care needs.

#### **Providing recognition of academic excellence.**

Single mothers in this study were often excellent students. In follow up contact with students, I found that several graduated from their colleges with honors. One woman won a

research award for her work on the multiple roles of single mothers. Others, like Autumn, cited the support they felt when they received recognitions such as Dean's List, a validation that their university was aware and proud of the hard work they were doing. "I got a letter in the mail... I made ... [the] Dean's list and that like was so exciting to me because ... even though I had made good grades I didn't feel like anybody had actually said, hey ... good job". Other recognitions were in the form of honor societies "I am in the Phi Eta Sigma ... because I got good grades my freshman year". This sort of recognition from the institution of a job well done made the women feel that they were able to succeed at their chosen university or college (Sharp, 2004). The exploration of the importance of recognizing academic excellence as a motivator for single mothers is incredibly limited, with only Miewald's (2004) study mentioning the importance of the Phi Beta Sigma inductions to the single mothers in that group. Institutions should consider ways to share the excellent work of single mothers so as to highlight the presence of parenting students on campus and verify to those mothers their importance to the campus community as a whole. Many of the women in this study reported feeling that they were valuable to their institution for something that they could offer, be that perspective on the importance of a college degree or cooperative child care services. Allowing single mothers to provide such services to the institution and publicizing those programs to the campus community would not only raise campus awareness of single parents on campus but inform traditional students and faculty to the benefit of the presence of such individuals. Additionally, publicizing programs offered by

single mothers (especially those geared towards parenting students) could encourage single mothers who had not yet chosen to attend college to ‘take the plunge’.

As a caveat, however, this recognition needs to be sensitive to the strong aversion many of the mothers in this study showed to being essentialized as someone who was juggling so many tasks in addition to their full time school work. This is a delicate line to walk, but important steps include allowing women to feel that they earned all accommodations, grants or recognitions with which they are provided. One step institutions could take to attempt to address such a concern would be to ask a single mother to serve on the committee that would recommend such recognitions, allowing the institution to have an insider’s perspective on the program. While this is not a panacea, it would provide an opportunity for a single mother to share her unique perspective with her peers and instructors on campus. Additionally, it would offer an opportunity for her to be an advocate on behalf of single mothers within the institution, an impact many of the women in this study expressed desire and determination to have on their campuses and communities.

### **Raising awareness of services provided.**

College campuses provide a plethora of services and resources to their students. Traditional students are likely to hear about the various student support services provided on campus through their orientation to the university, through ads in the student newspaper, and from their peers. These traditional methods of delivery do not appear to be as effective for reaching single mothers. While they have as much (and in some cases, more) need for the services that universities offer, such as student health services, counseling center services,

family housing, technology support and printing services to name a few, consistently, women in this study were not aware of specific student services of which they could avail themselves. With more intentional, targeted advertisement to this population, situations such as Brett's conversation with a county crisis line could be avoided. "[S]omehow I mentioned I was an ECU student and they were like well you have a counseling center on campus and I was like, I do?" To avoid this sort of disconnect between the need and the service provided, a few implications for change in practice are proposed.

Utilizing ads on buses that transfer students from commuter parking lots to campus could more easily reach this group. While many colleges offer a New Student Orientation geared towards transfer students, it is often offered during the day time, and attendance is relatively low. A change in practice that might better disseminate this important information to these students would be to have a podcast of the presentations and links to handouts. This simple change would make the information available to students who could not attend during the day, as well as allowing those who did attend to review information at a later time. Another recommendation relative to this lack of knowledge would be for universities to create a simple one page flier or brochure listing all of the services that students can utilize. The flier could be distributed within the admission letter, at New Student Orientation, and with financial aid award letters once a student is admitted. Having an easily readable listing of services would go a long way to encouraging students to be aware of and utilize services such as the disability services office, free movies on campus, student legal services, and campus recreation opportunities, to name a few which were not even mentioned by the

students in this study. The numerous services offered to fee paying students could be better publicized to this specific audience through targeted e-mail marketing, utilizing bus advertisements, putting information in admissions letters and in financial aid packages.

**Providing community.**

While not all women had all types of support, a support network was essential and greatly improved the likelihood of graduation (Austin & McDermott, 2004; Miewald, 2004). Given the importance of networks in the lives of single mothers attending college, having an awareness of the support students have when they begin pursuit of their education allows for the strategic provisioning of student services. For students who have well grounded family or community support, institutional programs become less essential; however, for those who have limited support networks, the importance of institutional support cannot be underestimated. Therefore, providing and publicizing what support groups are available on campus becomes essential; those who have well developed support networks can make a choice regarding participation and less well supported students can become aware of institutional programs to buttress their academic efforts.

It would be great to have some kind of program on campus for families. Some kind of resource... Some place where parents could come together and say this is what we need, how can we fix it. How can we make that happen. Just some kind of program like that because even child care could be solved with a program where parents could get together and say, all right here's the times I'm not in class. Here's the times I'm not in class. Can we work around this and you know, you watch mine for a little

while. I watch yours for a little while. Something like that. Even that would just solve a lot of the problems.

Phoenix spoke for many of the women in this study when she expressed her concern and desire for some connection with other parents. Many of the women in this study bemoaned their feelings of isolation and expressed their ardent desire for a community of mothering students with whom to share stories and provide support. This desire for peer support and recognition of that support as crucial to success is recognized within the literature (Clarke & Peterson, 2004). However, while many students reported a desire for support in the form of a group, when the researcher attempted to observe such support groups for single mothers on two of the campuses where such programs existed, the programs were cancelled for lack of attendance. Given the desire for community and the time scarcity identified in this research, the logical solution to this challenge would be to set up online support groups which would be available to students when they were most needed. Eliza shared how having an online support group was beneficial to her.

So I got to know some people just on-line chat rooms, etc. associated with that group that were really a good source of encouragement and then I could also log onto the computer and be like, okay I have a paper due in x amount of time and you know, how did you cope with this strategy or how did you cope with your children not sleeping. And that was good because it was always available and I got a good correspondence between her and other people...

While this online community may or may not work for all parents, the desire for community was a strong theme within the study and within literature on single mothers in college (Clark & Peterson, 2004; Sharp, 2004). Several of the women interviewed requested support that validated their place as parents on campus as opposed to alienating them based on their parenting status. They were looking for social activities that were family friendly—ways to allow their children to interact with the university that was such an important part of their lives. Sally made clear that “I just wish that everything wasn’t catered towards like, the younger students.” To provide those programs that recognize some women’s roles as mothers and students, some institutions have offered children’s programs and play dates. In fact, the program that Eliza started while she was a graduate student at her institution provided play dates and pot luck dinners to offer the camaraderie and support that these mothers yearned for. Other institutions offered a children’s graduation which recognized the amount of sacrifice that children who had parents enrolled in school had made in order to support their parent. These types of programs require relatively small budgets and can often be overseen by volunteers, but they provide a critical support for parenting students. While the women in this study were students at their universities, many bemoaned their lack of the ‘student experience,’ namely college social and sporting events, which they perceived as inappropriate for children. “[E]ven though we’re making it in college and we’re graduating, we are not learning everything we could be learning. We’re not being able to enjoy that college experience and actually walk away with something more than a degree.”

Additionally, given that community and family support is vital, educating families and communities about what undertaking undergraduate education requires of a student allows family and friends to be aware and potentially supportive of the challenges. This could be undertaken in partnership with community organizations, and could be done in conjunction with programs which educate youth regarding the importance of and benefit to college education. This would be an excellent format to address issues such as the lack of awareness within low income families of financial aid.

### **Child Care**

The assistance that universities offer in terms of securing child care for children under five is also critical to the retention of single mothers. In fact, the most often cited barrier to continued persistence within the university system is lack of adequate or affordable child care (Austin & McDermott, 2004; Butler, Duprez & Smith, 2003; Clarke & Peterson, 2004; Kahn, Polakow, 2004; Mather, 2004; Sharp, 2004). Individually, every woman who was interviewed for this study spoke of child care as a significant challenge for her at some point in her educational journey. The specific challenges ranged based on the age of children and the proximity and willingness of family to help care for children. However, each woman spoke of the struggle that she faced to assure that her child had adequate care while she was enrolled in school or working to provide financial support for the family. While there are no easy solutions to this problem, having child care subsidies provided through the educational institution would be an enormous support for single mothers who are working and attending college. An alternative proposed by Phoenix in the previous section would be providing

space within the institution where children could be monitored, but relying on some sort of child care co-operative staffed completely by the parents who chose to use it. This solution might come with some element of liability without signed waivers from participants, however, if sufficient funding did not exist for subsidies, this solution might show the university's dedication to supporting parenting students while not requiring additional financial support from the institution beyond the provision of a space that can be reserved. If even that amount of expense on the part of the institution is not feasible, training financial aid staff to provide information regarding how to access local government subsidies could address this need.

Failing the provision of any institutional support for child care, faculty should be encouraged to consider child care responsibilities when working with mothers in classes. This could take the form of either allowing children in class (given prior warning, and with some understanding as to their ability to not be disruptive to the class) or allowing mothers to miss class should their children be ill or require their care. While there should be limitations and structure to this provision, having a policy which allows missed classes with a doctor's note regarding the illness of a child could provide leeway needed by single mothers. When speaking of the supports she found for her education, Autumn specifically noted accommodating professors. "I've been able to bring my son a couple of times to classes when I needed to." This sort of understanding from professors allows single mothers to be more successful in meeting the demands of their lives as students and mothers.

## **Policy**

While the suggestions above address needs at an individual level, this section attempts to address how institutionally universities can best accommodate students who work, attend college and are raising children by themselves. There are four distinct areas identified where specific policies could assist single mothers who are working and attending college. Modifying attendance policies; providing funding and encouraging the development of hybrid and online courses and degree programs; assuring clearly defined articulation agreements; and providing specific funding streams for single mothers who request financial aid are all policy actions which support single mothers in college.

### **Attendance policies**

If my child is sick, there is no backup... I can't ask one of my family members to take off work to take him to the doctor. I am the one that has to do that.... When it's not ...to take him to the doctor ... but it's still something that he can't go to day care ... I can't leave him with my 70 year old grandparents because he's going to get them sick too...

Brett expressed the frustration that many of the mothers in this study showed surrounding her need to stay home with her son when he was sick. Because these women are the sole caretakers for their children, they need understanding and accommodation in the form of flexible attendance policies. Many universities have a standard suggested verbiage relative to excused absences within courses. In order to provide an environment which is supportive of single parents (and all parenting students), colleges should make modifications to the verbiage of this statement to include allowing students to miss class to care for sick

children. Danielle spoke about the support she felt from her professors who “understood that although I may not be ill, my daughter might be ill and I have to miss school for that”. While this policy might not impact a majority of students at the university, it does raise awareness of the students who are both going to college and raising children. Additionally, it gives credibility and validity to these women’s roles as mother and student. This policy revision is unlikely to cause much additional missed class time, but significantly improves the classroom climate surrounding the presence of single mothers.

This seemingly small change could affect institutional climate in a profound way, both because it acknowledges the presence of student parents on campus and provides protection from unfair treatment by faculty who fail to consider taking care of a sick child an “excused” absence. (Duquaine-Watson, 2007 p. 238)

To make such a step would remove the ambiguity that currently surrounds attendance policies and make parenting students aware of their rights to miss class to care for their children. This would reduce the likelihood of having some understanding instructors and some who are less likely to ‘forgive’ absences based on children, leading to disparate impact of illness on grades based on the professor.

#### **Encourage development of hybrid and online classes.**

To improve retention of single mothers, it is essential that colleges become intentional in creating environments which are aware of if not catered towards parenting students—including more evening, weekend and online classes as a start. Eliza had suggestions for how her university could better accommodate parenting students by

“[A]ccommodating classes at different times. Using technology, i.e., the internet, on-line discussions, etc. to either replace classes or to act as an additional course of interaction”.

Consistently, within this research, women spoke about the benefits of online coursework in terms of meeting their needs to be both a student and a mother. Danielle summed up the benefits as she saw them in this comment.

[T]he [online] classes met once a week and it was for like two hours but I could do it at home. ... I could fix dinner and still be in the classroom so I could multi-task a lot better at home than sitting in the classroom. Because my time is really valuable. So it works out really well if I can do things at home. Like I can be typing and in the classroom and helping her with her homework.

Enacting a policy that supports departments who are interested in developing online course work or hybrid courses not only supports single mothers, but also any other student who is not as easily able to attend class face-to-face. Such a policy might state that once a program or department reached a certain size, a given percentage of coursework should be offered in alternative format every two years, for example. This sort of policy might not be ideal for smaller colleges and universities where institutional change might better be effected by providing additional funds to develop online courses or providing release time for faculty who planned to teach online or develop hybrid courses. This encouragement could take the form of encouraging the development of hybrid courses which might meet face to face but also meet virtually as a substitution for some in class time. Having asynchronous online coursework that can be completed when it is best for the mother and her family allows for

more flexibility in meeting course demands and allows women to spend more time with their children. While not all of the mothers in this study chose completely online study, many had considered it either as a part of their college selection process, or as they began to consider their options for graduate school.

A specific area where participants identified a need was to offer upper level required coursework occasionally through some sort of distance format to allow them to complete major requirements while also allowing them to fulfill family obligations. While this effort might take more study in order to complete a needs assessment to find areas where there were larger numbers of students who desired virtual options, it would potentially allow wider access to the courses beyond just students within the major. Should a solely online format be difficult, the hybrid model would allow women to better negotiate the requirements of work and school.

**Transparent transfer policy.**

As a part of this study, women needed to have some experience with taking courses at a community college, however, challenges relative to transfer credit were not isolated to challenges faced moving from a community college to a university. Sara's story illustrated that her pathway to a degree had numerous stops, a problem that lengthened her time in college. "I probably should be a junior but because I moved around so much, I lost a lot of credit hours." The process of double dipping and swirling is becoming increasingly common, meaning that institutional policy relative to transfer credits granted from another

university needs to be well publicized and understandable (Shang, Cabral, Kappes, Macagno-Shang, & Miser, 2005).

Many of the participants in this study attended community college within North Carolina and transferred to an in-state public university. Fortunately, there is an articulation agreement between all of the community colleges and public universities of the state, however, that fact did not stop many of the women in that situation from being unaware of transfer policies. This lack of knowledge leads to large numbers of free elective credits or non-degree credits being granted to these students (Hagedorn, Lester, Garcia, McLain & May, 2004; Kienzl, 2004). Autumn, had this to say about her transfer credit situation “I was a little disappointed that a lot didn’t transfer over but other colleges I compared it to, more transferred here than they would have to other institutions.” Perhaps if she had been more aware of transfer policies as she was completing her work at her community college, she would have been able to be more strategic about what courses she selected. Best practices for assuring awareness of transfer credits is to have a clearly outlined and well publicized listing of courses which transfer between state community colleges and state universities at a minimum. Additionally, partnerships between community colleges and the universities which they serve as ‘feeder schools’ to would allow for training of transfer advisors who are familiar with the course equivalencies and other transfer requirements. Such programs or partnerships might have prevented her having only sophomore status at her university despite having over 80 hours of coursework at her community college. While articulation

agreements are agreed upon between the community college system in North Carolina and the university system, enforcement of those agreements varies widely.

### **Financial Aid for Parenting students.**

Financial aid is a critical component for the success for many students attending college. Alarming, students at community college have the highest levels of unmet need, with 80% of students having expenses beyond what their financial aid covered, with 54% of students at public universities and 53% of students at private institutions having unmet need (Ashburn, 2009). Moving beyond the larger student population, because single mothers are often found in lower SES groups, their needs as determined by financial aid offices are often much higher, making this a critical issue for this group.

I get a Pell grant but it is not enough for this tuition and ... I get grants and stuff ... right now I am afraid that I'm going to accumulate so much loans, it's going to defeat the purpose of me working so hard to be here.

While Sally was enrolled at a private school unlike many of her peers, her financial concerns were echoed by most of the women who were interviewed for this study. The lack of adequate financial aid to address the needs of students who have parenting responsibilities is a significant issue for women who are currently enrolled in undergraduate programs. This challenge has been identified and addressed in the literature, however, as Strawn (2000) succinctly articulates, the sweeping welfare reform of 1996 disadvantages single mothers pursuing further education.

[F]ederal student aid is not adjusted for family size, so that students with dependents do not receive more aid than other students with the same income but no dependents. In the past, the welfare system often provided a hidden subsidy to post-secondary education by supporting single parents enrolled in school, but with the shift to a work-based welfare system, in most states this subsidy no longer exists. (as cited in Heller & Bjorklund, 2004 p.137)

All of the students in this study reported receiving some sort of financial aid assistance. In addition to that admission, each stated that she felt that the amount of aid that she received was inadequate to address the financial needs of her family. This problem of unmet need beyond what the financial aid office perceives is identified in Heller & Bjorklund (2004) as a significant deterrent to degree completion with only 12% of students with high unmet need completing an undergraduate degree as opposed to 48% who had low unmet need.

Numerous studies show that financial support in the form of funding to defray education related expenses such fees, books and tuition impacts the persistence of single mothers (Butler & Deprez, 2002; Duprez, Butler & Smith, 2004; Heller & Bjorklund, 2004; Nora, 2001). Beth felt the pinch of having limited financial support “There is really no day care, there is no additional funding, there is no, you know, additional monies to be had besides loans”. This serious barrier can only be overcome with significant policy change at a national and institutional level to allow women who utilize public support to pursue postsecondary education and receive financial aid dollars in proportion to the significant need that she has as a parenting student (Fenske, Porter, DuBrock, 1999; Heller & Bjorklund,

2004). Given the percentage of single mothers who are at or below the poverty line when they enter institutions of higher education, universities would do well to extend existing emergency loan programs, and should offer grants that could assist with other household expenses. This practice would contribute to the retention of single parents, as well as increasing their sense that the institution is aware of and responsive to the needs of parenting students (Sharp, 2004). An additional accommodation might be providing financial aid to parenting students in the form of on campus employment. In order to be the most impactful, when extending this offer of employment, institutions should be intentional to assure that employment can be combined with government support and provides experience related to the area of their degree (Deprez, Butler & Smith, 2004; Mathur, 2004). Taking these steps can not only aid in the retention of single mothers, but can increase the human capital produced by institutions, promoting public good and potentially decreasing the experiences of 'lost talent' (Hanson, 1996).

Additionally, having partnerships between offices of financial aid and government agencies to address need outside of funds for books or tuition could be a great support for working mothers who attend college. If those partnerships are problematic or too time intensive to create, a short term solution could be to assure that financial aid staff have working knowledge of current governmental policies such as TANF (Temporary Aid for Needy Families) and PRWORA (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act) which might impact student's ability to work and study. In addition, colleges and universities need to develop funding sources to support these scholars,

particularly those who are not receiving government support. Unfortunately, for women who do not receive government aid, unmet need in practical terms is higher than their peers who receive government assistance due to the need to pay for food and housing without the assistance that subsidized housing or WIC (Women Infants and Children- a public health program) offers. Universities must cultivate donors and develop programs to provide financial aid dollars that can be used to meet the financial aid needs of women attending college while caring for children.

### **Theory**

This research was undertaken utilizing the theories of Person-Environment fit, Role Strain and the concept of Marginality & Mattering from Schlossberg's Transition theory (Holland, 1997; Goode, 1960; Schlossberg, 1989). These theories were relevant lenses for understanding the experiences of the women who participated in this research and all theories were supported by these findings.

#### **Role Strain.**

As mothers who worked, attended college and often had other responsibilities, the women in this study constantly felt behind and overwhelmed. This difficulty in fulfilling all of the demands of the concurrent roles they occupied has been called role strain, role overload and role stress within the literature (Gigliotti, 1999; Goode, 1960; Home, 1998). "Role strain begins to increase more rapidly with a larger number of roles than do the corresponding role rewards..." (Goode, 1960 p. 487). This unfortunate truth explains the high level of stress that many of the women in this study reported surrounding their

responsibilities as mothering students who had to work in order to provide for their families. Phoenix expressed great frustration as she reflected upon all that she was trying to do and how she often felt that with her multiple responsibilities, while everything got done, nothing was done *well*.

And it's madness trying to balance all these things. You know, just being able to spend some time with your kids is almost impossible. Because when you are at home, you're doing school work, you're doing research for papers or writing papers, you're doing assignments and you're trying to clean and you're trying to cook and, there is no time left to take kids to the park.

This sense that the requirements of one role overshadow and directly conflict with the requirements of another role is supported in the literature termed "perceived multiple role stress, the feeling that meeting the demands of either role interferes with meeting the demands of the other role, and it is not clear exactly how the demands of both roles should be met." (Gigliotti, 1999, p. 37). Additionally, the high level of shift work in this study and other studies of low income mothers has been shown to produce additional feelings of role overload (Perry-Jenkins, Goldberg, Pierce & Sayer, 2007).

The whole time I was in school, I always worked at restaurants. I always worked third shift and went to school in the day time up until six months ago when I started working as graphics operator. But I still work third-shift and go to the school in the day time.

Sally's choice to attend school, care for her daughter and work in the evenings left her very few hours a week to dedicate to sleep, leaving her constantly exhausted and potentially overwrought. While this study did not directly assess role strain, comments which implied role strain and role contagion (where one is thinking about the requirements of one role while completing the requirements of another role) were more pronounced when the children in the home were younger, just as Van Meter and Agronow (1982) stipulated. In addition, while data on family finances were not requested, it did seem that interviewees who mentioned stress regarding their daily living expenses were also more likely to voice feelings of role overload, as consistent with Home's 1998 study finding that low income women experienced higher levels of role stress. Similarly, as Home (1998) found, distance education (online) opportunities were cited by the women in this study as reducing their experiences of role overload.

And the classes met once a week and it was for like two hours but I could do it at home. So like right now I have to fix dinner. I could fix dinner and still be in the classroom so I could multi-task a lot better at home than sitting in the classroom. Because my time is really valuable. So it works out really well if I can do things at home. Like I can be typing and in the classroom and helping her with her homework. Danielle shared that online coursework allowed her to meet the multiple demands of motherhood and academic life concurrently, reducing her experiences of role overload.

While the women in this study had multiple roles which they identified themselves as occupying, the published theories of role strain which require that women have rigid

hierarchies of roles does not seem to be the case within this study population (O'Neil & Greenberger, 1994; Van Meter & Agronow, 1982). Women in this study seemed to move between their multiple roles, navigating lives as worker, mother and student, if not with ease, with proficiency and grace, indicating that they might have more fluid role systems (Marks & MacDermid, 1996). The findings of this study indicate that single mothers do experience role strain, but successfully navigate those roles through prioritization and willingness to lower their expectations of themselves. The use of lowering her standards for herself as a coping mechanism to diminish role strain should be further investigated with other groups.

### **Marginality and Mattering.**

Due to the status of 'single mother' put the women in this study at risk, according to Schlossberg's theory of feeling marginalized within their university (1989). Interestingly enough, this was the case for many of the women in the study when asked if they felt that they were important to their university. Samantha shared her frustration at the lack of interest she perceived from her university. "I don't feel that any initiative has been made to say, hey welcome. We want you to be comfortable. We want you to be welcome and you know, feel part of this university." Unfortunately, this experience of feeling lost within the larger university was common, but was mitigated by a feeling that she was important within her major area. So while many participants felt marginalized by the larger institution, they had a sense of mattering within the context of their specific departments.

The concept of mattering, as defined by Schlossberg (1989) has four aspects: attention (being noticed), importance (feeling cared for), ego extension (feeling someone will be proud) and appreciation (feeling efforts are appreciated).

[Instructor's advisor] wrote ... one of the best books on typography that are used in all schools, ... she [instructor] helped recommend me for a scholarship and she recommended me to be ... we have this book and she recommended me to be an art director for it. So I felt like that was, ... a turning point in my career that I got noticed and something that I was working on was noticed. Something specific that I was working on was seen by somebody else.

Sally spoke about a specific time which hit almost all of the tenets of mattering: her advisor identified her (attention) and felt that she would be a good addition to the staff of the book (importance), and even might be proud of the work she produced as art director (ego extension). Once in the role of art director, the student staff of the book relied upon her to put forth good efforts (dependence) and she was recognized for her work as the art director for the book within the campus community (appreciation) (Hamrick, Evans & Schuh, 2002; Schlossberg, 1989). Sally expressly identified the attention portion of the model in her quote, but mentioning the recommendation provided by her professor showed that she felt cared about (importance). While this quote exemplifies most of the portions of mattering, it is the exception in the expression of multiple levels of mattering. Most of the quotations which support a feeling of mattering illustrate the concept at the attention or importance level. While Scholossberg does not identify a hierarchy specifically, she does indicate that

some aspects build upon one another. Therefore, experiences of ego extension or dependence and appreciation have more impact, causing a deeper sense of mattering as contrasted with experiences of being noticed (attention) or feeling that someone cares (importance).

One interesting outgrowth of this concept of mattering is the idea that several mothers shared that their experiences added depth and value to the educational process of their more traditional peers. While this idea does not fit neatly into a category (perhaps coming closest to dependence or appreciation), it was clearly articulated by multiple women in the study. Susie spoke about being an asset to the students in her classes based on her knowledge of the ‘real world’.

I am a great asset because I know things about life outside the college. I know what these students are looking forward to going to. I know what to do, words like I know the competition. I know how cruel and harsh, yet rewarding it can be... I can have a lecture to these freshmen to let them know what, how cruel this world really is and what you have to be prepared for.

Brett also felt that her experiences as a single mother were important to share with the students at her university. “Like most of my papers are on us and, any chance I get to talk about the unjust world that we as single parents live in, I do it.” This concept of raising awareness for the other students in their courses was an interesting one to consider relative to the theory of mattering. The drive to share their experiences with other students implies that they felt that their experiences were important and valued or cared about, but none of the

reflections on this topic made the assertion that their contribution was needed or that their efforts were precisely valued by their peers. The women in this study somehow formed the opinion that their life experiences as single parents could be instructive for their more traditional peers-- indicating some level of appreciation. Conversely, however, various comments also show that those same traditional peers were often the cause of much of the women's experiences of marginality. This dual challenge of being both a source of knowledge for classroom peers and by doing so becoming a potential target for criticism from peers who do not appreciate or understand the life of a single parent has implications for how mothers might choose to interact within a classroom environment. Should they be willing to share their experience as a single mother, that experience is likely to marginalize them from their peers who might treat them as though they had "12 toes and 9 eyes" in the words of one participant. Conversely, to be called upon to share that experience could be a moment of mattering where at least attention if not importance is directed towards the single mother by virtue of having her called on as the 'expert' on the topic of single motherhood.

Considering this concept of awareness raising or advocacy for marginalized groups relative to Schollossberg's theory could yield interesting information regarding how best to assure that parenting students feel that they matter at an institutional level. Additionally, working with staff who interact with single mothers to encourage them to work towards creating situations that lead to experiences of ego extension or dependence and appreciation are critical. The feeling of ego extension (that someone would be proud) is directly related to the importance of institutional recognition of academic excellence in the form of honor

societies, Dean's Lists, and other accolades. This concept applies well to single mothers, which is not surprising given the development of the theory utilized a sample of non-traditional adult students, many of whom had parenting responsibilities (Schlossberg, 1989)

### **Person-Environment fit.**

Much of the inquiry that has been undertaken relative to Person-Environment fit and major choice focused on traditional aged students who lived on campus and were not independent from their families (Feldman, Smart and Ethington, 1999; Pike, 2006 & Umbach & Porter, 2002). Going into this research, the college choice patterns of parenting students who had to support families implied that major selection might be different for this group than their peers (Kienzl, 2004; Ratner, 2004). Where Person-Environment fit stipulates at its most basic level that students look for an academic environment where they feel that their personalities will best 'fit', as opposed to more instrumental considerations such as salary in their careers. Unlike more traditional students, single mothers attending college have to support families, so, the pay scale and stability of appointment within career is a concern as they select their majors (Fenske, Porter, DuBrock, 1999; Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Kienzl, 2004; Ratner, 2004; Reay, Davies, David & Ball, 2001).

While the desire to provide for her family was clearly important to the women in this study, that fact did not appear to affect the choice of major for the women who participated in this research. Samantha's conversation with a professor about her chosen major was one example of major choice that appeared to contradict many of the findings of previous research.

I said I am debating between psychology and sociology. One pays approximately \$10,000.00 more a year and he said but which one do you really want to do for the rest of your life and I said sociology and he said, that's where you need to be.

Phoenix had a similar quote regarding her selection of a social work major: "It's certainly not the most well-paying job, social work, but it is definitely one of the most satisfying that I could possibly do." These two women along with several of their peers chose professions that were not well known for the salaries they commanded, but of those study participants who made similar choices, each professed a strong sense of 'fit' within the major that they had chosen. This disregard for more instrumental concerns such as salary was a surprise given the conclusions of previous studies (Fenske, Porter, DuBrock, 1999; Ratner, 2004).

It should be noted, however, that while women did not explicitly consider only instrumental concerns such as paychecks, their choices were informed by factors such as the availability of jobs within their chosen major/career path, the amount of time they would have with children in various careers and in careers which had similar Holland codes, often women made pragmatic choices surrounding their pursuit of those degrees. Beth opted to pursue the professoriate because she felt that it would allow her to spend time with her son, and Autumn made a choice not to pursue Biology because she was concerned for her son's safety if she was required to work with unsafe chemicals. While they were aware of financial constraints and challenges of the majors they selected, in the final analysis, all opted for majors which lead to careers which they felt would best match their personalities, skills and abilities. In light of the findings of this study, Person-Environment fit appears to apply

to this population in similar ways to more traditional students. It could be that many (but not all) previous studies focused on career selection within the community college (student population is composed of a higher number of non-traditional students) as opposed to the university.

This study supports the theory of Person-Environment fit as it relates to major selection for single mothers. While the single mothers in this study did not use the concepts of Person-Environment fit to select their universities, they did take care to consider their own skills, talents and abilities as they chose their majors, and most reported strong feelings of fit within those chosen majors. One aspect of major selection within this study which might impact the application of Person-Environment fit is the high concentration of ‘feminized’ professions or majors within the study population. Aside from a woman who majored in Geography, a woman who majored in Graphic Arts and a woman who majored in Religion (but minored in Psychology), the remaining participants were in highly feminized professions. Due to the small sample size, the implications of this pattern of major choice for Person-Environment fit are unclear but warrant further investigation. This concentration of study participants within feminized professions points to a potential of lost talent within the sciences and engineering (Hanson, 1996). Autumn expressed concern regarding her selection of Biology as a major. She had heard from some Biology majors that upon graduation one *might* be required to work with dangerous chemicals. Instead of pursuing her dream to do biological research, she transferred into Geology. Upon follow up, she was enrolled in a graduate program in Geography, clearly indicating her ability to excel within

higher education. While this is one example, it clearly warrants consideration, and the potential cultivation of single mothers who express interest in science and engineering. This is seen as especially important due to the fact that science and engineering are well paid fields, unfortunately, however, “lower SES women are much more likely than upper SES women to stay of the sciences”, and important factor to consider when discussing single mothers, who are largely within the lower SES designation (Hanson, 1996 p.182).

### **Further Research**

This study uncovered several topics that would benefit from further in depth study. I have identified five areas where further research is warranted: the paradox of support and challenge faced by single mothers; applying Person-Environment fit to non-traditional student’s major selection; pride as a personal support, the use of religion as a support mechanism for single mothers of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, and aspirations towards graduate degrees amongst single mothers who are completing undergraduate degrees. Each of these areas will be explored in more detail in the following pages to give beginning direction for possible further study.

#### **Paradox of struggle and support**

Women in this study were very grateful for several things. First and foremost, they were grateful for their wonderful children, who without exception were the light of their lives. They were proud of who their children were and got immeasurable support from the pride the children expressed in what they were doing, as well as physical supports such as assisting with household chores. Women in this study were also quite grateful for

scholarships, government grants and even loans. Financial aid of these types allowed them to pursue the undergraduate education they saw as essential to getting ahead in a competitive marketplace.

Concurrent with gratefulness and joy over children and financial aid was a reality which was less joyful. Children, while incredibly important and deeply loved, also required a great deal from their mothers. Some, like Samantha's son, needed a soccer coach. Some, like Catrina's daughter, needed help to assure that her school projects were done well. While all women met their children's needs with joy, this often left them leaving ever less time for their homework or other needs. The cost of 'downsized dreams' was real in terms of time to degree as well as aspirations (Ratner, 2004). For K.B., she did not travel or attempt to be a masseuse, she opted instead to pursue her RN degree—something she felt was a 'sure thing' which could provide for her son, even when child support payments were not forthcoming. Sick children meant that student mothers missed class to go to the doctor, sometimes, as in Eliza's case, at the expense of her final grade in a course. Additionally, while all women enjoyed and were grateful for the financial support they received from the financial aid office, many shared concerns regarding how they would pay their utilities bill, or how they had to plan out meals to stretch their food dollars to the end of the month. Danielle registered for coursework while undergoing chemotherapy, knowing that she was not well enough to attend classes, but unable to make ends meet without the loans she got for attending college. Clearly, while financial aid is important, it is not enough.

How can we see children as a support and source of pride while also recognizing the impact they have to stifle their mother's aspirations and compromise her best efforts on school work? How can we see the importance of financial aid monies in granting access to higher education to this underrepresented group while also acknowledging the desperate financial straits of women on the edge of poverty? These questions are poignant ones which deserve further research into the complex and paradoxical facts which comprise the daily lives of single mothers working and attending college.

### **Non-traditional students and Person-Environment fit**

As indicated in the previous section, the application of Person-Environment fit to single mothers in this study yielded data that suggest that their major selection was similar to their traditional peers in light of this theory. This finding is at odds with the limited studies that address major selection, and therefore further research is needed on non-traditional students pursuing undergraduate degrees and their major selection process. In addition, while the findings of this study did indicate that Person-Environment fit was applicable, it is important to note that the women in this study did make their major selections within a bounded environment which reflected the realities of their lives as mothers, workers and students. Many of the studies which show that education level has an impact on earnings had a great deal of participation from students who were pursuing associate's degrees (Kienzl, 2004; Ratner, 2004). Given this fact, further research upon low-income, non-traditional students pursuing baccalaureate degrees should be conducted to consider how well the Person-Environment fit theory applies to this population.

Research of this sort could tease out the relationships between the instrumental tendencies highlighted in some studies and the findings of this study where women made choices informed by projected earnings, but did not base their entire choice of major on such factors. In fact, some women clearly articulated the fact that their choice of major would not earn them as much money as other majors that they considered, however, they made their selections based on their aptitudes or interests. Such research could consider the link between understandings of post-graduate earnings and major selection while also probing for other factors which influenced major choice. Further research could look specifically at groups of students who used primarily knowledge of skills, aptitudes and interests to select a major that was in line with those skills and interests (Person-Environment fit) versus students who made major selection choices primarily on the basis of more instrumental concerns such as salary upon graduation. A longitudinal study considering the persistence of these two groups within their chosen universities would be an excellent way to extend the knowledge around Person-Environment fit.

### **Pride as a personal support**

Women within this study were proud of their hard work. They were proud of their academic accomplishments, especially when their universities recognized their hard work. Additionally, they were proud of their abilities as parents as evidenced through their pride in their children. This took various forms, from being proud of the hard work that their children did around the house, to simply being proud of how bright or talented their children were. Some mothers shared photos; some introduced their children to me and some told stories that

illustrated recent accomplishments that their children had made. This sort of pride deserves further investigation as no research could be found on single mother's expression of pride in their children or their children's accomplishments. More in depth research would allow investigators to tease out the potentially distinct but intertwined concepts of pride in mothering abilities and pride in children and their children's successes within school or afterschool programming.

Additionally, several of the mothers in this study had experiences where their academic excellence was called into question. These experiences were hurtful and demeaning, but were also examples of the fierce pride that many had in their academic abilities. "I'm not capable of writing a good paper? ... I was working and going to school and raising my two kids and you going to come up there with something like that to me." The three most vocal examples of this phenomenon of righteous indignation in the face of questions regarding academic abilities came from three African American women. While some research has shown that students of color and students with disabilities experience a more 'chilly climate' on campus, additional research should explore the impact of questioning the abilities of talented African American single mothers on perceived classroom climate. Given the impact of positional pedagogies identified by Tisdell (1995), "the gender, race, class, sexual orientation—of both the participants and the instructor matter and have an effect on the learning environment" (Tisdell, 1995 p. 75). Given the presence of positional pedagogies, in depth research into creating classroom environments which foster high expectations and discourage underestimating or making assumptions relative to academic

competencies of for African American single mothers is essential. Clarifying this possible experience of discrimination will go far in allowing administrators to create an environment which welcomes all single mothers.

### **Religion as a support mechanism**

Within this study a minority of the women interviewed identified finding support for their educational process in their relationship with God. However, a majority of the study participants who identified as African American cited their own personal faith as a significant source of support for them as they navigated the educational system. Queen's advice to her peers who are still in school looking for suggestions on how to persist and succeed centered around being able to rely on her religion.

I see women now, ...that are still in school and I run into them, they ask now how I did it and I am, I am able to encourage them and give them some advice from what I went through to, you know,... in order to do it and it comes back to my spirituality.

The support systems reported by the women who found religion to be a significant source of support ranged from being small, like Valeria's "my support system is me, and the Lord." to being quite extensive like Danielle's which included family members, friends, a boyfriend, church and her daughter. The inclusion of a deity as a portion of a support network deserves further investigation, especially as it might specifically pertain to African American women. African American women in college have been found within the literature to rely upon their religion or spirituality when they are facing stress (Constantine, Wilton, Gainor, & Lewis, 2002; Watt, 2003). Religion was also reported to assist African American women in college

with their identity development as they navigated multiple identities (Stewart, 2002; Watt, 2003). While there is research regarding African American women's use of spirituality within the context of higher education, further research on low income women acquiring postsecondary education which looks at religion as a support for this specific population is important to discern if other ethnicities utilize religion and spirituality in similar or different ways.

Another area warranting further investigation is partnerships between universities and community agencies such as churches, synagogues, and civic centers to educate women about the opportunities provided by undergraduate education. This would build upon the presence of church or faith communities in the lives of single mothers (especially African American single mothers) while also raising awareness of postsecondary education within the community. Research shows that low income families and communities are less aware of the benefits and costs associated with college attendance than their more well off peers (Horwedel, 2006; Long, 2004). As that is the case, having programs to educate low income communities about the costs and benefits associated with the pursuit of an undergraduate degree could not only encourage attendance, but also provide information for the support communities of single mothers so that those communities could be more aware of and responsive to the needs of parenting students. Additionally, having programs which educate women about college could lead to a cohort of women choosing to attend college—something which research shows supports single mothers (Riemer, 2004). Programs which operate utilizing cohort systems have built in community and peer support, which can

drastically decrease women's feelings of toiling all alone to complete their undergraduate degree (Riemer, 2004).

### **Aspirations towards a graduate degree.**

Without any prompting, thirteen of the sixteen women interviewed as a part of this research divulged either concrete plans to attend graduate school, or reflected on their own process of considering that option. Given the large number of barriers encountered and shared by the women, it was surprising to hear that a majority of the women in this study were willing to continue to surmount those obstacles in order to pursue additional education. There were two levels of aspiration within the participants in this study. There were those who had a clear plan for attending graduate school in the future, and there were also those for whom, like Lily, undergraduate study had opened the door for consideration of additional education. "That's something that I didn't think I wanted to do but now that I see that there is such a need for it, it's like well maybe one day, maybe after I finish this degree, I can go back..." A significant number of other mothers, however, had clearly articulated plans for pursuing graduate study such as Catrina, who knew exactly what she wanted to pursue her master's degree in, and later in the interview disclosed a timeline for those degree studies. "I hope to have a BSW and I would like to enroll in grad school ... for a Master's in Social Work and I'm thinking about doing a dual Master's ... with Public Health." Further exploration is needed into how and why these women who clearly articulated their own stress surrounding attending college chose to continue within the same educational system that had presented them with so many problems. It could be that the increase in self esteem reported

by previous research (particularly related to the Parents as Scholars Program in Maine) and the idea of ‘investment in self’ identified in this research come together to create a desire for further education, but this possibility should be borne out with additional research to determine what factors might play into this intention (Butler & Deprez, 2002; Duprez, Butler & Smith, 2004). Perhaps the process of transferring from a community college into a university gave many of these students a taste of academic transition and so they were less apprehensive regarding the academic transition to graduate school. Addressing the graduate aspirations of single mothers is an important area for further research given the additional financial benefits that come with graduate degrees. Given that single mothers who have gotten an undergraduate degree are interested in pursuing further education, looking in depth into their experiences of graduate school could be informative. In addition to considering that, a more comprehensive study which interviewed women within a wider breadth of career fields would be able to explore if the desire for further education exists within career fields (such as Engineering) where starting bachelor’s graduate salaries are high. Additional research into the incidence of graduate school aspirations within single mothers who selected majors which have been reported to have a more chilly classroom climate would also provide more insight into the phenomena of undergraduate single mothers’ interest in pursuing graduate degrees.

## **Conclusion**

This research has implications for practice, policy, theory, and research. New directions for practice include increasing student awareness of current services, fostering a

sense of community for single mothers, and providing some support for child care. Policy implications include revising attendance policy verbiage, encouraging online and hybrid coursework, assuring articulation agreements, and providing additional financial aid to parenting students. Applications of Marginality and Mattering and Person Environment Fit verified that these theories do apply to non-traditional students such as single mothers on the whole in similar ways as they might to more traditional students. It should be noted, however, that Person Environment Fit seems to be impacted by factors not taken into account by Holland's typology, such as earning potential between similar professions and other more practical concerns . Lastly, further research in several specific areas was proposed: to clarify the dual nature of the struggles of single mothers regarding financial aid and children's needs which often also serve as supports; the impact of Person-Environment fit on major selection for single mothers; the experience of pride as a personal support—especially indignation at being underestimated as it might be experienced by all racial and ethnic groups; to examine religion as a support mechanism for single mothers, and to uncover more information regarding the development of graduate aspirations on the part of single mothers who work and seek bachelor's degrees.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A: Interview Questions

Go over informed consent; tape recording; take notes

Fill out demographic sheet-- member checks via e-mail or hard copy.

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself; how would you describe yourself to a stranger?  
*(May need to prompt for roles)*
2. What do you hope to do when you graduate?
3. Could you please share your educational history starting with high school?
4. How did you chose your college? What factors did you consider? How does it meet your needs?
5. How did you chose your major? What factors did you consider? How does it meet your needs?
6. What characteristics did or do you expect in an academic environment?
7. Do you generally share the fact that you are a single parent with your professors or other students? Why or why not?
8. How would you describe the people at your university? Are they like you or different? What makes you feel this way?
9. How would you describe the people in your major? Are they like you or different? What makes you feel that way?
10. What motivated you to pursue a baccalaureate degree?
11. Please tell me about an academic transition, or a transition that impacted your academics. What about **yourself** made the transition successful? What **supports** did you have? What coping **strategies** did you use? *(May touch on community college transfer)*

12. What has encouraged or supported you in your pursuit of your education?
13. Tell me about a time when you were proud of your academic work and why.
14. Can you share with me some ways that being a mother work works shapes or impacts your experience of being a student?
15. Could you please describe a "typical day" for you?
16. How do you feel your campus is supportive of single parents? *(Is there anything you feel that your college should be doing to support single mothers?)*
17. Do you feel that you, as a person, are important to your school? What makes you feel that way?
18. What other information do you think is important for me to have about you as a mother, worker or student?
19. Do you have any questions for me?

## APPENDIX B: Coding Scheme

### I. Accommodation

- a. Provided
  - i. Institutional program
    - 1. Mentoring
    - 2. Tutoring
    - 3. Support group
    - 4. Leave of absence
    - 5. Career services
  - ii. Financial Aid
  - iii. Professors
    - 1. Understand needs
    - 2. Flexibility
      - a. Allow child in class
      - b. Allow missed class for sick child
      - c. Submit work late
      - d. Encourage pursuit of further education
  - iv. Subsidized child care
  - v. Flexible course options
    - 1. Evening attendance
    - 2. Online classes
  - vi. Student organization
    - 1. Family friendly social activities
- b. Desired
  - i. Professors
    - 1. Understand needs
      - a. Bring child to class if needed
      - b. Willingness to be available
        - i. Explain course content again
        - ii. Review work before due date
      - c. Academic standard which takes into account multiple priorities
    - ii. On campus housing
    - iii. Health Insurance for child
    - iv. Financial aid
    - v. Parking
    - vi. Connecting with other mothers to share experiences
    - vii. Listening to their needs
      - 1. Welcoming environment
      - 2. Accelerated coursework
    - viii. Technology

1. Online course offerings
2. Online degree programs
3. Laptop
- ix. Course schedule
  1. Flexibility
  2. Follow syllabus (allows her to plan)
  3. “Slamming us with work during the end of the semester”
- x. Social activities that are family friendly
- xi. Different standard based on parenting status
  1. Desire to ‘earn’ those accommodations with good grades
  2. “I don’t want anybody to give me anything because I have a kid”
- xii. Child care
  1. Subsidies
  2. On campus

## **II. Agency**

- a. Action
  - i. Pursing financial support
  - ii. Pursing academic accommodation
  - iii. Pursing social support
  - iv. Future focus
  - v. Disclosure of parenting status
- b. Avoidance

## **III. Major selection**

- a. Long term goals
  - i. Graduate degree
  - ii. Wage earning
  - iii. Career opportunities
  - iv. Schedule in career
- b. Short term goals
  - i. Coursework as relevant to parenting
  - ii. Safety
  - iii. Time with family
  - iv. Time to degree
  - v. Amount of work required
- c. Success in classes/ Interest in topic
- d. Encouragement from professors
- e. Based on previous experience
- f. Family influence in selection of
- g. Person-Environment fit

## **IV. Purpose of education**

- a. Career related

- i. Assures job security
  - ii. Improves job options
  - iii. Improves job skills
- b. Financial considerations
  - i. Way to better one's station
  - ii. Increase earning potential
  - iii. Provide for child
- c. As subversive
- d. Investment in self

**V. College selection**

- a. Geography
  - i. Close to support network/ family
  - ii. Close to job
- b. Family friendly
  - i. Ability to bring child to campus
  - ii. Social activities as family oriented
  - iii. Non-traditional student programs
- c. Institutional reputation
- d. 'the college experience'
- e. Personal connections
- f. Convenience
- g. Previous positive experience with college
- h. Learning style
- i. Major selection
  - i. Availability of desired major
  - ii. Multiple major options
- j. Finances
  - i. Cost of attendance
  - ii. Financial Aid provided
- k. Availability of transfer credit
- l. Flexibility
- m. Size
- n. Application
  - i. Support during application process
  - ii. Ability to begin college right away

**VI. Child**

- a. Provides encouragement
- b. Distracts from school work
- c. As a source of pride
- d. Importance of setting a good example
- e. Sacrifice for child
  - i. Delaying plans based on child's needs

- f. Choice of career as influenced by motherhood
- g. Limits options for college attendance
- h. Motivation to complete degree
- i. Jealous of mother's time
- j. Academic liability

**VII. Divorce**

- i. As self discovery
- ii. Additional responsibilities
  - 1. Role of primary care giver
- iii. As catalyst for pursuing further education

**VIII. Multiple roles**

- a. Conflict
- b. Balance
- c. Intersection
- d. Multitasking
- e. Creating challenge to academic obligations

**IX. Community college**

- a. As a stepping stone to college
  - i. Transfer credit
  - ii. As a 'practice run' for college attendance
- b. Limited career options available with associate's degree
- c. Importance of articulation agreements
  - i. Increased time to degree
- d. GED courses
  - i. Waste of time
- e. Drawbacks
  - i. Lack of preparation for university work
- f. Benefits
  - i. Cost
  - ii. Online coursework
  - iii. Flexible course scheduling options
  - iv. Support for child care
  - v. Small course size
  - vi. Ease of coursework
  - vii. Student services
  - viii. Location
    - 1. Close to home

**X. Support**

- a. Lack of support
  - i. From professor
  - ii. From family
  - iii. From department/ major

- iv. From institution
  - 1. Feeling like a number
- v. Feeling that she needs to justify herself
- vi. From government
- b. Positive support
  - i. Female role model
  - ii. Employer
    - 1. Flexibility
  - iii. Faculty/ Staff
  - iv. Other students
  - v. Institution
    - 1. Feeling of belonging
  - vi. Government support
    - 1. Doesn't want to be seen as a 'charity case'
  - vii. Religion
  - viii. Determination
  - ix. Financial Aid
  - x. Friends
  - xi. Therapist
  - xii. Family
    - 1. Financial
    - 2. Emotional
    - 3. Child care
  - xiii. Child
  - xiv. Child's father
  - xv. Significant other
  - xvi. Community members

## **XI. Barriers**

- a. Age
- b. Limited child care options
- c. Cost of education
- d. Lack of access to technology
- e. Hostile environment in courses
- f. Lack of knowledge
  - i. Transfer requirements
    - 1. Increased time to degree
    - 2. Expense of general ed courses at university
  - ii. Campus Resources
    - 1. Mental Health services
    - 2. Student organizations
- g. Health
  - i. Mental

- ii. Physical
  - 1. Lack of sleep
- h. Lack of consideration of multiple responsibilities
- i. Lack of support
  - i. From institution
  - ii. From major
  - iii. From family
- j. Social isolation/Alienation from peers
  - i. Inability to ‘party’
  - ii. Attitudes of other students
- k. Institutional disorganization
  - i. Losing paperwork
  - ii. Inadequate sections for course demand
  - iii. Lack of technology support or training for faculty teaching online
- l. Time since last enrollment
- m. Time to degree
- n. Transportation
- o. Perceptions of ‘single mother’ by others
- p. Timing of course offerings
- q. Time scarcity

**XII. Academics**

- a. High school involvement
  - i. Drop out/ Uninvolved
  - ii. ‘President of everything’
- b. “Majored in partying”
- c. Her perspective as a mom in classes beneficial to all students
- d. Aspirations for graduate degree
- e. Pride in quality of work
  - i. Disbelief in own abilities
  - ii. Indignation at being underestimated
- f. Institutional recognition of academic success
  - i. Morale booster
  - ii. Feeling of mattering
- g. Reputation of university (prestige, rigor)
- h. Goal directedness
- i. Concern that multiple obligations do not allow her to focus on school
- j. Paying for college makes her take academics more seriously
- k. Fear that motherhood is seen as an ‘excuse’ for poor performance
- l. Feeling that academic standards have dropped based on motherhood
- m. Challenging/ Rigorous coursework

**XIII. Financial constraints**

- a. Purpose for return to school

- b. Limit ability to participate in extracurricular activities
- c. Loan aversion
- d. Challenge of continued enrollment
- e. Child care
- f. Cost of textbooks, software, computer
- g. Lack of financial support
  - i. From institution
  - ii. From parents
  - iii. From child's father

**XIV. Stressors**

- a. Conflicting priorities
- b. Custody issues
- c. Being primary care taker
- d. Physical ramifications of stress
- e. Family pressure to be academically successful
- f. Time to degree
- g. Need to 'lower her standards' of cleanliness, timeliness
- h. Feeling chronically behind on school work
- i. Need to 'prove' herself academically
- j. Financial concerns
  - i. Child care
  - ii. Ability to provide for child's needs
  - iii. Desire to do for herself, not be a 'charity case'

**XV. Priorities**

- a. Financial provision for family
  - i. Earning potential
- b. Changing priorities based on child
- c. Creating a stable family environment for child
- d. Academics
- e. As evidenced by time allocation
- f. Conflicting priorities
- g. Caring for child
  - i. Structures time based on child's needs
- h. Different from traditional students
- i. Balancing competing priorities
  - i. Family commitments not detracting to academic dedication
  - ii. Willing to have things be 'good enough', not perfect
- j. Time with child
  - i. Chooses academic schedule to allow for time with child

## APPENDIX C: IRB Approval

North Carolina State University is a land-grant university and a constituent Institution of The University of North Carolina

**Office of Research  
and Graduate Studies**

**NC STATE UNIVERSITY**

Sponsored Programs and  
Regulatory Compliance  
Campus Box 7514  
1 Leazar Hall  
Raleigh, NC 27695-7514

919.515.7200  
919.515.7721 (fax)

**From:** Debra A. Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator  
North Carolina State University  
Institutional Review Board

**Date:** April 5, 2007

**Project Title:** Mothers, workers, students: Seeking Institutional Accommodation for Single Mothers Transferring From Community Colleges to State Universities

**IRB#:** 125-07-4

Dear Ms. Robinson:

The research proposal named above has received administrative review and has been approved as exempt from the policy as outlined in the Code of Federal Regulations (Exemption: 46.101.b.2). Provided that the only participation of the subjects is as described in the proposal narrative, this project is exempt from further review.

NOTE:

1. This committee complies with requirements found in Title 45 part 46 of The Code of Federal Regulations.  
For NCSU projects, the Assurance Number is: M1263; the IRB Number is: 01XM.
2. Review de novo of this proposal is necessary if any significant alterations/additions are made.

Please provide a copy of this letter to your faculty sponsor. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Debra Paxton  
NCSU IRB