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Female adult learners, the fastest growing subpopulation in community colleges, face challenges navigating domestic, professional, and academic roles and take time off from school to reconcile issues with multiple role navigation; thus, their education is disjointed and staggered, creating barriers to persistence. This interpretive design instrumental case study answered the following research questions: a) How do female adult learners in community colleges perceive multiple roles and b) How do female adult learners in community colleges navigate multiple roles? Framed by Role Theory, data was collected through 19 interviews and two focus group sessions with community college female adult learners who also met the criteria of having at least one child age 13 or younger. These findings offer several insights into both perception and navigation. This study found a paradigm shift in social perception and behavior regarding women’s return to college. This study also found that women closely connect their role as student to their role as mother, yet they still hold their role as mother as the most esteemed and prioritized role. Finally, this study found that female adult learners perceive that the mother role allows for delegation, but the student role does not. These perceptions inform the navigation strategies for staying in control and setting boundaries (strategic planning, sacrificing, and separating the spheres), and strategies for staying positive (support gathering, self-encouragement, and avoiding negativity). These new understandings of female adult learner perception and navigation have implications with regard to research and practice in higher education. Implications for research include further exploration of the specific sacrifices that women make when
returning to college and their long term implications, studies that explore innovative ways to bridge school and home for community college students, further exploration of the success and effects of navigation strategies. Implications for practice include providing campus resources specific to female adult learner needs including but not limited to an all-female support group, a women’s resource center, and a mentoring program and fostering a culture of flexibility on community college campuses to accommodate female adult learner needs.
Female Adult Learners in Rural Community Colleges: A Case Study of Role Perception and Navigation for Student Mothers

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

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DEDICATION

To Turner and Avery
for inspiring me to do my best and to be my best
and for giving me a reason
to follow my dreams
BIOGRAPHY

Tara Thompson was born and raised in a rural town in North Carolina. Her love for literature and learning led her to a career in teaching. She first taught middle school, and then life led her to a teaching position at the local community college. She has worked in community colleges for ten years in a variety of ways, including teaching English Literature and Composition, developing and implementing online course and pedagogy, and developing and coordinating programs. It was in these roles at the community college that she became passionate about adult learning. Her adult students inspired her to return to college herself to pursue her doctorate.

Her two children further inspired her to work hard. She wanted to show them that learning is a beautiful combination of hard work and fun and that reaching your goals can be incredibly rewarding.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my committee, Dr. Bracken, Dr. Akroyd, Dr. Bowles, Dr. Brady, thank you for your wisdom, support, and guidance.

To my family…for loving me, for taking an interest, for helping me manage my life when it became more than one could manage

To my friends…for laughing with me, for enduring with me, for celebrating with me. Perhaps I could have done this without you, but it wouldn’t have been nearly as much fun.

To my other professors and colleagues and to all of my teachers…for pushing me, ever so gently, to find my strength and worth and for giving me the opportunities to do so.

To my students…for inspiring me to be fearless in the pursuit of my dreams

To my children…for encouraging me with your smiles, with your hugs, with your heart. You are the purist example of love, and I hope that I have made you proud.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background and History

Women have been attending college since the late 1800’s, and even in the earliest years, there existed the notion that women had different needs as learners. Most female college students attended all-female institutions during those early years when colleges were open to women. Horowitz (1987) explains, “The first generation of women to attend college held the serious purpose of becoming someone in the world” (p. 195). These “women” were most often what we would refer to today as traditional students. They left high school and the homes of their parents to pursue independence and academia. Postsecondary education has changed since those first female pioneers began chipping away at the barriers that kept them from their academic and professional potential. Among these changes is a rise in nontraditional learners (Aud, et al, 2011) (financially independent, serve as a parent or primary caregiver of others, stop and start their education several times, are employed full time), particularly female adult learners, who also hold the purpose of “becoming someone in the world” and also have unique needs.

The National Center for Education Statistics (Aud et al, 2011) projects an overall increase of 25% in nontraditional learners ages 25-34 and an overall increase of 12% in students ages 35 and older. The NCES also projects a 16% increase in the number of women students between 2007-2018 as opposed to a 9% increase in male students. More specifically, the total enrollment of female adult learners (ages 25 and older) rose from 3,530,000 in 1998 to 4,215,000 in 2007 (NCES, 2011). These numbers reveal a change in
the demographic of postsecondary institutions, specifically community colleges, which have garnered more attention since the recession of 2008 when enrollment increased and college budgets decreased (Hoover, 2011) and in which female adult learners comprise 60% of the population. In addition, The Institute for Women’s Policy Research states that one-fourth of undergraduate students in the United States are parents of dependent children. Half of those parents are single parents. The IWPR also states that student parents are more likely to attend community colleges (Miller, 2010).

The journeys that bring female adult learners to college at a later age are varied, yet research indicates that many of them have some similarity of experience as well as defining characteristics. Most female adult learners struggle to navigate multiple roles as students, mothers, wives, employees, and caregivers in a way that is unique to their gender (Home, 1998; Fairchild, 2003). A 2002 National Center for Education Statistics Special Analysis on Nontraditional Undergraduates reports that 27% of nontraditional learners seeking a bachelor’s degree interrupted their enrollment in the first year. Further, adult learners are most at risk for dropping out, and postsecondary administrators are challenged to design programs specific to the needs of nontraditional learners. Although some community colleges do offer programs and resources specific to their nontraditional population, and some specifically for female adult learners, the offerings are sporadic across the whole of community colleges. These offerings are dependent upon resource availability and site-specific campus decision-making. More colleges need to develop programs and resources to help female adult learners overcome the challenges that they face, but to plan programs and services for female adult learners, college faculty and administrators must understand female
adult learners’ unique experiences. It is not enough to know the challenges that female adult learners face. Many of these challenges (such as need for childcare, financial barriers, lack of support, difficulty navigating roles) are noted in the literature on female adult learners; however, to truly create effective programs, we must know how female adult learners perceive these challenges and how they use decision-making to navigate them. This study will focus specifically on how female adult learners perceive and navigate multiple roles.

Statement of the Problem

Research shows that female adult learners face challenges navigating domestic, professional, and academic roles (Barnett & Baruch, 1985; Home, 1998; Fairchild, 2003). As women accept the role of adult learner in a formal academic setting, they must adjust their personal resources such as energy, focus, and time to accommodate this new role. Such adjustments affect domestic, academic, and professional roles by taking time and energy away from those roles. This readjustment of personal resources not only puts pressure on female adult learners to keep everyone happy and fulfill all obligations, but it also creates feelings of guilt among women as they take time away from children, spouses, family, and friends to pursue a personal and professional ventures.

Community Colleges are populated largely by female adult learners (AACC, nd; US Census Bureau, 2011), specifically student mothers (Miller, 2010) who are trying to fit college into their already busy schedule. Research shows that female adult learners in community colleges take time off from their studies in an attempt to reconcile the issues associated with navigating multiple roles; thus, their education is disjointed and staggered, creating barriers to persistence.
Previous research shows the existence of challenges related to navigating multiple roles and subsequent social support ramifications (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Fairchild, 2003; Home, 1998; Leavitt, 1989), but few studies seek to explore how women negotiate resources to resolve these conflicts. More women than men experience negative consequences due to role conflict and, consequently, stop out of school (Hagedorn, 1993; Hanniford & Sagaria, 1994; Home, 1998; Tian, 1996). For those who do continue, Van Rhijn (2012) states, “Undoubtedly, role conflicts occur, but we need to understand how and why student parents choose to take on and continue with the additional student role despite significant conflicts” (p. 7). In a recent study, Moen and Sweet (2007) call for more research to explore the school-family interface regarding mothers in higher education. Kasworm (2003) also calls for more research and planning regarding the success of nontraditional students. In addition, research shows that role conflict greatly impacts persistence for students with families (Berkove, 1976; Galvin, 2006; Hagedorn, 1993; Hanniford & Sagaria, 1994; Hinds, Malenfant, & Home, 1995; Home, 1998; Kasworm, 2003; Kerka, 1995). Researchers suggest that community colleges should offer more support for adult adult learners, from specific family-inclusive orientations and female adult learner workshops to more specific counseling services for female adult learners (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992). However, such changes in programming may be moot without a better understanding of how female adult learners in community colleges actually perceive role conflict and work to navigate the challenges it creates.
Purpose and Guiding Research Questions

Existing research documents the ongoing challenges that women face as female adult learners, as well as the strengths and successes that they have in the classroom and as a member of college culture. Further, community colleges face the challenge of helping their largest constituency persist in a less disjointed fashion. To do so, they must better understand how female adult learners, student mothers, in particular, navigate those challenges, and they must further understand the psychology of female adult learner experiences and address them in ways that parallel the assistance they provide for traditional age students. One of the primary challenges involves navigating multiple roles. The purpose of this study is to better understand how female adult learners in community colleges perceive and address issues associated with navigating multiple roles.

The guiding research questions are:

1. How do female adult learners in community colleges perceive multiple roles?
2. How do female adult learners in community colleges navigate multiple roles?

Research Methodology

Qualitative research was used to answer the research questions. Qualitative research focuses on participant voice and participant perceptions of their own experiences. This study is instrumental (Stake, 1995), utilizing interpretive design (Merriam, 1998) with a focus on describing and analyzing the collective experiences as described by the participants. The study design, which is outlined in chapter three, has the potential to offer a deeper understanding of community college female adult learner lived experiences.
Theoretical Framework

This study is framed by role theory, first established by Goode (1960) and later refined by the many studies that have used role theory (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Fairchild, 2003; Home, 1998; Terrell, 1990). Role theory establishes that roles, whether perceived or real, do not exist independent of each other, but instead, impact each other in such a way that the person navigating them is impacted, as well. Role theory offers concepts such as “role strain,” “role conflict,” and “role contagion” to describe the various impacts that roles can have. Though I did not impose these terms on the data, I acknowledged them when they emerged and also questioned their absence as I related participant experiences to the existing literature. The existing research that utilizes role theory further offers themes such as guilt, stress, anxiety, depression, role reevaluation, and effects on personal relationships, among others. Role theory is discussed substantively in Chapter Two.

Significance

Understanding how female adult learners perceive and navigate multiple roles has the potential to affect not only future research, but also the practices of community colleges. Community College policies are informed by several factors including national and state policy, accreditation, and community/student needs. These policies inform community college practices. Thus, a better understanding of female adult learner needs may prompt community college policymakers to implement policies and practices that better serve this constituency. There are several reasons why this is important. First, female adult learners currently outnumber male adult learners, a trend which is expected to continue, and as a sub-population of community colleges, female adult learners face unique challenges. In their
efforts to increase completion rates, which has become a national priority with the adoption of “The Completion Agenda: A Call to Action” (McPhail, 2011), community colleges must acknowledge the disjointed learning trends specific to female adult learners and find ways to help them have smoother transitions and more fluid learning experiences. In addition, as society evolves, the roles that women navigate may become equally an issue for male adult learners. Thus, an effort to address the issues with female adult learners may become a preemptive way of addressing them for males in the future. Finally, this study has the potential to impact research and literature, taking the topic of female adult learners and multiple roles to a different dimension. The findings of this study may inform the direction of future studies and may substantiate previous research.

Summary

In summary, this study explores community college female adult learner student mothers’ perceptions of multiple roles and how they navigate issues related to navigating multiple roles. The literature places this issue at the forefront of a quest to better understand female adult learners. In addition, this study has the potential to offer much in the way of adding to the literature while also providing information to help community college leaders better serve their largest constituency.

Chapters two and three will further define this study. Chapter two offers a review of the literature, including a description of adult learners in postsecondary education, as well as a description specific to the characteristics of female adult learners. The section on female adult learners offers a review of literature on female adult learner development, college and classroom culture, social support systems, and female adult learner strengths and challenges.
Chapter two also provides an overview of community colleges and their role in educating adult learners. Another section on how female adult learners are unique to community colleges will narrow the context. Finally, Chapter two offers an in-depth exploration of role theory and how it has been treated in the literature. Chapter two ends with a discussion of the literature and how it frames the study.

Chapter three defines and describes the methodology for this study. It begins with a discussion of qualitative research as a valid and appropriate methodology and next defines case study and explains why an instrumental case study using interpretive design is a plausible choice for a study on community college female adult learner perceptions and navigation of multiple roles. Chapter three also offers a statement of subjectivity and positionality to address the researcher role in this qualitative study. Chapter three further describes the two phases of the study design, along with site selection, participant selection, and two phases of data collection and offers a discussion of ethics and acknowledgment of IRB. A portion of Chapter three is devoted to trustworthiness as well as credibility, dependability, and peer debriefing as strategies to achieve trustworthiness in the study. In addition, Chapter three notes the strengths and limitations of the study, provides a timeline of study activities, and describes data analysis strategies. Chapter three ends with a conclusion, summarizing the main points regarding the methodology of my study. Chapter four presents portfolios of participants and describes the findings of the study which are grouped by Perceptions and Navigation. Chapter five offers a discussion of the findings with regard to previous literature, and Chapter six discusses the implications of the findings for research and practice.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Female adult learners have quickly and steadily become the largest demographic in community colleges, and this demographic continues to grow (Phillipe & Valiga, 2000; NCES, 2009). To meet its mission of addressing student needs, the community college must work to understand the challenges facing its largest constituency, female adult learners, and make efforts to improve their experiences. The existing literature on female adult learners and their experiences navigating multiple roles speaks to the importance of this issue in the realm of adult education and certainly in the continued success of community colleges to meet their needs. The existing literature reveals the challenges and strengths of being a female adult learner (Castles, 2004; Cullen, 1994; Edwards, 1993; Jacobs & King, 2002; Kasworm, 2005; McGivney, 2004; Peter & Horn, 2005; Voccaro & Lovell, 2009; Waller, Bovill, & Pitt, 2011), as well as female adult learner perspectives regarding their social support systems (Aycock, 2003; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Coburn & Woodward, 2001; Cox & Ebbers, 2010; Loeper, 2003; Scott & King, 1985; Suitor, 1988; Waller, Bovill, & Pitt, 2011). This study will build on these concepts and will seek to understand how female adult learners in community colleges perceive and navigate multiple roles.

This literature review will define and describe adult learners and female adult learners, specifically. It will review literature regarding female adult learner persistence, college and classroom culture, and female adult learner development. It will show how female adult learners in community colleges are unique to their context. This review will
also offer a description of the community college, as well as an understanding of role theory in the literature in general and specific to adult learners.

**Adult Learners in Postsecondary Education**

Adult learners are often characterized in the literature by their age. The literature refers to adult learners as “nontraditional” who are typically above age 25. In recent years, the number of nontraditional students (ages 25 and up) has surpassed that of traditional students (younger than 25). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), between 2000 and 2009, enrollment of traditional students increased by 27%, while enrollment for nontraditional students increased by 43%. This enrollment pattern is expected to continue between 2010 and 2019 at a rate of 9% for traditional and 23% for nontraditional students. In addition, most nontraditional students attend college part-time, while most traditional students attend on a full-time basis. Among part-time students, the number of males between 2000-2009 increased by 14%, and the number of females increased by 26%.

Thus, the statistics show an increase in nontraditional students, particularly part-time female students. However, it is important to note that although these reports are based on a characterization of adult learners by age, more recent literature includes other factors such as role as parent or primary caregiver, financial independence, and interruption between high school and college, military service, and full-time employment.

Of the 20,966,826 students enrolled in Title IV institutions in Fall 2009, 5,919,985 were between the ages of 25-39 (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2011). Of these 30.2% were enrolled in public 4-year universities, and 32.7% were enrolled in public 2-year colleges. The rest were enrolled in private institutions. Of that same nearly 21 million students,
2,323,863 were over age 40. Of these, 23.1% were enrolled in 4-year universities while 40.7% were enrolled in public 2-year colleges. These statistics show that nontraditional learners are enrolled in greater numbers at 2-year colleges than at universities. The same study by Knap, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder (2011) commissioned by NCES recorded retention rates across university type. According to NCES, 2-year public colleges have 39.2% part-time retention rate as compared to a 59.2% full-time retention rate, and 4-year public universities 49.9% part-time retention rate and a 78.6% full-time retention rate. Thus, retention rates are lower for nontraditional students who are more likely to be part-time students at 2-year public colleges. Although these numbers say much about the growth of nontraditional learners in postsecondary education, other literature gives a more detailed look at characteristics of adult learners.

Adult learners can be characterized by a number of attributes, behaviors, and attitudes. To begin, adult learners are more intrinsically motivated. They have life experiences which they apply to their learning experiences. Adult learners are also generally goal- or objective-oriented. They learn better in participatory, collaborative environments and are mature, autonomous, and self-directed (Knowles, 1980; Merriam, 2001). In addition, adults navigate many roles and may need advanced planning with syllabi and course structure to help them navigate their domains. Adult students may also lack confidence, particularly if they have been out of the classroom for a long period of time, and they may need special consideration for parental, social, or professional commitments.

Higher education has typically been focused more on traditional students; thus, nontraditional students have not reaped the benefit of such focus and continue to face barriers
and challenges. These barriers manifest themselves in a variety of ways. For example, Mercer (1993) categorized barriers as situational, dispositional, or institutional. One such situational barrier involves the responsibility of parenting. Adult learners with older children may persist to graduation, but adult learners with younger children may stop and start their education several times (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002) in order to curb the situational and financial need for childcare. Fairchild (2003) discusses guilt as a situational barrier and also sees the lack of a cohort as a barrier to persistence. Adult learners feel guilt for taking time away from their families to pursue a personal interest, even if that personal interest will eventually add to the livelihood of the family. Adult learners also lack social connections when they return to college. An adult learner cohort would help adult learners form a social support system on campus that could provide the encouragement and camaraderie needed to face the challenges of being an adult learner. Adult learners are less likely to participate in campus activities other than simply going to class, because they have “little time to make connections” (Fairchild, 2003, p.15); therefore, if a cohort is not created as such, adult learners may not form social collegiate ties in the ways that we assume college students do. In addition, adult learners face three dimensions of role strain: role conflict, role overload, role contagion (Home, 1998). Role conflict occurs when two or more roles vie for the time and attention of the learner. Role overload occurs when one role requires more of the learner than the learner can handle. Role contagion is preoccupation with one role while completing another. Perceived role strain or overload often causes more stress than actual strain or overload, and often, women blame themselves for their inability to focus or attend to responsibilities rather than question social or familial expectations. In addition, adult
learners face financial barriers as they add tuition, books, and possibly childcare to the growing number of bills that they are required to pay (Jacobs & King, 2002). The cost of college is increasing, along with the resources required to complete courses. Some courses require expensive books, software, or tools (for programs such as nursing and dental assisting). Women in particular must also consider the cost of childcare. Some colleges offer childcare onsite, but admission is limited, and at some institutions, students must vie for admission with college faculty and staff, as well.

Although these barriers create difficult challenges, adult students are successful despite their challenges. Adult learners bring interesting attributes to the postsecondary classroom. As compared to nontraditional students, adult learners have a more complex knowledge base, focus their learning on applicable skills, and are known to be more authentically involved with family, friends, and community; they interact with faculty and make meaning of class material in a more effective way (Bradley & Graham, 2000).

Kasworm (2005) found that nontraditional learners have a higher rate of satisfaction with their college experience and have higher academic performance as compared to traditional students. Nontraditional students are more likely to utilize resources and study hard, increasing their self-efficacy (Kasworm, 2005). Nontraditional learners are also more self-directed, display more power and autonomy when dealing with authority figures, are more motivated and psychologically mature, and have more positive attitudes and clearer goals (Beder & Darkenwald, 1982). In the intergenerational classroom, as in the community college, adult learners see themselves as a mediating voice, helping to bridge knowledge and conversation between the instructor and other students (Kasworm, 2005, p.17).
Female Adult Learners

Literature over the past few decades establishes the growth of female adult learners in higher education. According to CAEL (2008), higher education has seen an increase in female adult learner attendance at postsecondary institutions. The National Center for Education Statistics (2009) projected a continued increase of 16% in women learners (ages 25 and older) between 2007-2018. The Chronicle Almanac (2011a) projects similar numbers. From 2011 – 2019, the population of women attending college is expected to increase by 18% while the population of men is expected to increase only 8%. In addition, the U.S. Census Bureau (2011) published that 4,129,000 women ages 25 and older were enrolled in college in 2008, 40% of the total number of women enrolled, indicating that adult women, or nontraditional women, are the “fastest growing segments of higher education’s student populations” (Fairchild, 2003, p. 11). The trend of women becoming the majority in postsecondary institutions has been gaining momentum for several decades. Between 1980 and 2001 women represented the majority of undergraduates in postsecondary education (Peter & Horn, 2005). In addition, they were awarded more bachelors and associates degrees, and women have been overrepresented in older student populations and populations of students with families (Peter & Horn, 2005).

Female adult learners, like adult learners in general, return to college for several reasons. Some return to add to their skill sets; some have put off their dreams of earning a college degree while they tended to their own families’ needs, and return to school once their children are grown or have reached a more self-sufficient age; some women return to school as dislocated workers. Returning to school, however, does not necessarily change their
domestic or professional responsibilities. Female adult learners navigate multiple roles as mothers, wives, caregivers, and employees (Home, 1998). Some are even single mothers who serve as primary care-givers to their children. Female adult learners are more likely to experience guilt for having to take time and energy away from their families in pursuit of a personal interest (Fairchild, 2003). They also feel stress, anxiety, and depression in association with multiple roles (Barnett & Baruch, 1985). However, academically, female adult learners earn better grades, build better rapport with instructors, and utilize instructor office hours and academic resource centers more than other students (Cox & Ebbers, 2010). They also cite intrinsic motivation to learn and often serve as mentors to other students within the classroom (Kasworm, 2005).

In female adult learner literature, several subsets of women can be found: African American, first generation female adult learners, Latina, and mothers and single parents. Although research on some of these subsets is gaining momentum in the literature, they are still generally underdeveloped. Thus, I will not look to them as underpinnings for this research but may refer to them should I see a need in data analysis or findings.

**Female Adult Learner Development**

A true understanding of female adult learners should take into consideration their identity development and the effect that returning to school has on not only their everyday lives, but also on their emotional and psychological ways of being. Identity development in most of the adult education literature stems back to Erikson (1968), who saw identity formation as a form of separation, individuation, and autonomy. However, Erikson’s work was not situated in the feminine. His work on identity development took into account only
what it meant to be male, not female, and thus other researchers had difficulty applying Erikson’s theories to women. Since Erikson’s work in 1968, researchers have tried to establish theories of identity development more closely associated with the lived experiences of women. Most noted in the literature on female adult learners are the writings of Marcia (1966), Miller (1976), Chodorow (1978), Gilligan (1982), and Belenky et al. (1986).

**Seminal works.** Marcia’s (1966), study of 86 college males was an extension of Erikson’s (1968) work on identity and identity diffusion. Marcia defined four phases of ego-identity: Identity Foreclosure (an acceptance of prematurely created identity or identity shaped primarily by parents), Identity Achievement (young people who have tested options and committed to an identity), Moratorium (people who are in active crisis phase and have not committed to an identity yet), and Identity Diffusion (drifters who are avoiding tasks related to identity formation). Josselson (1987) would later take this framework and apply it to women. Miller’s book *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976) explored women’s development as an effect of relationship. She discusses women’s tendency toward service of others, primarily men and children, and how this service-oriented identity creates both internal and external conflict for women. Using a psychoanalytic perspective, Chodorow (1978) delineates the differences in male and female personalities and roles, pointing specifically to women’s development as relational. In Gilligan’s (1982) attempt to differentiate the identity development of men and women, she offers three stages of moral development or the ethic of care: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. From this, Gilligan proposes that women begin with a focus on individual survival, but then learn that to be female means serving and caring for others, thus creating the dichotomy that
caring for others means not caring for oneself, a phase of much internal strife for women. If women reach the final stage, they learn that caring for oneself means that they can better care for others, and a compromise is reached. Gilligan (1982) is noted for her critique of Kohlberg (1969) and Erikson’s male-centric theories and for proposing a view of women not as other or opposite as they were marginalized by Kohlberg and Erikson, but rather as simply different. Perhaps most quoted in recent literature regarding female adult learners is the work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule (1986), who explored epistemology through connected ways of knowing. These are epistemological positions known as salience (being voiceless and powerless), received knowing (having the ability to receive knowledge from authority, but unable to create knowledge), subjective knowing (knowledge is subjective and privately created), procedural knowing (wanting to learn the proper way to apply knowledge as taught by an authority figure), and constructed knowing (all knowledge is contextual and anyone can create knowledge from their experiences). Connected knowing refers to the woman’s preference for and tendency to link experience to learning such that learning is constructed rather than transmitted. Connected knowing involves reflection, analysis, and often considering a situation from various perspectives.

**Connectedness, voice, and socially constructed identities.** These aforementioned authors and their work in the field of identity development have become the foundation upon which most current literature on adult female identity has been positioned. Josselson (1987), building on Marcia’s (1966) work, further examined the phases of Identity Foreclosure, Identity Achievement, Moratorium, and Identity Diffusion and suggested that knowing which
phase a young woman is in during late adolescence and early adulthood is a good predictor of how her identity will develop over the next few decades.

Tarule (1988) explored perspectives of female adult learner needs by focusing on voice, connected knowing, and developmental position. Women have been known to have a “different voice” (Gilligan, 1982), that is more exploratory and less decisive. They are better listeners and encourage personal narrative. Further, Tarule discussed developmental positions in reference to Belenky, et al (1986); Tarule applied these theories to female adult learner experiences and explained how an female adult learner might feel silenced when her subjective way of expressing herself is rejected by the scientific and academic community. According to Tarule:

Being heard, feeling herself a participant in good dialogue, and feeling that she can talk about her ideas – these are all essential to the returning woman if she is to develop confidence. Being heard is also intimately interwoven with her sense of herself as an informed and smart (rather than ignorant and dumb) learner. (p.25)

Yet, often, institutions do not listen to female adult learners and do not validate their ways of knowing, and thus women feel “disconnected, isolated, and often scared” (Tarule, 1988, p. 25). For some women, connected knowing is less about learning new things and more about organizing what she has already experienced (Tarule, 1988). Sometimes, women’s connected ways of knowing are incongruent with the classroom culture or instructor practices. Younger students may become uneasy when female adult learners begin telling what seem to be personal stories of experience in an attempt to construct knowledge, and instructors may feel uneasy when female adult learners ask personal questions of the instructors in an attempt to
understand the instructors’ perspectives. Tarule argued that female adult learners are initially filled with self-doubt about their abilities and may abandon their typical ways of constructing knowledge to attempt to fit in. “Connected learners must learn to achieve a balance between connected and separate thinking. The latter frequently allows them to feel empowered; the attempt to find balance helps them become conscious of how they learn” (Tarule, 1988, p. 28). With regard to developmental position, “The developmental sequence of positions can be understood as describing two progressions: first, the unfolding over time of organized frameworks that define the limits and possibilities of a given individual’s world view; and, second, the process by which new learning, and adaptation to new environments, proceeds in a much shorter time frame” (Tarule, 1988, p. 31).

In addition, Daloz (1988) explored female adult learners’ struggle to break free from the “tribe,” which is essentially their more traditional roles as mothers, wives, and caretakers, and how this breaking free forces some women to “lose their balance” in negotiating life roles and understanding their own beliefs and values. (p. 234). A female adult learner in the first year may feel that she does know her beliefs, those being the beliefs that she held in her traditional roles as mother and wife, the beliefs of what Daloz would call the “tribal world” (1988, p. 238); however, in her second year, the same woman may be in a questioning phase, a redefining time during which she questions her former beliefs. This phase, Daloz refers to as the place of imbalance, the “gap between old givens and new discoveries” and the place where “inner voice is born” (1988, p. 238). During her third year, the same woman might feel very confident in her beliefs again, though her beliefs have been redefined and
reestablished in her life. Daloz describes this phase as a woman taking “authority into her own heart, to listen with greater respect to the inner voice” (1988, p. 238).

A more current theory focused on adult development and change in the adult learner is self-authorship. First coined by Kegan (1994) and later developed by Baxter-Magolda (1992, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2004), self-authorship requires a balance between a contextual understanding of knowledge and one’s own beliefs. Typically, movement in self-authorship occurs as a result of reflection on and reaction to a provocative moment. Certainly becoming a female adult learner could be that provocative moment, initiating the move to self-authorship. Self-authorship has three phases: The Crossroads, Becoming the Author of One’s Life, and Internal Foundations. (Pizzolato, 2005, p. 625). At The Crossroads, adults begin to look introspectively for refined definitions of their own personal beliefs and goals, and they begin to separate these from and mesh these with other external perspectives. Pizzolato assumes that self-authorship is a “desired outcome of student participation in higher education,” (2005, p. 625) and thus surveyed over 600 college undergraduates to explore self-authorship’s relationship to the provocative moment. According to Pizzolato, students who exhibited self-authorship also exhibited “volitional efficacy – a belief in one’s ability to persist in goal-directed behavior in the face of challenges” (2005, p. 630). Pizzolato claims that self-authorship may be different in traditional students because traditional students are still so greatly dependent upon external sources (parents) for decision-making. (p. 632). Nontraditional female learners may tend toward self-authorship, and their very presence in higher education is in some ways a reflection of a provocative moment; however, women returning to school also face many barriers to such change. Creamer and
Laughlin (2005) also examined the topic of self-authorship. They write that self-authorship involves agency, and though someone may have the potential for self-authorship, without the presence and development of certain agentic behaviors, self-authorship may not yet occur. Creamer and Laughlin believe that self-authorship often comes with time and experience. Wawrzynski & Pizzolato (2006) found that traditional students with more social personalities scored lower on self-authorship tests, calling into question the difference in social versus relational agency, an interesting concept in its application to female adult learners who are relational learners.

Current research. Hayes and Flannery, (2000), attach their discussion of women learners to Belenky et al.’s Women’s Ways of Knowing (1996), explaining that the book offered exciting new insight into women’s development and epistemology. “We view gender as a type of social relation that is constantly changing, created and recreated in daily interactions as well as on a broader scale through such institutions as school, work, and the family” (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p. 4). The authors refer to Sandra Harding’s (1996) notion of gendered systems of knowledge, that gender, as a social construct, affects what we know and how we know it. Hayes and Flannery (2000) situate their text in the feminist theories of Belenky et al (1986), and recognize their most important contribution to understanding female adult learners is that “they challenge the invisibility and marginalization of women’s experience in the knowledge-building process” (p. 11). Hayes and Flannery’s (2000) book about female adult learners focuses on several themes that they and their colleagues deemed to be significant to women’s learning based on the developmental and epistemological theory such as Belenky et al’s (1986) and the little
research available on the topic. These themes (social contexts, self-esteem and identity, voice, connection, and transformation) all have their roots in developmental literature.

In her chapter on social context, Hayes (2000a) explores three important social contexts for female adult learners: curricula, interpersonal interactions, and institutional culture. In each context, Hayes offers evidence that women are ignored, overpowered, or oppressed. In addition to formal learning, Hayes (2000a) discusses learning in the workplace, community, and in the home as other learning contexts for women. Although the home may seem like a safe environment for identity development and learning for women, Hayes points out that the social patriarchal structure is also prevalent in many homes and thus creates identity conflict, specifically for female adult learners who may be ready to challenge traditional notions of gender roles. Hayes writes, “If we shift our lens from formal education to the intersections among women’s learning at work, in the family, and in the community, we may find similar issues of connection, separation, and conflict…” (p. 50). Hayes notes that as women experience formal learning and thus grow and develop in the new identity of the female adult learner, other contexts (work, home, community), may not eagerly accept such change and may pose conflict, sometimes resulting in domestic violence and abuse.

Flannery (2000b), explains, “Much of women’s learning has to do with women’s identity and self-esteem, even though these concepts are not often treated explicitly in discussions of women’s learning” (p. 54). Flannery refers to Mary Catherine Bateson’s (1990) notion of identity creation and composition, that women are constantly recreating and redefining themselves. In offering a comprehensive understanding of identity, Flannery pulls
from Josselson, who writes, “Identity is the interface between the individual and the world” (1987, p. 8). To this degree, identity is formed by a combination of internal and external influences. According to Flannery, “Opinion varies, however, on the extent to which identity is influenced from within or from without, on whether its formation is a conscious or an unconscious process, and on the extent to which early identity formation remains influential” (2000b, p. 56). Flannery also exposes the more psychological view of identity in which identity formation is an unconscious process that works to maintain “a sense of internal coherence” (2000b, p. 56). Finally, Flannery points to a sociological view of identity in which women make conscious choices about who they will be and how they will situate themselves in their roles. The notion of identity is impacted by essentialist or nonessentialist perspectives, essentialists being those who look for fundamental characteristics of identity that do not change over time, and nonessentialists being those who “consider many possible expressions of identity…and assume multiple identities…that change across time, and that my conflict with each other” (2000, p. 57). For nonessentialists, the identity is formed through socially constructed realities and identities may change per context. Flannery further focuses on identity formation and autonomy of women, pointing to Erikson (1968), who saw identity formation as a form of separation, individuation, and autonomy, Marcia (1960), who saw identity negotiation in terms of foreclosure, achievement, moratorium, and diffusion, and Josselson (1987), who further explored Erikson and Marcia’s path of identity development by applying it to female adult learners. From identity formation and autonomy, Flannery moves to the idea that women’s identities are created through their relationships with others, pulling from the work of Chodorow’s (1974), Gilligan (1982), Miller (1986),
Emmanuel (1992), and Stern (1985). Flannery’s discussion of “Identity Formation and Socially Constructed Identities” (p. 62), which pulls from a more nonessentialist perspective, is found in more recent research. Flannery notes the work of Anderson and Hayes (1996) and McCarn and Fassinger (1996) who found that social forces affect identity construction. Female adult learners are a product of gendered identity, which derives from social constructs of what it means to be male and female. Such socialization occurs before birth and extends into adulthood, at which time women often face conflict regarding their expected behavior in roles as mothers, wives, and workers (Flannery, 2000b). To this end, gendered identity cannot be separated from race, class, and culture, and thus to understand how women work as agents of their own identities as adults, one must consider the unique influences of race, class, and culture (Flannery, 2000b)

Hayes (2000b) in her chapter on “Voice” explains the importance of voice with regard to women’s learning. She references Belenky, et al (1986), and notes that “voice implies communication and connections with other people, an orientation to relatedness that has frequently been associated with women in dominant United States culture” (p. 80). Hayes discusses voice in three ways: voice as talk, voice as identity, and voice as power, and refers to Tannen’s (1994) term “rapport talk” as a way of discussing women’s voice versus “report talk”, a term used to describe how men communicate. According to Hayes, women’s voice is an important part of learning for women and thus development for women. She connects the notion of voice to Flannery’s previous chapter on identity, explaining that this “voice” is the mechanism through which women discover themselves and negotiate their identities.
Flannery (2000a) follows with a chapter on Connection. She goes again to Gilligan (1982) and Miller’s (1986) work on how women navigate their worlds via relationships. In this chapter, Flannery also refers to Belenky, et al’s (1986) idea of subjective and connected knowing and calls into question the assumptions upon which our current (as of 2000) understanding of connected knowing exists. Flannery cautions against dichotomous assumptions about how women learn, explaining that women can and often do engage in several ways of knowing.

Transformative learning is another way in which the female adult learner identity development plays out in higher education. Mezirow’s (1978) theory of transformation or transformative learning “implies a metamorphosis into an entirely new form, as opposed to a simple adaptation of the existing form” (Brooks, 2000, p. 140). Brooks offers that much of the criticism regarding transformative learning comes from women researchers or research on women and that transformative learning when applied to women must be based on an understanding of women’s development. According to Brooks, transformative learning may best be understood through narrative, pulling from previous notions of voice in women’s development. She writes, “Transformation through narrative requires that the narrator position herself in relationship to others” (Brooks, 2000, p. 153). It is important to note that transformative learning occurs in some cases as a result of the provocative moment, a concept used in discussions of self-authorship.

Tisdell’s (2000) chapter on Feminist Pedagogies extends Flannery, Hayes, and Brooks’s chapters on women’s development, voice, and learning. Tisdell defines women’s pedagogies as “stories, both personal narratives and public stories, and their use in
education” (p. 157) and being “concerned about increasing women’s choices and status in society” (p. 156). She points to Maher and Tetreault (1994) as laying the literary foundation for future feminist pedagogies, and further offers five themes: (a) how knowledge is constructed, (b) voice, (c) authority, (d) identity as shifting, and (e) positionality, or dealing with differences based on the social structures of race, class, and sexuality. Tisdell further examines psychological, structural, and poststructural feminist pedagogies and suggests that poststructural pedagogies offer “the most potential for working toward social change for women” as well as ways to “unite affective and cognitive forms of knowing” (p. 183).

Wentworth and Peterson (2001) echo the notion that for women, midlife is the most important time for identity exploration and change. The authors reference a study by Luttrell (1989, 1997) that finds that working class women distinguish between academic knowledge and common sense and that these women feel that by cultivating their academic knowledge they are “threatening their connections to working class cultures that value common sense knowledge over school knowledge” (2001, p. 10). Hence, women have to learn to negotiate their identity among the two worlds. The study by Wentworth and Peterson, though focused on working class women in prestigious four-year colleges, speaks to the nature of identity development among women at community colleges who are primarily working class. Wentworth and Peterson quote Josselson (1987) who claimed, “[T]he self is gradually modified so that one day one may look back and realize that one has changed inexorably, that one is different from how one used to be and is still essentially the same (p. 12)” (2001, p. 14). Josselson’s comment speaks to the idea that women do not decide to go to college to change their personality or their identity; they choose to go to college to change their
socioeconomic status or achieve a personal goal. They go to change their place in the workforce. Yet something happens during the experience that causes an identity shift. Further, Wentworth and Peterson explore changes in social class identity. In their case studies, they found that “identity concerns are not isolated or exclusively internal events; other people may play a crucial role in standing for something different from oneself, but somehow within reach” (2001, p. 18). They describe a questioning of the sense of self from each of the women interviewed in their case study. The authors suggest that the questioning resulted in either identity transformation or continuity, and the authors further note that changes in social contacts may “precipitate identity inquiries, revisions, and/or crises” (2001, p. 19), otherwise known as a “Provocative Moment” in the theory of Self-Authorship (Pizzolato, 2005). It stands to reason that for nontraditional female learners, this is a constant state.

In addition, Stewart, Ostrove, and Helson (2001) studied patterns of personality change in midlife women. Stewart et al provide a firm review of the literature which suggests that women develop their identities differently from men. Instead of identity development occurring in adolescence as is the case with males, identity development occurs for females in midlife through intimate relationship (p. 24). This finding is particularly important in connecting developmental theory to female adult learners. Instructors may mistake female adult learners’ maturity and self-directedness with the idea that female adult learners have fully-developed identities and thus may disregard the female adult learner’s need to develop voice and negotiate identity among social and domestic roles.
Helson and Srivastava (2001) explored paths of adult development, dividing adults into three categories: Conserver (those who try to live in accord with social norms), Achievers (those who desire social acknowledgement of achievement), and Seekers (those who seek personal independence). In the study, Helson and Srivastava explain that Achievers and Conservers work to “sustain commitments to goals such as promotion in work or stability in marriage”, both which are rewarded by adhering to social norms. Seekers, however, try to “de-emphasize these norms and to learn to trust their own feelings and sense of self as a part of their pursuit of personal growth.” (p. 998). Although this theory has not been formally applied to female adult learners, it lends itself to possible future research regarding internal conflict with regard to female adult learner identity development.

Friedman (2004) studied the correlation between reflective judgment and personality traits in female students and concluded that autonomy has a significant correlation to reflective judgment. Friedman explains further:

It is possible that psychosocial experiences like leaving home, going away to college, meeting new people, becoming employed, and experiencing a variety of positive and painful interactions enhance autonomy that allows an individual to become more reflective in embracing and resolving life’s dilemmas (Kramer, 1990). (p. 302).

This same sense of autonomy is similar to Helson and Strivastava’s (2001) idea of the Seeker, both turning away from social norms and turning inward to intuition and reliability and understanding of the self. The list of experiences given by Friedman that may trigger or become a catalyst for such change are all a part of the life of a nontraditional female student at a community college.
**Mothering and identity.** Becoming a mother also affects a woman’s identity development. Rubin (1967) introduced the Theory of Maternal Role Attainment which suggests that women undergo a series of psychological experiences and changes that help her adapt to motherhood. These stages include mimicry, role-play, fantasy, introjection-projection-rejection, and identity. This process includes grief as the woman relinquishes roles that no longer fit into her identity as a mother. Rubin explained that a woman’s maternal identity is fused with her whole self-identity in such a way that she cannot simply step into and out of the mother role at will. More current studies suggest a more comprehensive theory called “Becoming a Mother (BAM)”, which allows for growth through the experiences of motherhood and a widening of the mother identity through those experiences (Mercer, 2004).

Other studies explored identity development and motherhood. Ruddick (1980) suggested that women’s maternal and connected ways of knowing are influenced by the deep emotional bonds that they have with their children. However, studies on identity and motherhood have been critiqued for having narrow and generalized vision and not including diverse mothering situations or considering how motherhood evolves in different family and social situations (Gerson, et al, 1984; Glenn, 1994). Building from these studies, Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) found two types of mothering, a) mothering as a gendered talent and b) mothering as conscious collaboration. The first assumes that mothering is a talent known only to the feminine gender, and thus, is not a role that can be delegated to others. The second assumes that mothering is a role that can be divided among family members and genders via conscious choice by the mother or parents. In the second type, mothering is
relational instead of internal. Cowdery and Knudson-Martin write, “The analysis shows how beliefs in mothers’ natural childcare abilities and connections become translated into practices that perpetuate separate-sphere mothering even among couples who do not endorse traditional gender roles” (p.343). This study adds to the exploration of an understanding of why division of labor at home remains unequitable, even though women have taken on roles outside of the home like work and school (Cowdery & Knudson-Martin, 2005).

Discussion. Research and literature pertaining to women’s development reveals a rocky start since the time of Erikson (1968) whose research was male-centric. In the 40 plus years since Erikson’s findings, researchers have worked to better understand the unique characteristics of women’s development and their developmental needs. A focus on epistemology has helped to better understand “Women’s Ways of Knowing” (Belenky, et al, 1986), and much of the literature beyond this seminal work has referenced the findings of Belenky and colleagues. Several themes stand out in reference to identity development among female adult learners. First is the idea that identity development for women happens later in life, rather than earlier (Wentworth & Peterson, 2001). This finding calls attention to the imperative of paying attention to the needs of female adult learners instead of assuming that they are fully developed.

Next is the understanding that women are relational. They grow and develop through their relationship with others (Chodorow’s, 1974; Emmanuel, 1992; Flannery, 2000a; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976; Stern, 1985). Relational development is closely tied with connected ways of knowing (Belenky, et al., 1986), in which women try to connect new learning with prior experiences. This process may manifest itself in interesting ways in the
postsecondary classroom (Tarule, 1988) and may require patience from instructors and classmates who fail to understand the need for open, and what may appear to be random or tangential, recall. In addition, the relational nature of female adult learners is revealed in how women navigate multiple roles. Their relationships with others in part inform their decision-making process when deciding how to prioritize their responsibilities and choose among their own needs and the needs of others.

Another concept that has seen much attention in research and literature is the idea of voice. Part of development for women is finding their own voice, which tends to be more exploratory than that of men (Gilligan, 1982). Belenky et al. (1986) referred to the state of being voiceless and powerless as “Salience.” Daloz (1988) also points to the importance for women of questioning one’s beliefs and thus finding her inner voice. The notion of “voice” is connected to relational development or connected knowing because it is the tool with which women communicate and thus narrate their identities (Hayes, 2000). Hayes associates voice with identity and power specifically, and Tannen (1994) differentiates the female voice (rapport talk) from that of men (report talk), further supporting the need to differentiate among their development in research.

Research and literature on women’s development also characterizes identity as a social construct. Josselson (1987) described identity as a result of internal and external forces. This stems from the idea that gender is socially created (Flannery, 2000b; Harding, 1996), thus identity associated with gender is also a socially influenced. Flannery and Hayes (2000) note “social context” as one of the primary themes of developmental literature, and
Hayes further identifies curricula, interpersonal interactions, and institutional culture as contexts that contribute to female adult learner identity development.

The nonessentialist perspective that identity is formed through socially constructed realities and changes per context coupled with Hayes’s (2000) idea that voice is the mechanism with which women negotiate identity creates a scaffold for research that is positioned on the earlier understandings of women’s development and primed to move forward to a more current understanding of female adult learner identity development. Therefore, the final component, and perhaps the one most in need of further research with regard to today’s female adult learners, is the idea of negotiating identity. Kasworm (2005), like Wentworth and Peterson (2001) contends that adult learners are constantly negotiating their identities based on their personal roles, roles as students, and context (p. 4). Pizzolato (2005) offers the term “Crossroads” in the theory of Self-Authorship to describe this state of redefinition, and it would seem that female adult learners are constantly at a crossroads with regard to identity development. This notion of identity negotiation bleeds into other current research focused on how female adult learners navigate and negotiate role conflict (Aycock, 2003; Carney, Crompton & Tan, 2002; Cox & Ebbers, 2010; Edwards, 1993; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Home, 1998; Johnson, Schwartz, Bower, 2002; Voccaro & Lovell, 2009; Waller, Bovill, & Pitt, 2011). The idea that women have different identities for different roles and must, therefore, negotiate those identities between roles by leveraging power and voice to resolve conflict is more salient now than ever as the number of female adult learners in postsecondary education continues to grow.
As women continue to exercise their power and autonomy to return to school, whether for personal or professional reasons, they will continue to find themselves on a developmental journey that perhaps they did not expect. This journey will affect not only the women themselves, but their families, friends, classmates, instructors, and our overall social fabric, as well. The next sections will focus more precisely on the strengths and challenges of female adult learners, some of which have been revealed in the literature on female adult learner development.

**College and Classroom Culture**

Female adult learners not only face challenges associated with role conflict, they also face challenges in the classroom. According to Tarule (1988), female adult learners may experience a feeling of disconnect in the classroom. They may feel that younger students dislike them because of their enthusiasm for studying and learning or because at a time when younger students are trying to detach from their mothers, the female adult learner represents the younger students’ mothers’ generation. Or, she may feel that the younger students look up to her as a wiser, older woman, but this makes her feel more like a mother and less like a part of the learning community. Because of an affinity to connected ways of knowing (Belenky, et al), female adult learners will try to construct knowledge by connecting it to previous experiences. They also rely on their relationships with their instructors and mentors in which trust is an important factor. Tarule (1988) describes this trust: “trust that he or she knows what is important to learn, trust that he or she cares about students, and trust that he or she can teach them, even if he or she is younger” (p. 27).
Edwards (1993) studied the experiences of mature women students. The students felt their experiences as paid workers or volunteers were valuable and claimed that tutors and instructors looked to them to keep discussions going; however, they felt that their experiences as mother and housewives were not valuable. They felt less confident about testing and writing skills but more confident overall compared to the younger students. Women worried about being different from the norms of the traditional boy bachelor student, so they were less expressive about personal experiences related to being a mother and a housewife. Women experienced a “cycle of guilt”, feeling guilty for thinking about family when they were at school, and feeling guilty for taking time away from family to be at school. Some participants did not want their partners or spouses to encroach on their role as student. They cherished the independence of what they were doing as learners and wanted to keep those spheres separate. Mature women students sought out friendships with other women who had shared understandings of being a mother, partner, and student, yet many did not have time to cultivate these relationships properly. The women in this study engaged in “connected ways of knowing” (Belenky et al), and chose courses or topics of study that connected to their own personal experiences, passions, or situated learning. Women claimed to keep their academic and domestic lives separate, largely to avoid conflict at home with partners and parents who felt that if education were introduced into the domestic sphere, it would be detrimental to domestic relationships and upset domestic harmony. These issues had less to do with race and class than with sex; however, white working-class women felt that their education distanced them from their families of origin and was censured by them. Going back to school affected mature women learners’ relationships. Eight of the 32
participants ended their relationships, six during the first year of studies. They cited lack of support and enthusiasm from partners as the reason for ending relationships. Edwards suspected that more of her participants’ relationships ended after the post-study.

Despite these challenges, female adult learners also perform at higher academic levels than nontraditional students (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). A survey conducted by CCSSE found that women are more likely to use peer or other tutoring, skills labs, career counseling, academic advising, financial aid advising. Evelyn’s (2002) study of adult learners found female students are 33% more likely to use the college's tutorial services and more likely to visit their instructors during office hours. Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) studied academic performance in nontraditional females as opposed to traditional females with a particular interest in how their roles affected their achievement. They found nontraditional females to have higher levels of academic achievement, even though they also had more complex roles (mother, wife, career professional, caretaker, etc.). All but one of Edwards’ (1993) participants said that what they gained from their postsecondary experiences was confidence.

Social Support System

Although earlier research has focused on challenges associated with gender roles and intergenerational classrooms, Cox and Ebbers (2010) contend that the challenges facing female adult learners are social in nature. Suitor (1988) found that women’s attitudes on gender roles and social issues became more liberal when women returned to school which created difficulties with less educated friends and family members who held more traditional values, specifically with mothers and friends. Thus mothers and friends held a negative view
of women’s enrollment in higher education. In addition, female adult learners may be seen as “superior” by others, and may see themselves as superior because of changing identity (Waller, Bovill, & Pitt, 2011). Researchers have already noted the importance of family support to the success of the student (Coburn & Woodward, 2001). Yet, there is a call in adult education research for more attention to social support systems for female adult learners (Bauman, et al, 2004). An understanding of female adult learner social support systems will help to develop the nature of role conflict as a barrier to female adult learner persistence.

The social support system includes friends, family, spouses, and peer groups as forces of support that are meant to help female adult learners persist in school. Traditional-age students have more social support than do adult learners (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002), making the notion of social support important to an understanding of the adult learner, specifically female adult learners who struggle with role conflict. Loeper (2003) found that nontraditional students work independent of their social support system and have better academic outcomes despite less support. She also noted diminishing family support as the student’s education progressed (Loeper, 2003). Loeper (2003) found that students with supportive partners had lower stress and higher self-esteem, and she concluded that social support can be seen as a buffer for stress for returning students. A report by Brazier (1988) found that flexibility between all stakeholders (family, students, etc.) led to less stress on the part of nontraditional students.

Yet Loeper’s (2003) research also found that spouses offered instrumental help (help with the children, domestic chores, etc.), through the first year, but stopped offering help
beyond that. Research indicates that men are more satisfied with their wives’ role as students if the wife also continues to serve in her other roles at the same capacity as previous to her becoming a student (Scott & King, 1985).

Families are sometimes referred to as “greedy institutions” (Coser, 1974) and are noted to offer marginal support but also cause the most stress and guilt and are insensitive to the challenges and experiences of adult learners (Aycock, 2003). When asked about perceived support from spouses, women were grateful for the support they receive but expressed that their spouses (along with other social support persons) did not understand the responsibilities of a college student and therefore did not offer or continue to offer the level or type of support needed (Aycock, 2003; Scott & King, 1985). Loeper (2003) cited a direct correlation between the length of a relationship and the amount of support. The longer a couple had been in a relationship, the less supportive the spouse would be for the wife’s return to school (Loeper, 2003). Wakeford (1994) also found that relationships with spouses and partners are most vulnerable when women return to school, and Waller, Bovill, and Pitt (2011) also found for female adult learners, a “negative impact upon existing relationships, particularly with peer groups and significant others” (p.523). Relationships were also threatened for students who come from working class families and communities where people are not familiar with the experience of college. (Waller, Bovill, & Pitt, 2011) In Suitor’s 1987 study, both full time and part time students faced challenges with spousal support and became frustrated with the lack of domestic help; marriages suffered. To circumvent the problem with social support systems, some female adult learners create their own support system with other female adult learners because they understand each other’s
challenges (Cox & Ebbers, 2010). These issues with social support systems as noted in the literature may become central to this study as female adult learners reveal how they navigate multiple roles. They may compromise their own academic security and self-efficacy to avoid confrontation with family members, or they may express guilt and frustration with efforts to appease others and still successfully fulfill obligations in multiple roles.

**Female Adult Learner Strengths**

Although female adult learners face many challenges and barriers, they also have many strengths. Voccaro and Lovell (2009) found that although women take breaks from their education, they still stay engaged and make their education a priority. In addition, Vocarro used the term, “Self-Investment” to explain how women invest for personal reasons, rather than others. Waller, Bovill, and Pitt (2011) found that female adult learners had growing self-esteem and increased confidence as a result of returning to school. In addition, female adult learners tend to be more intrinsically motivated, relying less on grades or motivation from others (as with traditional students who may be more motivated by parents encouraging them to get their degree), and are more motivated by a willingness to better themselves. Female adult learners are also more likely to utilize resources such as instructor office hours, academic resource centers, and peer tutoring. They make better grades, have higher GPAs, and tend to take courses that challenge them. In the classroom, female adult learners often serve as mentors to younger students and offer their experiences quickly to others in an effort to be helpful. In addition, female adult learners seek out other female adult learners as support networks.
Female Adult Learner Challenges

In addition to their strengths, female adult learners also face many challenges. Research shows that female adult learners may stop and start their education multiple times, taking time out of their studies to alleviate stress in their own lives due to role conflict (Jacobs & King, 2002). Peter and Horn (2005) found that 32% of students in their study who started their postsecondary education in 1995-1996 had left school by 1998 without their credentials. Of these, 33% of women cited conflicts with their job and taking time off, conflicts at home or personal problems, or change in marital status as reasons why they did not persist. Only 2% of women cited academic problems, and 17-18% cited that they left school because they needed to work or had financial problems.

Peter and Horn (2005) sum up the plight of the female adult learner in postsecondary education:

Women continue to represent 60% or more of students with characteristics that place them at a disadvantage in succeeding in postsecondary education. In particular women make up 60 percent of students in the lowest 25 percent income level, 62 percent of students age 40 or over, 62 percent of students with children or dependents (among married or separated students), and 69 percent of single parents (p.v). According to McGivney (2004), adult learners have more external constraints that prohibit persistence. Lack of confidence may also be a factor in the inability to persist. McGivney (2004) discusses gender differences in completion patterns, noting that women withdraw for reasons having to do with family commitments and lack of or cost of childcare. McGivney also cites “acute conflict between their domestic and student roles” as reasons women do not
persist, noting that “many feel they have to hide evidence of their study when they are at home to avoid accusations of ‘abandoning’ the family” (p. 38). Lack of support from social networks, families, and spouses are other reasons women decide to discontinue their education. (Cullen, 1994; Edwards, 1993; McGivney, 2004). Castles (2004) also studied persistence in adult learners with a focus on social and environmental factors, traumatic factors, and intrinsic factors. Castles found support and ability to navigate roles to be the two most important factors affecting persistence.

In addition to issues with persistence, Waller, Bovill, & Pitt (2011) found that women felt like imposters and lacked a sense of entitlement. These may cause feelings of inferiority and may also silence women both in the classroom and in efforts to express their needs to college faculty and administration and to their social support network. The support network itself may also cause challenges for female adult learners. Vocarro and Lovell (2009) found that, although family is inspirational, female adult learners do not expect that their husbands will help with the housework; thus, female adult learners still take on the primary role of motherhood.

In addition, female adult learners may face challenges in the classroom. Because female adult learners often tie curricular concepts to prior experiences in personal ways, they may make instructors uneasy by pushing boundaries both in class and in their interactions with instructors as they try to understand instructor perspectives which may, in turn, hinder their ability to communicate or connect with the instructor. Female adult learners may also marginalize themselves from others in the class whom they feel are less motivated or less
serious about their studies, which may also impair their ability to connect with other students or participate constructively in collaborative learning.

Finally, literature also contends that the female identity is socially constructed (Flannery, 2000; Harding, 1996; Josselson, 1987); therefore, during this process, female adult learners may struggle with relationships outside of school as they begin to redefine what they believe about themselves, their abilities, their worth, and their roles and negotiate their identities (Kasworm, 2005). Often, these aspects are bounded by and facilitated by context. Community colleges boast the largest number of female adult learners; thus, the nature, role, and characteristics of the community college must be explored to understand how female adult learners function within them. The next section examines the nature of the community college.

**Community Colleges**

To understand how female adult learners in community colleges navigate multiple roles, one must understand the context of the community college. The first community colleges were established in the late 1800s and early 1900s as a way to separate freshmen and sophomores in universities from juniors and seniors in an effort to make universities more successful in research. Relocating the freshmen and sophomores to junior colleges would afford universities more time and money to focus on more mature students and would relieve the burden of having to deal with the antics and issues of late adolescence. Although this particular reasoning did not persist, junior colleges did grow and took on a more vocational role. Later, they would adopt a transfer mission, as well, tying them more closely to the work of the universities (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Today, their curricular functions include
academic transfer, vocational education, continuing education, developmental education, and community service (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). According to the Community College Resource Center, there are over 1,200 community colleges in the United States enrolling over 10 million students each year. “Community colleges serve high numbers of non-traditional students who are often older than 25, working part- or full-time, parents with dependent children, from ethnic minorities, and from low-income households” (CCRC, np). In 2006, 62% of community college students attended part-time (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). In addition, community colleges enroll a disproportionately large amount of minorities (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). Community colleges also utilize part-time faculty at a rate of over 50%, and the primary role of community college faculty is teaching, as opposed to university faculty who are also responsible for research (CCRC, 2008). Community colleges are funded primarily by state and local agencies and confer 70% of the nation’s Associates degrees. The tuition and fees of community colleges are half that of universities, making community colleges more affordable for lower income students. The median age of community college students is 24, and 30% of community college students are 30 years of age or older; 59% are women, 15% are Black, and 14% are Hispanic (Provasnik & Planty, 2008).

Community colleges are located in a variety of places and are spread out more evenly across communities than are universities. In addition, 71% of community colleges enroll between 1,000-10,000 students for a variety of reasons including college transfer, basic education, and continuing education. (Provasnik & Planty, 2008).
In fall 2009, Title IV institutions in the United States enrolled a total of 21 million undergraduate and graduate students; 62% were enrolled in 4-year institutions, 37% were enrolled in 2-year institutions, and 2% were enrolled in less-than-2-year institutions (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2011). In 2009, 58.1% of community college students were White, 15.3% Black, 17.4% Hispanic, 6.6% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1.2% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 1.3% nonresident alien (Aud et al, 2010).

More than half (62%) of community college enrollments are part-time students, at least twice that of 4-year universities (27%). Community colleges also enroll large percentages of minority students with 19% of community colleges having minority enrollments of more than 50% of their total enrollment. (Hussar & Bailey, 2008).

Community colleges have seen increases in enrollment over the past few years, largely due to the recession of 2008. From 2007-2009, community colleges saw a 17% increase in enrollment, and another 11% between 2008-2009. According to Hoover (2011), in addition to steady trends of an increase in nontraditional learners, community colleges have also seen an increase in traditional, first-year students choosing to enroll in community colleges. In 2010, enrollment growth slowed to 3.2%. (Phillippe & Mullin, 2011). The increase in enrollment coupled with a lack of funding and a need to increase course flexibility for adult learners has led to an increase in online course offerings. Parsad & Lewis (2008), reporting on behalf of the National Center for Education Statistics, found that 97% of 2-year colleges offered students online or hybrid distance education courses (as compared to 89% of public 4-year universities). Also, as a result of the recession and in an effort to help
students get jobs in a floundering economy, community colleges are focusing more on programs that support persistence and timely graduations (Conway, 2012).

Community colleges confer more associate’s degrees than other institutions. In 2005-06, community colleges accounted for 70% of all associate’s degrees awarded. Most of these degrees were in liberal arts and sciences, general studies, and humanities with an additional 18% conferred in health professions or clinical sciences. (Hussar & Bailey, 2008)

In 2003-04, 65% of community college students were financially independent adults over the age of 24, married with children, or single parents. These students come to the community college for a variety of reasons. In 2003-04, 33% stated that they intended to transfer to a 4-year university, 43% intended to earn an associate’s degree. Other reasons included seeking a certificate, seeking job skills, and enrolling for personal interest. As compared to 4-year universities, community colleges have higher proportions of students who are older, female, and from low-income families. Lower proportions were White. In addition, 35% of community college students are 30 years old or older. In 2003-04, 59% of community college students were female, greater than the 54% at 4-year universities. Black and Hispanic students make up a larger part of the student body at community colleges than at 4-year universities. Twenty-six percent of community college students in 2003-04 were in the lowest income level. (student characteristics)

An understanding of persistence and completion in community college is difficult at best. The variety of reasons that students have for attending college and their intentions make analysis a challenge (NCES, 2008). Comparing community college students' persistence or attainment rates by their attendance status reveals that students who always
attended college full time had higher rates of persistence or attainment than students who always attended part time. Yet, the persistence or attainment rate for students who alternated between full- and part-time attendance was higher than either those for full-time or part-time students. However, for female adult learners, measuring commitment based on attendance may not yield accurate results.

One way community colleges work to increase persistence is to focus on student services in an effort to support educational objectives and aid in student development. Cohen and Brawer (2003) lament that consensus has never been met regarding how much emphasis should be placed on helping students mature. Some community college systems, such as the California Community College system, have attempted to establish a list of responsibilities for student services in community colleges. Their list includes admissions, orientation, academic assessment, counseling and advising, follow-up on academic progress, research and evaluation, and coordination and training of staff (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). In their section on Counseling and Guidance, Cohen and Brawer discuss the longstanding philosophy found in the student services literature that students are not “minds apart from their bodies and emotions; they are whole people, and the college should treat them as such” (p.201). It is this philosophy that undergirds the current study. The literature shows female adult learners to be academically proficient, yet their tendency to stop and start their education and the literature regarding role conflict leads one to the belief that the issues plaguing female adult learners are practical rather than academic and could be addressed by some facet of student services in community colleges. Cohen and Brawer (2003) assert that counseling should be integrated with campus activities in a way that focuses on “educational, personal, social, and
vocational development” (p. 202). This philosophy is ideal, but perhaps not implemented well for all community college demographics. The most profound and telling passage from Cohen and Brawer (2003) is revealing.

However, personality development concepts are more applicable in institutions that control most aspects of the person’s life. Apparent change in the developing personality is more likely to be revealed in a four-year residential college than in a commuter institution where most students attend part time. The character formation, moral development thread that appeals to many of the student services practitioners seems not particularly relevant in a college where half the entrants drop out before completing one term’s worth of credit. (p. 202-203)

Perhaps this misconception is where community colleges lose ground in helping their largest population, female adult learners, succeed. Identity development is very relevant to the female adult learners in community colleges as revealed in the research on female adult learner development, and efforts to help female adult learners navigate these changes along with the other challenges they face could prevent drop-out and support persistence and completion. Cohen and Brawer (2003) go on to explain that while many community colleges offer resources (counseling, advising, career help) for their students there is no continuity in what community colleges must offer; therefore, although one community college may offer a large career center with a plethora of resources for a diverse student body, another may simply offer brochures or a list of web resources. It is true that community colleges are local institutions and are built to serve the needs of the local demographic, but a lack of continuity among resources may leave some constituencies needing more.
Many issues continue to plague the community colleges and challenge their ability to provide low-cost postsecondary education. In 2010, the first ever White House Summit on Community Colleges was held. The American Association of Community Colleges submitted a Community Colleges Issues Brief to Dr. Jill Biden and those responsible for hosting the Summit. Among the issues highlighted by the AACC were those regarding funding, federal aid, accountability, and completion. The AACC accepted the “completion challenge” to increase the number of students graduating with college degrees and pledged to continue to focus on access and inclusion while also encouraging completion (Mullin, 2010). This “completion challenge” is in response to President Obama’s 2009 challenge to increase college completion. Brandon (2009) wrote of the initiative

You may remember Dr. Biden recently spoke about the critical role of community colleges in our higher education system. Community colleges are rapidly growing, and are needed now more than ever to keep America competitive. The American Graduation Initiative will build on the strengths of community colleges and launch new initiatives and reforms that will increase their effectiveness and impact by figuring out what works and what doesn't, modernize facilities, increase graduation rates, and expand and create new online learning opportunities (n.p.)

Thus, a new focus and perhaps a new era for community colleges are upon us. The AACC touted their support for the President’s 8 billion dollar budget for community colleges that includes support for financial aid and career training programs (AACC, 2012).

**Rural community colleges.** To begin, rural community colleges are defined by the Carnegie Classification system as located outside of Primary Metropolitan Statistical Areas
(PMSAs). Carnegie classifies rural colleges as small, medium, and large depending on the number of FTE. Rural community colleges are known to realign their institution to address needs of changing diverse student populations (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Pennington et al., 2006). In addition, because they are located in rural geographic regions, rural community colleges work to preserve local culture (Katsinas & Miller, 1998). However, little research has been done to understand rural community colleges (Howley, 2004). The lack of scholarship regarding rural community colleges may be attributed to researchers’ lack of understanding of rural issues (Howley, 2004). According to NCES (2003), there are 732 rural community colleges in the United States. According to Phillips (2008), these colleges are “situated in a unique position to serve as a research setting for the study of local issues” and research conducted in rural community colleges “could expand the existing scholarship focused specifically on rural issues” (p. 23).

**Female Adult Learners in Community Colleges**

The rise in female adult learners has also impacted the community college culture. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, “Community colleges serve close to half of the undergraduate students in the United States, which included more than 6.5 million credit students in the fall of 2005” (AACC, n.d.). Since 1985, more than half of all community college students have been women (AACC, n.d.). Total female enrollment in 2-year colleges is 3,013,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011b). Of that total, 1,187,000 are over the age of 25. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011b). Similar statistics are cited in *Community Colleges: Special Supplement to the Condition of Education 2008*, the most recent comprehensive
report of the state of community colleges, which states that 35% of community college students in 2008 were 30 years or older (NCES, 2008).

Though female adult learners at the community college share many of the same characteristics and needs as female adult learners in general, community college female adult learners are sometimes viewed as a separate category for research purposes given that the context of the community college attracts a more specific type of female adult learner. Female adult learners make up an overwhelming majority of students receiving nursing degrees, dental assisting, medical assisting, and secretarial studies at community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). According to Townsend (2008) women make up the majority of learners at the community college yet struggle to achieve equity. Women at community colleges are more likely to be directed by counselors and advisors to avoid four-year institutions of higher learning and to lower their ambitions and standards for what may seem like a more appropriate choice by simply entering the workforce after attainment of the degree at the community college level (Townsend & Twombly, 2007, p. 209). However, Townsend (2007) concludes that further studies need to be conducted to “examine ways in which the community college serves its women students” (p. 215). This means looking at student services such as counseling and childcare options across the different types of community colleges. Grubb and Lazerson (2004) explain:

Almost all community college students work to support themselves, and many also have spouses and children, or are responsible for elderly parents or other members of extended families. An alarming number of female students suffer some kind of
abuse, often by husbands and boyfriends who resent their emerging independence.

(Wogemuth, Kees, & Safarik, 2003). Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower (2000), who studied the role of stress (mostly imposed by role conflict) in the lives of female adult learners, explained that female adult learners need additional sources of support from the institutions. Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower surveyed 350 adult female students at a community college and found that those with children felt “excessively burdened by the stressful demands of parenting” (p. 297). In addition to female adult learners who had children of their own, Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower note, “A surprising discovery was the number of women who provided child care for grandchildren or nieces and nephews” (p. 298). “Child care concerns appear to be the greatest source of stress facing adult women students” (p. 298). Sixty-one percent of women who have children after enrolling in community colleges fail to finish their degree, and many community college students arrive on campus already navigating work and family (Gonzalez, 2011).

For those students so different from their traditional, full-time, middle class counterparts life is a balancing act. A small change in a work schedule, an unanticipated roadblock in child-care arrangements, a health or family issue that requires attention, or a car that breaks down can unravel their carefully laid plans.” (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004, n.p.)

With regard to persistence of female adult learners in community college, Bryant (2001) writes that stopping out is related to “financial aid status, grade point average, and
final goal. Nonpersisters differ from persisters in that they do not successfully integrate themselves into college, nor are they committed to obtaining a degree” (p. 81). Because men tend to participate more frequently in campus activities than do women (Hagedorn, Maxwell, Rodriguez, Hocevar, & Fillpot; 2000), community college women may be more at risk for stopping out than men. Yet Bryant explains that women are more successful with “informal social integration” than men (p. 86). They make friends more easily and form study groups more readily than do their male community college counterparts.

In addition to challenges related to role conflict, community college students face financial challenges. Fifty percent of students from families earning less than $40,000 attend community college. (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2011b). In their favor are the numbers. According to Townsend and Twombly (2007), one of the positive influences on female students at the community college is that because there are more women attending the community college, women are more likely to see others like themselves. A study by Wolf-Wendell and Ward (2006) explored different types of postsecondary institutions as work environments for women. The study found that community colleges were in some ways more flexible places of work for women faculty, but still lacked full acknowledgment of women’s needs and certainly had room to grow in terms of making the environment a better overall workplace for women. These types of issues may also translate into similar issues for female adult learners who attend community college. The college environment should meet the needs of all women as a standard rather than as an amenity.

In addition, community colleges have made efforts to offer more online courses, on-site childcare, and women’s resource centers, but these efforts are sporadic across the whole
of community colleges such that some colleges may offer several of these resources while others may offer none. However, challenges associated with multiple roles, social support, and persistence continue to pervade the female adult learner’s experience at the community college.

**Role Theory**

Research shows that most female adult learners face barriers as they navigate their multiple roles as mothers, wives, employees, and caregivers (Aycock, 2003; Carney, Crompton & Tan, 2002; Cox & Ebbers, 2010; Edwards, 1993; Flannery et al., 2000; Home, 1998; Johnson, Schwartz, Bower, 2002; Vocarro & Lovell, 2009; Waller, Bovill, & Pitt, 2011). Female adult learners also deal with high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression as a result of role conflict (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002) and are more likely than traditional students and male nontraditional learners to lack self-esteem (Quimby & O’Brien, 2006). As a result of role conflict and part-time enrollment, female adult learners are most at a disadvantage for completion (Jacobs & King, 2002). Female adult learners are constantly evaluating their roles, values, and beliefs and revising them. Kasworm (2005) found that these revisions are either the result of some sort of crisis, or they precipitate one. Competing demands make it more difficult for nontraditional students to complete their studies. Women are under pressure of being caregiver and primary provider and may also be undergoing transitions such as divorce (Wogemuth, Kees, Safarik, 2003). Cox and Ebbers (2010) refer to the “second shift” (p.341) as an illustration of the way female adult learners manage the extra responsibility of school.
One of the earliest explorations of role theory is Goode’s (1960) piece entitled “A Theory of Role Strain”. Goode posits that institutions are made up of “role relationships, and approaches both social action and social structure through the notion of ‘role strain,’ the felt difficulty in fulfilling role obligations” (p. 483). These role relations are carried out through “role bargains” through which participants select among “alternative role behaviors” to reduce role strain (p. 483). One type of role strain proposed by Goode deals with required timing of role demands which may not be consistent with a person’s sense of spontaneity. The second type is “conflicts of allocation” (p. 485) wherein roles may require contradictory performances. The third type of role strain involves inconsistencies within the role, for example, when a person’s role demands that he or she do something that his or her family members may not like. Finally, Goode refers to “role sets,” which means that “the individual engages, by virtue of one of his positions, in several role relationships with different individuals. The individual is thus likely to face a wide, distracting, and sometimes conflicting array of role obligations” (p.485).

In addition, Goode discusses ways to approach and deal with role strain. The first is referred to as “manipulation of the role structure” (p. 486). Compartmentalization, delegation and elimination of the role relationship, and extension are types of manipulation that may relieve role strain. Of these, delegation is expected to be the most considered form of role manipulation by women. Wives may delegate housekeeping or child caretaking, but social values may indicate what cannot be delegated. Current understandings of social hierarchy and women’s roles might indicate that delegating the housekeeping or childrearing is frowned upon in some social circles, thus adding to role strain. In addition, others may not
be willing to accept the delegated tasks (e.g., a husband may not accept the delegation of
doing the laundry, watching the children, or cooking dinner), which creates further conflict
for women. To use role theory to understand female adult learner’s perceptions of role
conflict and the ways in which they deal with them, requires a consideration of social context
for each participant as a defining entity in the role allocation schema.

According to Goode (1960), role strain is about the allocation of resources. Each role
requires time and energy, of which, people have limited amounts. Therefore, they must learn
to bargain and allocate in a way that allows them to fulfill each role satisfactorily. “In role
behavior, we begin to experience strain, worry, anxiety, or the pressures of others if we
devote more time and attention to one role obligation than we feel we should, or than others
feel we should” (p. 488). An analysis of role allocation requires that we consider one’s
internal demands, as well as external demands. These internal demands may also become a
factor in role strain among female adult learners. For example, some women have what I
term the “superwoman” complex, meaning that they feel they should be able to do all things,
navigate all roles efficiently, and be all things to all people. Friends, family, and colleagues
may offer to help, but the internal conflict to do it all may cause the woman to forego the
help of others to fulfill her self-imposed obligation to her roles.

One might imagine the family to be a good source of support for those dealing with
role conflict. Indeed, Goode refers to the family as a “secure center” for role bargaining (p.
493). Because the family is aware of one’s roles and allocations, and because the family is a
…set of status obligations which change little from day to day and from which escape
is difficult, role alternatives can be evaluated against a fairly stable background.
Consequently, other family members can and do give advice as to how to allocate energies from a ‘secure center.’ (p. 493)

Goode refers to the family as a positive place for role allocation. More recent research on role conflict (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Fairchild, 2003; Home, 1998; Terrell, 1990), however, indicates that the family is more a part of the problem than the solution. Goode calls family roles “old shoe,” a role “in which expectations and performances have become well meshed so that individuals can relax in them” (p. 493). According to Goode, “The intense sentiments within the family cushion individual strain by inducing each person to make concessions, to give sympathy, to the others.” (p.493). Yet Goode also admits that “greater strain is experienced when they do not” (p. 493). Attention to the role of family with regard to role conflict will be important to an overall understanding of role bargaining or negotiation in female adult learners in community colleges.

**Role Theory in Early Research**

Barnett and Baruch (1985) studied role overload, role conflict, and anxiety in 238 women ages 35-55. They combined role overload and role conflict into one category, role strain. The authors focused on number of roles, type of roles, and quality of experience to understand how the experience of multiple roles might influence anxiety. Barnett and Baruch attribute the discrepancy in the literature regarding whether multiple roles create anxiety to a lack of focus on the role and role combination in question. They refer to these two differences as the scarcity hypothesis (the notion that multiple roles creates stress because it requires more time and effort than a person has to give) and the expansion hypothesis (participating in multiple roles actually expands a person’s personal well-being)
(Barnett & Baruch, 1985). Although they did not include the role of student in their study, Barnett and Baruch did find that role conflict increased with greater educational attainment. They also found that mothers experience more role conflict than women without children.

The two most striking findings of the study are that (a) the role of parent rather than that of paid worker is the major source of stress for women in the middle years and (b) the quality of experience within a woman’s social roles is a major independent predictor of role overload, role conflict, and anxiety. (p. 143).

Hirsch and Rapkin (1986) explored how multiple roles affected the well-being of 349 participants ranging in age from 23 to 68. They wrote, “The principle burdens of multiple roles seem to fall disproportionately on women.” (p. 1237). The question of well-being is not on how many roles a woman has but on the conditions under which the outcomes occur (Hirsch & Rapkin, 1986). Hirsch and Rapkin focus on two variables: (a) perceived quality of the role, and (b) responses of social network members. Although they focus on domestic and workplace roles, what Hirsch and Rapkin found can be seen as applicable to the academic world, as well, particularly since they are frequently quoted in more specific studies on female adult learner role conflict (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Home, 1998). Hirsch and Rapkin found that stress and dissatisfaction in one role transferred to other roles. Their findings suggest that “interactions with several network members have an important impact on efforts to manage multiple role involvements” (p. 1244). Hirsch and Rapkin found that support of the husband, or lack thereof, was most influential on the woman’s satisfaction with her roles and her overall well-being. They suggest further research to better understand
how multiple role involvement affects the individual as well as social networks and organizations.

Coverman, (1989) sought to clarify the inconsistencies and conceptual confusion of role overload and role conflict and began with an assessment of recent trends affecting women, including more women in the workforce working longer and more continuous hours, more female single-parent households, and little change in the division of domestic labor among spouses. Coverman argues that role contagion and role overload are often used interchangeably in the literature; although they are related concepts, they are different. According to Coverman, many confuse the notion of role conflict (the extent to which a person experiences pressures within one role that are incompatible with the pressures that arise within another role) with role overload (having too many role demands and too little time to fulfill them). In subjective evaluation of both role overload and role conflict, Coverman notes that role conflict is often measured by questioning how often participants have more to do than they can handle. For role conflict, participants are asked whether they perceive incompatibility in demands of multiple roles. Note that this data was taken from a survey conducted in 1977 and that there were twice as many male participants as female. Coverman found that role conflict significantly decreased women’s job satisfaction and increased psychophysiological symptoms. Role overload did not negatively affect participants, but role conflict did increase women’s symptoms of distress.

Rosalind Edwards, in her 1993 book, Mature Women Students: Separating or Connecting Family and Education, explored the effects of education on women and on the people they interact with. She pointed first to Lawson (1990) who explained that education
changes people in fundamental ways, which may threaten the traditional structures of society. Edwards conducted a series of interviews of 31 mature women students in 1988-1989. Important to note is that all participants had at least one child below school age or in full-time education for which they were responsible, and all claimed to have a male whom they considered to be a long-term partner.

Edwards (1993) criticized role theory by explaining that being a mother and a wife are more than simple roles that one can manipulate like one might with a professional role. Being a mother, for example, is a natural and biological state of being that cannot be easily changed or relinquished. Edwards writes of role theory, “It is a generalized abstraction that tells us little about the lived experience and feeling, and that mirrors assumptions rather than explicates them” (p. 12). For her study, Edwards rejects role theory “because it does not fully address social and political issues” (p. 14). Instead, she focuses on the public and private spheres as boundaries for understanding mature women students. Edwards explains, “Women are under pressure to achieve success in each of the two greedy spheres by showing that neither suffers because of their participation in the other” (p. 63). This notion of the “greedy institution” was coined by Coser (1974):

Institutions that seek “exclusive and undivided loyalty, and they attempt to reduce the claims of competing roles and status positions on those they wish to encompass within their boundaries. Their demands on the person are omnivorous…They exercise pressures on component individuals to weaken their ties, or not to form any ties, with other institutions or persons that might make claims that conflict with their own demands (p.4,6).
The women in Edwards’s study felt that the demands of home and school were never-ending. They described taking time to study as taking time for themselves and thus taking time away from their families. The women felt pulled both physically (to do chores or to study and complete homework) and mentally. They also felt that because they (mature women learners) had taken on education, they owed it to their families to make sure that their lives were disrupted as little as possible. Feelings of guilt were pervasive in Edwards’ study. She noted that two-thirds of her participants described guilt as an issue with both family and education, and nine participants described a cycle of guilt that moves from being guilty over taking time away from the family, particularly the children, to feelings of guilt for taking time away from studying. Importantly, Edwards notes that even if adult female students do not do all of the domestic labor, they are still the ones responsible for organizing the doing and for worrying about whether and how it gets done. Edwards calls this the “psychological division of labor” (p. 74). The women in Edwards’s study described having their lives planned carefully to the minute, using every spare minute (after children had gone to bed or before children awoke) to study and do schoolwork or chores. “The women felt everything had to be dropped and rearranged around allowing everybody else’s lives but their own to proceed as usual” (p. 74-75). Edwards also wrote, “Women have to draw upon their own practical and psychological resources in order to cope both because there is little help available to them and because in their own and others’ eyes it can be normatively unacceptable for them to seek help” (p. 75). The women in Edwards’ study reported that they had no time to participate in campus events, and their own social lives were abandoned in an attempt to find time to meet the requirements of the greedy institutions of home and school.
In a section titled “balancing standards”, Edwards explains that although female adult learners could not fully comply with the socially acceptable demands of motherhood and studentship, they still held themselves to these high standards, a result of public scrutiny in their minds. In Edwards’s study, partners and parents were more likely to exert that the academic sphere should not invade the domestic sphere and should not interfere with domestic roles and responsibilities, and one quarter of her participants ended their relationships (perhaps more after the study), because partners were not supportive in helping them integrate their academic and domestic worlds.

In 1995, Gigliotti and Huff, upon the recognition that the effects of role conflict on nontraditional students had been studied little, examined how role conflict and role strain affected stress and, consequently, depression, perceived value of college, grades, subsequent course load, and retention of 355 students age 25 and older at a large urban university. The findings showed that females displayed higher levels of stress over all variables. Younger nontraditional students also displayed higher levels of stress. In addition, conflicts with the spouse, financial strain, and strain caused by the university contributed significantly to overall stress. The authors found that “the more activities of 10 plus hours per week with which one was involved, the lower the semester grade performance” (p. 336). This activity strain, along with conflict with work, poor grades, and financial problems, are factors affecting reduction in course load.

Home’s (1998) study of 443 female adult learners in universities is one of the seminal works most referenced by other more current studies on role conflict in adult learners. The goal of Home’s study was to “identify the importance of specific life situations and
institutional supports, as well as women’s perceptions of demands and supports, in predicting conflict, overload, and contagion” (p. 86). Home notes that perceived burden can be more a predictor of role strain than actual burden and that university and family demands conflict the most, as both are known to be “greedy institutions” (p. 86).

Overall, Home’s (1998) findings indicate that “students’ perceptions of their demands best predict all three strain variables” (p. 93). This speaks to some notion of psychological management. Home also notes, “Demands from family and student roles were the strongest predictors” (p. 93) because jobs may have fixed hours which help women compartmentalize, but family and student work never ends. Home found that no measure of support could assist with a reduction in the feeling of role overload, which is the feeling of being “spread too thin”. In addition, mothers of children under the age of 13 feel more overload and higher conflict. One cause of this is the social expectation that women will be the primary caregivers. In reference to role conflict, which occurs when women are forced to deal with several urgent, incompatible demands simultaneously, Home found that role conflict can be mediated by distance education and higher income. With regard to role contagion, which occurs “when women have difficulty performing one role while worrying about their other responsibilities,” (p.95). Home found unexpectedly that renegotiation of assignment due dates increased contagion because women had to continue to expend the mental energy to worry about that assignment in addition to worrying about the new assignments along with other responsibilities.
Role Theory in Recent Studies

Carney-Crompton & Tan (2002) explored the relationship among social support, psychological functioning, and academic performance in one group of traditional and one group of nontraditional female students. They used scales to assess depression, anxiety, demographics, and measures of social support and found that female adult learners had higher and more consistent academic performance levels despite less social support. Traditional students reported more resources for emotional support; however, there was no significant difference in levels of satisfaction with emotional and instrumental supports. Nontraditional students cited spouse and child as greatest sources of emotional support and spouse, child, and paid help as greatest source of instrumental support. “The finding that psychological and academic status of the nontraditional students was unrelated to the quality and quantity of their support systems contradicts a number of previous research findings” (p. 147). Carney-Crompton & Tan cite studies that show that female adult learners suffer detrimental psychological and academic effects (Leavitt, 1989; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Roehl & Okun, 1984), while other studies show positive outcomes such as greater self-esteem and self-confidence (Home, 1993; Kasworm, 1990) and greater academic accomplishment and self-efficacy (Home, 1997; Leavitt, 1989; Thacker & Novak, 1991). Carney-Crompton & Tan suggest that certain variables may explain the discrepancy in the aforementioned studies. One such variable is age of children. Women with children under the age of 13 tend to experience more role conflict and higher instances of stress and anxiety (Home, 1998). The other variable is time of data collection. Data collected earlier in the female adult learner’s college career or at any transitory stage may reflect greater stress.
among female adult learners. The final variable proposed by Carney-Crompton and Tan is age. They note that with age, tendency for depression decreases; therefore, if studies focus on older nontraditional female students, the findings may reflect less stress and anxiety, whereas with younger nontraditional students, findings may reflect more stress and anxiety.

In 2003, Fairchild examined “Multiple Roles of Adult Learners” and began with an explanation of the barriers (situational, dispositional, and institutional as per Mercer, 1993) that adult learners face. Guilt is seen as a situational barrier experienced primarily by female adult learners with children under the age of 13 (Terrell, 1990). Financial constraints are also categorized as situational barriers because adult learners often have to pay not only for tuition and books, but also for child care. Finally, job responsibilities are deemed situational barriers which offer some positive psychological effects (Chartrand, 1992), but which drain adult learners of their spare time. In this regard, adult learners may have to make compromises, which can also negatively affect their health and finance.

Fairchild (2003) next defined dispositional barriers, referring to Home’s (1998) three dimensions of role strain: role conflict, role overload, role contagion. Being a mother of small children with low income increases the amount of role conflict, thus increasing guilt, stress, anxiety, and depression among female adult learners. Important to the study of community college female adult learner perceptions of role conflict and ways in which they address role conflict is the understanding of the importance of social support when making decisions to stay in school or stop out. As reported by Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002), traditional-aged students receive more social support than do adult students.
Finally, Fairchild (2003) discussed the role of institutional barriers in the adult learner experience. Institutions are poorly structured for adult learners, failing to accommodate adult learner needs or to properly orient adults to the college experience. Institutions may do little to encourage school involvement of adult learners and may fail to help adult learners “find a cohort of similar students with whom they can connect socially or emotionally” (p. 13). Fairchild notes that student affairs professionals are not trained to address the limited engagement of adult students. Yet, adult students manage to persist when faced with difficult odds. Fairchild explains that despite issues of role conflict and lack of campus involvement, adult students still manage to be successful.

Srivastava (2005) has published the most comprehensive study of role conflict to date. Her work in India compares her first study (1990) of role conflict among 272 working professional women in fields such as law, medicine, teaching, engineering, nursing, and social work to her more recent study (2002) of role conflict among 120 women in the same professions listed above. Although, notably, Indian women have only more recently begun to gain momentum in the struggle for equality, and though Strivastava’s study focuses on the conflict between the domestic and professional spheres only, not to include the role of student, her study, nonetheless, provides a clear lens for understanding the issue of role conflict among cultures as well as the intricacies involved in the study of role conflict. Srivastava first looked at incidence of role conflict and found that the incidence decreased from 1990 to 2002, an indication that society is beginning to be more accepting of and helpful to women who take on both domestic and professional roles. She next looked at reflectors of role conflict: “Any conflict gets reflected in the behavior patterns and conduct of
people who suffer from it. In case of role conflict also, the behavior and conduct of women professionals reflect the inner conflict from which they suffer” (p. 64). The results of the study show that women are becoming more expressive of their frustrations, and most women do get help with the domestic duties of the home, but Srivastava points to joint family living situations as the reason for this help. Many Indian households are made up of the younger family and the older parents; therefore, if a young professional woman has to work outside of the home, her duties are taken over by her mother-in-law with whom she lives. Also to be noted is the pervading use of servants in India to take on household chores, a practice rarely seen in middle and lower class families in the United States. Thus, Srivastava’s notion that women get help may not apply to American women who are less likely to live in joint family situations and are less likely to have servants.

In 2009, Voccaro and Lovell studied 28 nontraditional women learners at a small college. The authors revealed four themes: Ebb and Flow, There’s Always Something, Family, and Self-investment, two of which speak to the literature regarding role conflict. With Ebb and Flow, the authors challenge the standard definition of engagement. They contend that women stay engaged, even though life presents them with reasons to stop-out of their education from time to time. This finding adds new direction for studies on role conflict, as previous literature has suggested that role conflict prevents female adult learners from staying engaged in their education (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Leavitt, 1989; Sandler, 2000). “There's Always Something” is the notion that women are constantly facing challenges and barriers, but they make their education a priority, and they find ways to get work done. Participant interviews revealed that the women did not expect that their
husbands would help with the housework; the women still took on the primary role of motherhood. Also speaking to the notion of role conflict, this theme and authors’ findings offer insight into the true disposition of female adult learners. As Voccarro and Lovell show, female adult learners do not necessarily complain about the roles that they navigate and may not expect others to help them, they simply find a way to do it all.

Analysis

Several themes emerge in the literature with regard to role theory. The first is the ambiguity that pervades any general understanding of role theory and its application in research. Though Goode’s (1960) articulation of the theory of role strain seems sound, later applications have proven complicated. Barnett and Baruch (1985) separated role theory into role overload and role conflict, Coverman (1989) tried to clarify the conceptual inconsistencies of role conflict and role overload, and Edwards (1993) shunned role theory altogether, stating that it cannot fully characterize the experience of women.

Since Goode, (1960) role theory has been explored through a focus on number of roles, role type, and quality of experience (Barnett & Baruch, 1985; Home, 1998; Fairchild, 2003), perceived role quality, perceived demands, and social support (Coverman, 1989; Hirsch & Rapkin, 1986; Home, 1998; Voccaro & Lovell, 2009), the effects (including and perhaps most notably guilt) of role conflict, overload, or strain on women or female adult learners (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Coverman, 1989; Edwards, 1993; Fairchild, 2003; Gigliotti & Huffman, 1995; Voccaro & Lovell, 2009), a general understanding of how women navigate role strain, conflict, or overload (Edwards, 1993), and incidence and reflectors of role conflict (Srivastava, 2005). From these studies, a focus on mothers of
young children becomes apparent. Mothers of young children experience more role conflict, higher stress and anxiety levels, and more guilt (Barnett & Baruch, 1985; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Fairchild, 2003; Home, 1998; Terrell, 1990) than do traditional students and women whose children are older than age 13. Younger women are also more prone to stress and depression than are their older counterparts (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). In addition, mothers of young children also need more instrumental help and may have more vulnerable relationships, thus leading to the final theme to consider from the literature on role theory – social support and strategies for dealing with role conflict, strain, or overload.

Goode (1960) referred to the family as the “secure center” (p. 493), a resource and part of the social support system to help women navigate role strain. However, more recent research finds the family to be problematic. Family, along with school, are seen as “greedy institutions” and are considered problematic for female adult learners (Flannery & Hayes, 2000). Hirsch and Rapkin (1986) found the husband to be instrumental in either adding to or alleviating stress with regard to role conflict. Other research sees the social support system as key to the success and overall well-being of female adult learners but suggests that the competition between school and family contributes to volatile social relationships (i.e. family, friends, co-workers) for female adult learners (Aycock, 2003; Cox & Ebbers, 2010; Loeper, 2003; Scott & King, 1985; Suitor, 1987; Wakeford, 1994; Waller, Bovill, & Pitt; 2011) Home’s (1998) finding that social support cannot alleviate the burden of social expectation speaks to a deeper, more fundamental challenge. Women are expected to be caretakers, and to abandon that expectation or relinquish any part of that role leads to guilt (Ewards, 1993; Faircild, 2003; Terrell, 1990) and a sense of social failure. Edwards (1993)
referred to this as the “psychological division of labor” (p. 74), meaning that even if women delegate responsibilities to their social support system, they are still responsible for the psychological worry and effort of making sure that delegation happens and that the tasks are completed. Thus, the issue of role conflict with female adult learners is much larger than the greedy institutions of family and school.

**Discussion**

The existing research on female adult learners is compelling. Though female adult learners stop and start their education and have difficulty persisting, they are not less committed to their education than their male counterparts. Further, they make better grades and are more engaged in the classroom and their studies. Cox & Ebbers (2010) suggest that the challenge facing female adult learners is systemic in nature, and is rooted in the challenge of navigating multiple roles. Female adult learners may face disproportionate amounts of responsibility as compared to their male counterparts and are, therefore, navigating more than male students. As female adult learners try to navigate the responsibilities of their domestic, professional, and educational spheres, they may look to their social networks for support. When that support is lacking or when those networks, intentionally or unintentionally, foster feelings of guilt and create more stress, female adult learners face difficult decisions regarding their loyalties and responsibilities. Thus, conflict ensues, and female adult learners may stop and start their education to prevent disturbing the domestic or professional spheres, and they may also internalize the conflicts of guilt associated with not being able to be fully engaged in all spheres at once.
The resounding issue at the heart of female adult learner persistence and completion seems to be role conflict. Female adult learners have many responsibilities, and as they prioritize those responsibilities, they put their families first. This is not unexpected. Yet research shows the agonizing decisions that women have to make when their home life is pitted against their student life. The “cycle of guilt” seems to be pervasive among female adult learners as they try to commit themselves to both their domestic roles and their student role. An underlying component of the issue of role conflict is that of social support systems. The research in this review shows that women who have more spousal and family support feel less stress (Loeper, 2003) and that more flexibility among stakeholders (spouses, family, friends) also results in less stress for the female adult learner (Brazier, 1988). Research also shows that women with children younger than age 13 exhibit more stress and feel more conflict than do others.

As the government and community colleges pour more money and resources into improving the completion rate, they must consider their largest demographic, female adult learners. Finding ways to help female adult learners navigate role conflict could not only improve completion rates and overall well-being among current student populations, but could also make the notion of coming to school a more viable one for future female adult learners.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Female adult learners have quickly become the largest sub-group in community college student populations. As they grow in number in all postsecondary institutions, researchers continue to take interest in understanding their experiences. The literature offers research in several aspects of the female adult learner experience, yet a prevailing issue remains the navigation of multiple roles specific to mother and student. This study seeks to understand the ways in which female adult learners in community colleges perceive and navigate the multiple roles involved with being a student in addition to being parent, caregiver, spouse, and employee. This chapter explains the rationale for the use of qualitative methods and case study design, as well as the elements of research design such as sampling and site selection. As a part of the overall research design, I provide the structure used for data collection and data analysis and explain how role theory framed this study. A statement of positionality and subjectivity is offered, as well as strengths and weaknesses of the study, and a discussion of rigor. Finally, I discuss ethics and IRB, and provide the timeline in which the study was completed.

The research questions are:

1. How do female adult learners in community colleges perceive multiple roles?
2. How do female adult learners in community colleges navigate multiple roles?

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a way of collecting information which focuses on an understanding of human behavior. Gay, Mills, & Airasian (2006) describe qualitative
research as “the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual data in order to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest” (p. 399). They delineate qualitative research from quantitative research by its “simultaneous collection of a wealth of narrative and visual data over an extended period of time,” and its tendency to occur in a natural setting. (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006, p. 399). Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on numerical data, qualitative research elicits data about human experiences. To do this, qualitative researchers use data collection strategies such as interviews, focus groups, and observation to understand a phenomenon or experience. These forms of data collection allow the participants’ voice to be the center of the research; thus the researcher must take care to include this “voice” and to interpret it in a way that is ethical and understandable. Guba and Lincoln (1994) explain that the value of qualitative research is in the ability to convey an understanding of human behavior which “cannot be understood without reference to the meanings and purpose attached by human actors to their activities” (p. 106). Qualitative research typically takes place within a natural setting or context instead of a lab environment. Because qualitative researchers are studying human participants, they must use ethical strategies for data collection and analysis. They must also disclose and use appropriate strategies to take into account their own personal biases and subjectivity to strengthen the integrity of the research process.

The characteristics of qualitative research position it as a valid choice for the study of female adult learner perspectives and navigation of multiple roles. Because qualitative research focuses on an understanding of the lived experiences of the participants, it allows the researcher to capture complexities in ways that other studies cannot. The terms
“navigation” and “perspective” speak to a more personal and subjective thought process that is best understood through participant account which requires the use of narrative data, as proposed by Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2006). Further, this study is concerned with human behavior in the realm of decision-making and reflection, which Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggest requires these personal narratives offered by participants. Qualitative research allows for a more descriptive interpretation of sensitivities to be revealed while also respecting the feelings, or humanity, of the participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

The literature shows that as female adult learners navigate multiple roles, they are faced with difficult personal decisions. The roles of parent, spouse, caregiver, employee, and student all require physical, emotional, and psychological energy; thus female adult learners must make choices about how to allocate their personal resources to fulfill the responsibilities associated with these roles. Some may integrate roles, some may struggle to manage them, and some may be successful at navigating multiple roles, sacrificing one for the other. This decision-making process and these experiences are intense and may lead to feelings of guilt, stress, anxiety, or conversely, feelings of success. These emotions and the process itself are best captured through female adult learners’ own descriptions, narratives, and accounts. Qualitative research focuses on the natural setting and participant experiences in ways that shed new light on interpretations and understandings and is particularly well suited for such inquiry.

**Case Study**

Qualitative research lends itself to several methods of inquiry. These include phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, historical research, and case study to name a
Given its characteristics, case study is a good fit for studying female adult learners’ perspectives on the perception and navigation of multiple roles. The purpose of a case study is to gather information on a phenomenon in which the context is deeply intertwined with the phenomena and cannot be separated from it. Case studies are bound by aspects such as space, time, and context (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006), and in a case study, the researcher imposes artificial boundaries to provide a structure for examining the case. Thus, the unit of analysis is found within those bounds. For this study, the case is bound by the context of the community college and the specific aspects of each site and by the particular issues and challenges that female adult learners face. The unit of analysis for this study is the collective accounts (or issue) given by the participants of their perceptions of and experiences as female adult learners navigating multiple roles.

Several methodologists have characterized and defined case study for its use in qualitative research. Yin (2009) describes three types of case studies: exploratory, descriptive, explanatory. An exploratory case study explores a specific situation and seeks to better understand it, and a descriptive case study focuses on phenomena within a bounded system over time. An explanatory study offers several explanations for a set of events and tries to find relationships between or across them. Stake (1995) also identifies three types of case study: intrinsic, instrumental, collective. An intrinsic study seeks understanding for the researcher without the need to generate theory. For this type, the case itself is of most importance. For instrumental case study, the case itself is secondary to the need to contribute to or refine theory. Finally, a collective case study involves the study of multiple cases at the same time so as to create understanding across cases.
In addition to Yin (2009) and Stake (1995), Merriam (1998) defined types of case study by intent: descriptive, interpretive, and evaluative. A descriptive case study presents detailed information about a case or situation that can be used for theory-building. An interpretive case study uses an inductive model of analysis and is used to develop concepts or support or challenge existing theories. An evaluative case study not only involves description and explanation, but some form of judgment, as well.

This study is instrumental (Stake, 1995) because the case itself is secondary to the overall understanding of the phenomenon. According to Grady (2010):

An instrumental case study is the study of a case (e.g., person, specific group, occupation, department, organization) to provide insight into a particular issue, redraw generalizations, or build theory…In an instrumental case study the case itself is secondary to understanding a particular phenomenon. The difference between an intrinsic and instrumental case study is not the case but rather the purpose of the study. In instrumental case study research the focus of the study is more likely to be known in advance and designed around established theory or methods.

There is a strong history of research regarding female adult learner experiences in postsecondary education; thus, this study does not seek to explore new phenomenon. However, this case does seek to provide better understanding of an existing issue and build on current theory.

**Interpretive Design**

Of the many possible paradigm choices (analytic realism; interpretive design, Connoisseurship model of inquiry; semiotics; phenomenological, psychological,
structuralism; poststructuralism and postmodernism; symbolic interactionism) for qualitative research, interpretive design is well-suited to a case study designed to understand how female adult learners navigate multiple roles. According to Travis (1999), interpretivism focuses on “meaningful social action and … an in-depth understanding of how meaning is created in everyday life and the real-world” (p. 1042). “The interpretivist paradigm also assumes that there are many points of entry into any given reality. The focus of the case study within this paradigm is on a particular reality that is of relevance to the phenomenon under study” (VanWynsberghe & Khan, 2007, p.89). This paradigm can be described as an iterative process that “emphasizes an often story-like rendering of a problem” (VanWynsberghe & Khan, 2007, p.89). The interpretive paradigm assumes that reality is a social construct which emerges as people interact with each other and within certain contexts. For this reason, the design of this study included both individual interviews and focus groups. Given the definitions of interpretive design, education can be seen as “a process” and school as “a lived experience” (Merriam, 1998, p. 4). “Multiple realities are constructed socially by individuals” (Merriam, 1998, p. 4). An interpretive orientation allowed the participants’ experiences as female adult learners to be the focus of the study as opposed to a positivist orientation, which would place the focus more on the phenomenon of education and would posit reality as “stable, observable, and measurable” (Merriam, 1998, p. 4). For this study, education per se was not the focus. The female adult learners’ perceptions of their unique educational experiences and the ways they navigate that reality were the focus. In addition, although critical research (Merriam’s third orientation of consideration) does focus on “power, privilege, and oppression in areas of educational practice” (p. 4), the focus of the
study was not to critique education as oppressive and not to focus solely on issues of power. Participants expressed frustration with issues of power and privilege and conveyed feelings of oppression, but these feelings were part of their lived experiences and constructed reality.

**Subjectivity and Positionality**

**Subjectivity**

I am an educator, a mother, and a student. I have been a teacher for 13 years, the entirety of my career, and I believe that everyone can learn if given the right opportunities and the right circumstances. I have taught middle school, community college, and university courses. I believe that education should be holistic, that as teachers, we should pay attention to our students’ personal growth as well as their academic growth. Education should be constructive and transformational. I believe that teachers should honor the time that they have to speak to students one-on-one about how the students feel about their learning process, and I further believe that this time is as valuable as time spent in the classroom.

I am also a mother. I am a single mom of two young children, and being a mother affects everything that I do in some way. I believe that my self-efficacy as a mother affects my self-efficacy as a professional and a student. I also feel that as a mother, I am extending my role as a teacher. I am very deliberate in what I teach my children, focusing on holistic learning, and I approach my time with them in the same manner that I approach formal teaching.

Finally, I am a student. I believe that, as a teacher, I have always been a student in some way, for teaching and learning are unbreakably tied. However, I also recognize that I have been a formal student for most of my professional career, taking courses and pursuing
professional certificates as well as this degree. As a lifelong learner, I value education, and I believe that my experiences as a student impact my effectiveness as a teacher. I believe that education is worth the sacrifices that often must be made to complete one’s studies and that education makes people better versions of themselves.

Positionality

As the researcher in a qualitative study, I recognize that my positionality is an important factor in the conduct of the study. My experiences shape my own perspectives and have led to my interest in this topic. This study explored the experiences of female adult learners in community colleges as they navigate multiple roles. My connection to this topic is two-fold.

First, I am a female adult learner. I personally navigate the multiple roles associated with personal, professional, and educational spheres. I bring my own experiences, good and bad, to my work as a researcher. Like many female adult learners, I have had to work several jobs to make ends meet while also finding time to attend class, complete homework, and manage the daily responsibilities as a mother. I have looked to other resources such as family, friends, and programs or opportunities offered by my institution to help me navigate those roles. Sometimes these resources have been helpful. At other times, they have not. There have been times when I have been frustrated and wondered if my personal desire to further my education was impeding my ability to be a good mother. I have struggled with the guilt of not always being available for my children because I had to attend class or I had to study. I have wondered if my friends or family perceived me as being “above them” somehow because I am earning a degree in higher education. Yet, I have also felt joy in my...
successes in school. I have felt gratification in reaching milestones in my education, and I feel that I am setting a good example for my children who have taken part and seen first-hand the work involved in pursuing a college degree. This vast array of emotions is chronicled in the literature regarding female adult learners, and I did find commonalities between my own experiences and those of my participants.

Second, I have taught female adult learners in community colleges. I have an insider’s understanding of how community colleges operate. As a community college instructor, my primary responsibility was to teach. In doing so, I offered, office hours as a time for students to come by and get help with assignments. The students who most utilized my office hours were my female adult learners. They did not stop by to ask questions about class, however. They stopped by to talk about life. They wanted to talk about school and work and family and about the challenges that they faced to “be all things to all people” as I recall one woman saying. Often, they were pleased and sometimes surprised at how successful they were as students. Yet they also felt stress and guilt and struggled to find the right support to help them navigate their multiple roles. In addition to my responsibilities as an instructor, I also served as an advisor for our chapter of our international honors society. I quickly saw that the students most involved in our chapter were our female adult learners. We met once or twice a month to plan our service projects. These women would either find a sitter, or more often than not, they would bring their children with them. I noticed during this time that they formed camaraderie with each other that they began to rely on. They talked about the common challenges and benefits of being female adult learners and created a support system for each other that lasted through their days as college students at that
community college. It was from these experiences that I found great interest in the stories of female adult learners at community colleges. I often felt that I was not only an instructor or advisor for them; I was also a counselor of sorts. I struggled to find ways to help these women on my campus and wondered if there was more that community colleges could do to assist them. Thus, my experiences as a female adult learner and as a community college instructor have informed my interest in this topic and positioned me for unique understanding of the findings.

My statement of subjectivity and positionality offer a deeper understanding of my experiences as both a female adult learner and an instructor of and advocate for female adult learners. These experiences led to my interest in this topic and in role theory and in part informed my decision-making process for this study. I was better prepared to interpret the literature and the experiences of the participants. By disclosing my experiences to my participants, I was able to build a stronger rapport. Thus, participants spoke more candidly to me and revealed more dimensions of their experiences as they felt a sense of understanding. As the researcher, I was vigilant in my awareness of when my experiences were positively informing the study, and when they were negatively informing the study.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study of how female adult learners in community colleges perceive and navigate multiple roles is bound by role theory. Research using role theory shows that most female adult learners face barriers as they navigate their multiple roles as mothers, wives, employees, and caregivers (Aycock, 2003; Carney, Crompton & Tan, 2002; Cox & Ebbers, 2010; Edwards, 1993; Flannery et al., 2000; Home, 1998; Johnson, Schwartz, Bower, 2002;
Female adult learners also deal with high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression as a result of role conflict (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002) and are more likely than traditional students and male nontraditional learners to lack self-esteem (Quimby & O’Brien, 2006). As a result of role conflict and part-time enrollment, female adult learners are most at a disadvantage for completion (Jacobs & King, 2002). Female adult learners are constantly evaluating their roles, values, and beliefs and revising them. Kasworm (2005) found that these revisions are either the result of some sort of crisis, or they precipitate one. Competing demands make it more difficult for nontraditional students to complete their studies. Women are under pressure of being caregiver and primary provider and may also be undergoing transitions such as divorce (Wogemuth, Kees, Safarik, 2003). Cox and Ebbers (2010) refer to the “second shift” as an illustration of the way female adult learners manage the extra responsibility of school. These elements of role theory have developed over time in the literature and will provide a sense of boundedness to this study.

Since Goode’s (1960) theoretical piece on role theory, the use of role theory has contributed to the evolution of the theory itself. Some studies have embraced the terms “role strain” and “role conflict,” while other studies have denied all terminology associated with role theory, claiming that it is not sufficient to describe the experience of women who navigate multiple roles. This study used role theory in its more evolved format, using the more traditional themes of role strain and role conflict as well as more evolved themes such as guilt, stress, and effect on relationships and to guide data analysis. I used these themes to guide emerging data and further focus on role perception and navigation.
Study Design

Case study utilizes several strategies for data collection including interviews, observation, and focus groups. Therefore, for this study, I implemented these strategies in two phases.

Phase 1: Study Design

The first phase of the study design involved identifying sites, recruiting participants, filing the IRB, and conducting individual interviews with participants. Weiss (1994) gives several reasons for conducting qualitative interviews. These include developing detailed descriptions, integrating multiple perspectives, learning how events are interpreted, and bridging inter-subjectivities. Interviews were conducted in a small, quiet space on site for participant convenience. The small, quiet space was intended to help participants feel emotionally safe about sharing personal feelings and experiences. When one participant mentioned that she would feel safer conducting her interview in a different building, we moved the interview to a building of her choice. Because she was a work study employee in the building where previous interviews were conducted, she felt less privacy there and asked to change venues. The data generated by individual interviews were first level coded and analyzed and used as a basis for the focus group data collection. First level coding is an initial coding structure that uses “low inference codes, which are very useful in summarizing segments of data, and which provide the basis for later higher order coding” (Punch, 2009, p.176).
Phase 2: Study Design

The second phase of the study design included convening the focus groups, running them, analyzing data, writing it up, and drafting the dissertation. The focus groups took place in two sessions. Participants were asked to attend one of the focus groups and were given their choice of times. Only five of the participants were able to attend the focus group sessions. Two sessions were held. One focus group had three participants and the other had two. In the focus group, I presented a collective executive summary of the data from the individual interviews and asked participants to comment on those findings. The focus groups gave way to deeper discussion regarding female adult learner perceptions of multiple role navigation.

Site Selection

Site selection for this study was specific to the context of the research question, which focuses on female adult learners in community colleges. Two rural community colleges (as defined by Carnegie Classification) were located in the southeast in close proximity to the researcher’s location. Site selection began with just one community college with administrators who were willing to assist the researcher in participant recruitment. This site was chosen because it offers a Women’s Resource Center and a women’s support group specific to women’s needs. One of the college’s Deans connected me to a counselor who serves as the advisor for the Circle of Sisters program (a campus group for women students). The counselor, along with other counselors for other groups such as TRiO, helped me to recruit participants. I made fliers for the counselors to hand out to students in meetings or in classes such as ACA (College Student Success). I also spoke to possible participants at a
group Circle of Sisters meeting and explained the purpose of the study and my need for participants. These efforts lead to the greatest number of participants. I began interviews and found that I still needed more participants, so current participants polled their friends for female adult learners who would be willing to participate. This generated several more participants. The primary challenge for finding participants was the time involved in interviews and focus groups. The nature of the study indicated a need for participants who are female adult learners who, by nature, are very busy and have little time. Thus, finding female adult learners with time to spare was challenging. Once interviews at the first site were complete with the 12 participants and having felt that I had exhausted my resources at the first site, I chose a second site to recruit more participants and add to my contact hours. At the second site, I contacted an administrator who polled several faculty members and asked for assistance recruiting participants. I was able to gain seven more participants at the second site for a total of nineteen participants.

The first site (MCC) is a rural community college in the southeastern United States. It is a larger rural college with an estimated 9,000 students. The college is housed in the same town as a major university that offers medical degrees, so the community college works to feed that university by also offering degrees such as nursing, medical office administration, sonography, and radiography. The college also offers an on-site daycare and female mentoring program.

The second site (KCC) is also categorized by the Carnegie system as a rural college, but has half the student population of MCC. This site is not in a university town, but it is in a military town that hosts a United States Airforce base. Several of the participants were either
members of the military themselves or wives of military members. This site does have an on-site daycare, but it does not offer a female mentoring program.

**Participant Selection**

**Sampling Strategy**

This study logged 25 contact hours with 19 participant interviews and two focus groups as well as campus visits, discussions with counselors, and observations. Individual interviews lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. During the second phase, I conducted two focus groups to share first level findings and elicit reactions and discussion from study participants. The two focus groups lasted approximately an hour each for a total of two hours for focus groups.

Because community colleges are typically smaller than universities and are more focused on teaching as opposed to research, they are often more connected with students. Participant selection was purposeful and utilized a convenience sample, which is simply a sample that is convenient to the circumstances of the researcher and the context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In addition, I used a snowball strategy, which involves “identifying cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information rich” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.28). I recruited participants who attended the institution sites and who could most easily participate in the interviews and focus groups. Snowballing is a strategy in which the researcher finds a representative who refers the researcher to one or several participants, and those participants refer the researcher to other participants. First, an administrator was contacted and asked for a list of students who fit the criteria, which is discussed in the next subsection of this chapter. Next, the referred students were contacted to
ask if they were willing to participate. In addition, fliers were sent to suggested faculty and staff for help with recruitment. Students on the original list were also contacted and asked for references to other students who fit the participant criteria. These newly referenced students were contacted to ask if they would participate. After this round, more participants were needed, and I felt I had exhausted the pool of willing participants at the first site, so I repeated these steps at a second site.

**Participant Criteria**

In this study, maximizing data from female adult learners who may have the most experience navigating multiple roles was important. Thus, participant selection was also criterion based such that all participants had completed at least one full semester of college within the past 2 years and had at least one child age 13 or younger.

Some literature characterizes an adult learner as someone over age 25 (Allen, 1993; Stewart & Rue, 1983; Villella & Hu, 1991). However, more recent literature has defined the adult learner as financially independent, married or a single parent or primary caregiver. Nontraditional students in community colleges may be younger than 25 but may still be financially independent, married or a single parent or primary caregiver. Thus, for this study, I did not define a female adult learner by her age, but rather by her responsibilities.

Often, adult learners return to school after many years away from college. Many may have attempted college as young adults but were unable to finish. Adult learners’ lives were likely very different during that time, and their experiences, though still valuable, do not necessarily speak to the context of being a female adult learner in the present. Also, having completed one full semester of college gives participants more opportunity to reflect on the
full cycle of a semester at the community college and the types of issues presented by being a female adult learner in addition to the other roles for which they are responsible. Therefore, the criterion of having completed one semester of college in the past two years is relevant. The second criterion required that participants have at least one child age 13 or younger. The literature reflects that female adult learners with children below this age face more challenges navigating of multiple roles. Application of this criterion supports a deeper understanding of how female adult learners navigate and negotiate roles when faced with the challenges of being a student and parent, in addition to other roles.

In summary, sampling strategy involved:

- Criteria based snowball strategy
- Contacting administration to request a list of possible participants
- Posting fliers around campus to recruit participants
- Asking students on the initial list for references to other possible participants
- Asking faculty and staff for references of possible participants

Participant criteria included

- Female adult learners defined by role/responsibilities
- Completion of 1 full semester of college in the past 2 years
- Primary care-giver of at least one child below the age of 13

Data Collection

As explained above, this study is an instrumental case study utilizing interpretive design. I used “multiple sources of evidence – converging on the same set of issues”, as proposed by Yin (2009; p. 32). Data collection included interviews, observation and
document analysis dealing with site and context, and focus groups. The study was broken up into two phases: Phase 1 – individual interviews, Phase 2 – focus groups. Observation and data collection regarding the community college, its mission, and its policies and programs that affect women were ongoing during the data collection phases.

Prior to this study, I had an exploratory phase on Dr. Sue Bracken’s research team during which I conducted interviews with female adult learners and co-presented the preliminary data on a related topic which helped me to narrow my own research topic and plan my protocol. The data was analyzed and framed based upon Mary Catherine Bateson’s work, *Willing to Learn*, which is a compilation of essays on life stages and gender (Bateson, 2004). While the data is not a part of this study, the research process that I participated in prepared me in the following ways. It helped me refine my protocols so that I had a better sense of what to ask. It helped me to better understand role theory and how that theory may be exhibited in female adult learner participant responses. I also helped to write the literature review for articles and presentations based on the study and later helped present the findings at a national conference, thus honing my skills in research, writing, and data presentation.

**Phase 1: Data Collection**

Phase 1 of data collection included in-depth individual interviews aimed at understanding individual lived experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The purpose of the interviews was to have participants communicate their own perceptions of the experiences of navigating roles as a female adult learner. Participants were asked to read two fictional scenarios of a female adult learner who is navigating her roles as student, mother, spouse, caretaker, and employee. The scenarios were developed in consultation with key concepts
from the literature and can be found in the appendix. The participant was asked to respond to the scenarios by explaining how she would resolve the issues that arise in the scenarios. She was then asked to discuss any similar situations that she has experienced as a female adult student. This part of the interview resulted in more conversational dialogue, which “draws attention to the relaxed, conversation-like appearance of qualitative interviewing” (Weiss, 1994, p. 207), and utilized semi-structured questions which guided participants toward more focused questions and issues (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006). As the researcher, I was responsible for providing the direction of the interview, keeping the goals of the study in mind (Weiss, 1994). The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. I took detailed notes about participant demeanor and specific topics and discussion points during the interview. This log helped to support trustworthiness and verifiability. The individual interviews in the first phase of data collection were semi-structured and lasted 60-90 minutes.

During this phase, I asked the college administrators for documents that would help me to describe and establish the learning context for the participants. These documents included literature and pamphlets about the school’s programs and resources and revealed information on the institutional mission, goals, and demographics. The first institution had a resource center for women and a support group for women, and though I asked for planning documents or reports, none were available.

**Phase 2: Data Collection**

The second phase of data collection was the focus groups. After first level data analysis of the individual interviews, I presented an overview of interview findings to the focus groups and ask for their feedback on the data presented. Krueger and Casey (2009)
suggest that focus groups remain small, between 5-10 people, “small enough for everyone to have opportunity to share insights and yet large enough to provide diversity of perceptions” (p.6). For this reason, I provided several times and dates for possible focus group sessions such that the participants could be divided into small groups. However, only a few of the participants were able to attend the focus groups, which kept the groups at two and three participants each. The snowballing strategy did provide for some previously established sense of community among the focus group members such that they felt safe sharing their personal thoughts within the group. The use of focus groups as a second phase of data collection enforced participant debriefing and triangulation of data as participants responded to the first level of findings. In addition, the focus groups allowed for a deeper understanding of participant perceptions as they discussed their experiences navigating and navigating multiple roles.

In summary, data collection included:

- Individual interviews including reaction to female adult learner scenarios
- Document and institutional data solicitation
- Subsequent focus groups using findings from individual interviews

**Data Analysis Strategies**

Qualitative data analysis has been characterized in four phases: a) defining the analysis; b) Classifying data; c) Making connections; d) Conveying the message (Baptiste, 2001). Baptiste describes these phases as “interactive, iterative, and non-linear” such that the researcher might circle back through a phase for clarification (n.p.). For the “Analyzing Data” phase, researchers must consider ontology (understanding what is real), epistemology
(the nature and process of knowing), and axiology (the domain of values and ethics) (Baptiste, 2001). The next phase, “Classifying Data,” involves “tagging data” and “grouping tagged data” (Baptiste, 2001, n.p.). In this phase, the researcher determines which parts of the data are important to the purpose of the study. These parts of the data should be labeled and subsequently grouped into categories. These labels may be revealed organically or may be imposed from the framework or literature. Baptiste explains that categories require very specific definitions. Phase 3, “Making Connections” can also be called “Constructing Stories and Theories” (Baptiste, 2001, n.p.). Baptiste argues that the nature of qualitative research is to provide a deeper meaning of the topic than has yet been presented in literature, and to do that, analysts should develop stories and theories. For this study, I utilized Baptiste’s four phases. Within those phases I utilized data analysis techniques suggested for the specific data collection instruments, interview and focus groups.

Thematic data analysis began with the individual interviews. Weiss (1994) offers two types of data analysis for interviews: issue-focused and case-focused. For this study, analysis of the interviews was issue-focused. The research questions lent themselves to a better understanding of how female adult learners perceive issues associated with multiple roles; thus the focus is on the issue and not the specific cases. Weiss further gives four distinct analytic processes for producing issue-focused analysis. These are coding, sorting, local integration, and inclusive integration. Atlas ti, a coding software, was used to assist in coding and code organization. Coding was semi-structured, meaning that while most of the codes emerged from the interviews, some of the codes were pulled from the framework and the literature regarding role theory and social support systems.
Specifically, notes were taken in the researcher log during and directly after interviews. These notes chronicled participant behavior as well as key comments and researcher thoughts. Profiles of participants were written within one to two days of the interview, allowing time for the researcher to process the notes and interviews but not so much time that details were forgotten. As more interviews were conducted, emerging ideas were noted in the researcher log. When all interviews and focus groups were transcribed, the formal coding process began. The theoretical framework Role Theory informed some coding. Ultimately, the language specific to Role Theory (role contagion, role conflict, role overload) was too narrow for the findings that emerged in the data. Thus, the researcher deviated from the strict use of those terms to broader parameters taken from the literature. These included:

- Leveraging of resources to navigate roles
- Instances of guilt, stress, and anxiety
- Attention to social support systems as a resource
- Internal conflict regarding role values
- How participants frame and define their roles and how they perceive others define their roles

The change in coding strategy from the confines of Role Theory to larger parameters required several iterations of a coding structure. Themes were reorganized to reflect the two research questions. Thus, the final list of findings is organized as findings regarding role perception and findings regarding role navigation in that order to reflect how perception
informs navigation. Within those groups, findings in Navigation were grouped by the purpose for the navigation strategy.

Data analysis for focus groups should be systematic and verifiable, according to Krueger and Casey (2009). Transcripts of the focus groups, along with field notes and researcher observations, served as a starting point for analysis. Themes and categories were identified. Coding for the focus groups stemmed from the coding of the individual interviews. I looked for similar themes, yet also let new themes emerge.

**Ethics and IRB**

Qualitative research deals with human participants in their natural setting. Therefore, the research must consider and adhere to some form of ethical standard. Although a clear code of ethics has not been created for qualitative researchers, Stake (1995) offers, “Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict” (p.244). As the researcher, I take responsibility for ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. Ethical considerations included privacy and security of participant data and sensitivity to participant needs. All participant names have been changed to pseudonyms. Participant selection and communication was approved by the administration of the site selected, and the rules for participant communication and site observation provided by site administration was adhered to. I recognized that the topics being discussed in interviews and focus groups were sensitive issues and elicited displays of emotion from participants. These were handled gingerly.

This study proceeded with the consent of the Institutional Review Board of North Carolina State University. I created and presented an informed consent form to each
participant, which was signed before continuation of interviews. Data has been stored in a secure place and only shared with participants and peer reviewers. Names of institution and participants were changed for reporting. These steps have helped to ensure the ethical nature of this study.

**Issues of Rigor**

Qualitative research, also known as naturalistic inquiry, deals not with absolute truth, but with the reality of the participant or the participant’s perspective (Merriam, 1998). To ensure trustworthiness, I conformed to accepted standards of credibility, dependability, and peer debriefing as established by Guba and Lincoln (1982).

**Credibility**

Credibility refers to the participants’ beliefs that the researcher’s interpretations of the data are correct (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). To establish credibility, I engaged in the following practices: peer debriefing and member checks. I periodically debriefed my peers about my study and topic and elicited advice about methodology. I met with my dissertation chair to discuss the steps of the study and the progress at each phase and received advice in decision-making. This also created an audit trail and helped to purge any emotion that might have impeded my function as the researcher. Also, to ensure credibility, I made member checks a part of the structure of the study. During the focus groups, participants were given the findings from the first phase of analysis of the individual interviews. They were given the opportunity to clarify or elaborate upon any of the findings from the interviews as a form of member check.
Dependability

Dependability is the stability of a study once inevitable changes and variability have been accounted for. (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). To ensure dependability, I created a dependability audit trail. As the researcher, I offered a description of each step of the research process as it was executed. This includes full disclosure of the strengths and weaknesses of the study as well as the researcher positionality. I also described each step of the process in a researcher log.

Peer Debriefing

I built into this study a substantive form of peer debriefing. The focus groups in the second phase of data collection utilized first level coding and data analysis of the individual interviews. Thus, participants had an opportunity to react not only to their own collective thoughts and statements, but also to my interpretation of those experiences. This allowed for a stronger level of trustworthiness for the overall findings of the study.

Limitations and Strengths

Limitations

There are three limitations to this study: researcher bias, scope and site selection, and participant restraint. As the researcher, I brought my own experiences to the study. As a limitation, I was cognizant of my own experiences as I collected and analyzed data and strove to remain open to whatever findings emerged. However, although my experiences could pose issues for researcher bias, my insider knowledge as a female, single mother, and student helped me navigate and understand role theory and build rapport with participants and will be discussed in the “Strengths” section.
The second limitation is the small scope of the case. Because this is a case study and is bound specifically by scope, site, and participant selection and by circumstances that are context specific, it is not generalizable beyond this case itself. The two sites of the study are rural community colleges in southeastern United States, which limits the context. Community colleges are community-specific and by their very nature tend to the needs of their surrounding communities. This may determine amount, type, and allotment of resources in ways that may vary from one community college to another. Therefore, the findings of this study are not generalizable to other colleges or contexts.

The third limitation of this study involves the role and level of participation of the participant. The nature of the study is very personal. Participants were prompted to reflect on personal situations in which they may have felt vulnerable and may not have been forthcoming with their emotions on the topic. Though the researcher worked to eliminate barriers to vulnerability by creating an inviting and safe environment, the possibility remains that participants limited the amount and type of information they gave. Included in this set of limitations are those associated with focus groups. According to Krueger and Casey (2009), focus group participants may intellectualize their responses so that they seem thoughtful and reflective to the group. They may also refrain from showing emotion and may make up answers so that they do not seem to lack knowledge. Creating a safe, comfortable environment may have helped to alleviate some of these issues. Also, participant knowledge that all participants are female adult learners with similar experiences may have encouraged participants to be forthcoming with emotions and experiences rather than hold back.
**Strengths**

The three strengths of this study are researcher positionality and experience; research design; and potential to positively affect community college policy and programs for women.

The first strength of the study is researcher positionality and experience. I have concrete working experience with female adult learners in community colleges, which allowed me to better interpret the experiences of my participants and to further connect my findings to the literature. This aided in framing and coding the study. In addition, my experiences as a female adult learner allowed me to self-identify with my participants and helped me to know which questions to ask and how to ask them in a way that solicited the most valuable information from participants. My experience as an instructor in a community college helped me to establish rapport with the administrators and faculty, thus improving participant selection and access. My positionality provided a passion for discovering and uncovering the truths of these participants’ lived experiences and a desire to truly add to the literature in a way that is helpful. Finally, though I am a novice researcher, I have experience as a researcher on faculty research teams conducting interviews with female adult learners in community colleges. I also have experience writing literature reviews and presenting at conferences on this topic. These experiences coupled with my working knowledge of the context of the study served as a strength for topic development and synthesis and analysis of ideas.

The second strength of this study is study design. The two phases of the study allowed for a deeper understanding of participant experiences. Participants offered personal reactions to the female adult learner scenarios and were asked to discuss their own
experiences as female adult learners navigating multiple roles. After first-level coding of the interviews, participants convened in two groups to participate in focus groups during which they were presented with initial findings and interpretations as a form of peer debriefing. Having participants react to, comment on, and further explore their own collective experiences as well as my interpretation of the experiences offered a level of trustworthiness that strengthened the study.

The third strength of this study is its potential to provide a more practical understanding of how specific types of institutions like community colleges can seek to help female adult learners navigate multiple roles. As community colleges consider their largest subpopulation, female adult learners, they may look to the literature to better understand the experiences of female adult learners. The findings of this study may offer guidance for community college program planners and policy-makers or may inspire them to think differently about how to address the needs of female adult learners.

**Conclusion**

Qualitative research offers an appropriate platform for allowing women to express themselves, narrate their experiences, and offer a deeper understanding of how they make the choices that they make with regard to role conflict. Case study (as opposed to grounded theory, phenomenology, and ethnography) allows for a more tailored study of the bounded case of female adult learners’ experiences with role conflict. The resulting research has the potential to add a missing link to our understanding of what it means to be a female adult learner in postsecondary education.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The research study included interviews and focus group sessions with nineteen community college female adult learners from two sites to better understand the experiences of female adult learners in community colleges. The case study addressed the following research questions.

1. How do female adult learners in community colleges perceive multiple roles?
2. How do female adult learners in community colleges navigate multiple roles?

Each participant was asked to reflect on her own experiences as a student, parent, spouse, employee, and community member combined. Participants were also asked to reflect on the hypothetical situations of the two vignettes (See Appendix B, p. 317) that were offered for reading during the interview. The first vignette shared the experience of Kendra, a single mother of two young children trying to earn a nursing degree at her local community college. Kendra works two jobs and also cares for her mother who needs treatment for cancer. In the vignette, Kendra’s youngest son is sick, and Kendra works to find childcare for him while also getting her mother to her cancer treatment, attending class, and working her jobs. At the end of the vignette, Kendra wonders if she will be able to complete her degree given all of her other responsibilities. With this vignette, participants reacted to Kendra’s situation and described the advice that they would give her. The second vignette gives the story of Jamie, a married mother of two young children who wants to go to the community college to earn a degree. Jamie struggles to find a schedule that will meet her own needs as a learner, as well as her family’s needs. She also receives little support from her parents and some resistance
from her husband to help her instrumentally. Again, participants responded to Jamie’s situation and offered advice.

The data was analyzed through open coding guided by Role Theory. Data was organized based on the research topics of navigation and perception. Within each of these overall findings, participants offered insight in a variety of sub-categories. The subcategories for Perception include: School IS Cool: The Paradigm Shift in Student Support, “I’m Always a Mom No Matter What I’m Doing”: The Mother Role as Most Important, The Unbreakable Venn Diagram: The Unique Integration Among the Roles of Mother and Student, and Delegation Dilemma: Standing in for the Female Adult Learner. The findings related to navigation are: Strategies for Staying in Control and Setting Boundaries: Strategic Planning, Sacrificing, and Separating the Spheres and Strategies for Staying Positive: Support Gathering, Self-Encouragement, and Avoidance.
Profiles

The profiles reflect a diverse group of participants. This participant chart (sorted by marital status) is offered as a snapshot of participant characteristics.

Chart 1: Participant Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Self-Identified SES</th>
<th># of children/ages</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Af/Am</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>1 / 2 years old</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>MCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Af/Am</td>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td>2 / 6, 3</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>MCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savannah</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td>2/ 16, 5</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>MCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Af/Am</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>1/13 years old</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>MCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanisha</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Af/Am</td>
<td>Lower class class</td>
<td>2/ 10&amp;3</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>MCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td>2/ 6, 3</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>MCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layla</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Lower-middle class</td>
<td>1/ one</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>MCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td>1/ 2 years old</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>MCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>2/15, 12</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>KCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Lower-middle class</td>
<td>2/16, 11</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>KCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>2/ 9, 5</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>KCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haley</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td>2/ 2, 6</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>KCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kesha</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Af/Am</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>2/ 2, 5</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>KCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td>1/ 18 months</td>
<td>engaged</td>
<td>MCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Af/Am</td>
<td>Lower-middle class</td>
<td>1/7 month old</td>
<td>engaged</td>
<td>MCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Af/Am</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>3/14, 9, 8</td>
<td>engaged</td>
<td>KCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonja</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Lower-middle class</td>
<td>5/ 14, 12, 8, 7, 2</td>
<td>engaged</td>
<td>KCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonya</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Af/Am</td>
<td>Lower-middle class</td>
<td>1/ 4 years old</td>
<td>divorced</td>
<td>MCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addie</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Af/Am</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>2/8, 24</td>
<td>divorced</td>
<td>MCC</td>
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Lisa

Lisa is 21 years old and the mother of a two year-old daughter. She is African American and still lives with her mom and dad. Lisa got pregnant while in her senior year of high school and decided to have the baby. Her parents both have college degrees, so they
understand the importance of college, but were disappointed that she had a child at such a young age. According to Lisa, community college was her best choice.

Lisa seems assertive in some ways and tentative in others. She rarely makes eye-contact, and she seems very concerned about her speech. Though I was unable to detect any speech disorder, Lisa says that she has struggled with speech her entire life. However, Lisa is assertive in the expression of her own challenges. She expresses a clear understanding of issues that concern her, such as her role as a mother and her powerlessness to be the kind of mother that she wants to be, and ways that she feels they should change. Though Lisa is guarded, she does open up to me about her current situation.

Lisa says that she cannot remember things and that her speech impairment keeps her from getting jobs. She is looking for a part-time job, but hasn't found one yet.

Lisa is a part time student. She wants to be full time, but she cannot afford it. Lisa is not eligible to receive financial aid because her parents make too much money. They are paying out of pocket for her to go to school and, therefore, cannot afford for her to go full time. It seems that Lisa feels somewhat trapped in her life.

Lisa chose MCC because her high school counselor recommended the TRiO program to her. TRiO is a national program funded by Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 and offers assistance and guidance to students who qualify. The purpose of the program is to help low-income and first-generation students enter, succeed in, and graduate from college. Lisa likes the guidance that she receives from TRiO and references it often in the interview.

Lisa is most concerned about the conflicts between being a student and being a mother. She regrets that she has to leave her daughter with her parents when she is in
school. Although Lisa does say that she takes her daughter to daycare while she goes to school, she also says that her parents take on a more dominant parental role with Lisa's daughter than Lisa does. Lisa feels that she needs to finish school so that she can provide better opportunities for her daughter and herself, but she feels sad that she has missed out on time with her daughter.

"My parents spoil her (Lisa’s daughter) rotten, and I can’t spoil her because I don’t have a job. I’m trying, but it’s hard. And at school, yes, I have a lot of stuff on my hands. Yes, I have to study, and I can’t get to her like I want to because I have a test the next day, and she wants the attention. But I just, like, can’t compare it so I always – like my parents watch her for me while I can get to study. So it just feels like I’m not a parent either."

It seems that Lisa is struggling to free herself from her parents to be her own person and be independent. She has no friends at school, only former high school acquaintances. She speaks of her TRiO group as being like a family to her, and this service seems to keep her in school and help her to control her emotions.

"So I said, “It’s a good program,” but you know...I’m just saying it’s a good program and it’s kind of like a family thing, you know? They help you out if you need help with your classes or whatever, so it’s like one big, happy family even though we have problems sometimes, but it’s like one big, happy family there.

What most stands out about Lisa is how emotional she becomes when she talks about not being able to parent the way that she wants to parent. She tries to be strong and independent and to do things without the help of others, though she says that her parents and
TRiO members are supportive. She does mention that she has some "friends" who are all young parents, but she points out that most of them co-parent with their children's fathers, which is something that Lisa does not have. Lisa seemed to think that co-parenting is a better circumstance than her circumstance of living at home with her parents.

**Jessie**

Jessie is a 39 year-old, White, single mother of two. Her household includes herself and her two children ages six and three. She self-identifies as lower class and says she has always been lower class. She is currently a full-time student and does not work.

Jessie is strong-willed and seems to have come from a past of low self-esteem. She discusses being apathetic when she was younger, but she says that having children has changed her perspective. She wants to be able to provide for her children, which is why she has come back to school. In addition, Jessie has a gentle affect and says that her children are her motivation for returning to and doing well in school.

One of the reasons Jessie chose MCC is that MCC made the application process more enjoyable, and they made her feel welcome. Jessie went to college several years ago but did not graduate, so when she decided to return to school, she called the previous college, but that college did not return her call. She says that MCC returned her call immediately and that made her feel that they wanted her at MCC.

Jessie is from a town 30 minutes away, so this is not too far from her original home. She uses the resources at school while there and does not study until after the kids go to bed; thus, she is often up until 1:00 am. She says that she puts her kids first. Jessie stresses the importance of time management and stress management. She says that she
exercises to relieve stress. Jessie also discusses her school with her children. She says that she is a conscientious student and tells her children that she has to study, but she says that she worries a lot.

Jessie has taken some online courses. She says that she used to be terrified of computers and was computer illiterate but took a summer computer class that helped her feel more comfortable with computers.

Jessie relies on her babysitter as part of her emotional support system. She does have some friends from class, but not many. She is an involved volunteer and says that her church is very supportive. Other than church, Jessie says she has no support system. Her sisters are somewhat supportive, but she hates to ask them for help because they have their own challenges and lives to tend to. Jessie says that many people told her that she could not be successful in school, which she says just “fuels her fire” and makes her want to succeed.

*I have a lot of people that I would say are not supporters of me going to school that I feel like they would be content with if I failed or, you know, got kicked out so that makes me more determined to not fail and to not get kicked out. I’m going to stick it out.*

*I am very determined not to fail. And if I have to read the chapter three times to get the information to sink in, I’ll read it three times. … I’m determined not to fail because, you know, I feel like I can’t fail for my children’s sake, you know? I want them to do good in school, and I want to be that example that, you know, that they count on, too.*
Jessie makes her children her top priority and feels guilty for taking time away from her children and says she can relate to feelings of being afraid that she will be dismissed from her academic program for not doing well, but Jessie hopes that the guilt ends when she graduates.

*I mean you have to put your children first. And I can relate to feeling guilty about not being able to have time with them when they’re sick. And I can relate to feeling like I will be dismissed from the program if I don’t do well on a test. I’ve had those same feelings myself at times, especially if one of your children gets sick and you have to, you know, you have to be there for them. Because they’re not going to cry for somebody else. They’re crying for their mama.*

Jessie’s parents are deceased, and she tried not to bother her sisters with her problems. Thus, she has very little support. She mentions her church as a more prominent part of her support system.

*They’ve been really supportive; my first semester here they helped me out. They gave me a card for some gas, and I cried when they gave it to me because I never had…I haven’t had that somebody you could call if you’re broke down on the side of the road or if you need twenty dollars for gas*

Given the challenges she faces with computers, guilt, and lack of support, Jessie seems optimistic about her experiences in college. Though she could possibly finish her Medical Assisting degree next semester, she has decided to prolong her graduation so that she has one more summer at home with her children. She knows that once she finishes school and gets a full-time job, she will no longer be able to do that.
Sharon

Sharon is a White, 38 year-old married mother of two children, daughter age three, son age six. She lives with her husband, kids, and dog and she self-identifies as lower middle class. Sharon is originally from Finland and has a university degree from Finland in cultural studies. She was an exchange student to the USA and met her husband here. She volunteered for a while before she got her work permit then worked at an animal shelter. Once she had children, she chose to stay home. Sharon is very enjoyable to speak with, very open, and articulate. She is eager to be involved and has a seemingly good support system.

Sharon now works as a veterinary assistant in addition to going to school full time. She decided to return to school because she knows her family will need extra income later. She points out differences between Finland and USA and says that she is hyper aware of these differences even now.

Sharon started as a transfer student and switched to the Associate of Arts program so that she could actually finish her degree. She says that her school schedule did not work well when her children were younger, but now it seems to work. Sharon is now double majoring in Associate of Arts and Biotechnology, and she says that she enjoys school and enjoys the challenge.

Sharon chose MCC for affordability, convenience, and reputation. She currently works a couple of nights during the week and every other weekend. She and her husband share domestic responsibilities, and her husband is very supportive.

Sharon tells a story of a recent conflict between being a mother and student. Her son needed to have surgery which would require that he be put to sleep during the surgery. She
desperately wanted to be there for her son, but the surgery was scheduled during a day when she had class. She told her instructor that her son was having surgery, and the instructor told her that she needed to be at school instead of her son's surgery. She ultimately chose to go to school but feels guilty and sad for not being there for her son. She cries while telling this story.

And so they scheduled the surgery on Thursday, which is my day when I have 8:00 Organic Chemistry Lab that I really cannot miss unless it's something very, very important. So there I was, after I heard that, there I was and I was like – and he was, of course, saying, “mom, I really want you to go with me. I want you to go with me.” And there I was, like, having this big debate in my head. I really want to be with my son and this is going to be one of those labs that I know is going to be on the midterm, what am I going to do?

Those are the situations that are the hardest when, even though I keep on saying that I always put my kids first, but then there are the situations where you really… and everybody else said, too, they were like, “Sharon, just calm down. Ben is there, it’s not like you’re sending him over there by himself.” And I’m like, “yeah, I guess that’s true, but...” So those are the hardest situations when you have to debate whether it’s your child or whether it’s school or work.

Sharon points out that her strength and confidence come from her upbringing in Finland. She explains that in Finland, there does not exist the same separation of gender roles as in the USA. Moms and dads both contribute to domestic chores. Also, people are
encouraged to go to college, and the government does more to help even the playing field financially with respect to citizens. Finland has a much better support system from the government to the family and the culture there is more collective.

Though Sharon expresses many challenges of being a mother and student, she also seems to have the most stable support system. Her husband has a Masters degree, and Sharon already has a Bachelors degree, so they both seem to understand the nature of college and what it takes to persist. In addition, Sharon’s husband offers instrumental support in ways that the other participants’ significant others do not. Sharon says that her husband is her main form of instrumental, financial, and emotional support. She reflects on other students who may not have that support:

I have somebody that I can call and say, “Take half of this responsibility and carry it, please.” ...So that’s why when I have a bad day and I’m like “[Sigh] This is just crazy schedule. It doesn’t work and I don’t have enough time and I want another 24 hours!” And then I’m like, “Sharon, you have nothing to complain.” Like there are other people whose schedules are even worse than yours, so it’s just going back and thinking about those people who don’t have the main support right next to them.

Sharon uses this self-talk to encourage herself and remind herself that she has some positive forces in place to help her. Because Sharon is married and older than some of the other participants, she seems to be more financially stable. Her husband has a good job, and they are able to afford to send their children to private school. Her family is still in Finland, so she doesn’t have that kind of support available, but she has made good friends in her neighborhood who help her when she needs it. Overall, Sharon is a conscientious student.
She takes as many credits as she can and seems to thrive on doing well in school. She reflects on the difference between nontraditional and traditional students and says:

*I’ll do my best and it depends, I’ll do my best and whatever I get as a grade then that’s what it is. And that is just the most that you can do and but somehow I feel like a lot of mothers or even fathers that have all the different roles, they actually do better at school with all the stuff going on. Like I keep on comparing, I’ve seen a lot of young people, like in classes I’ve taken, and I’ve seen tests and of course some people just don’t get all the subjects, but I have questions several times. I’m like, “Okay, you have no children, you have no work, the only thing that you have to do is your school and you get a D. I have two kids, I work part-time, I have all the other stuff that I need to get done, and I have still been able to manage my GPA a 4.0”*

Sharon’s reflections help to understand the more wide-spread challenges of being a female adult learner such that even when one has a good support system and financial stability, challenges still exist that are more inherent to the nature of being a mother.

**Tonya**

Tonya is 25 years old and divorced. She is African American and has one child age four. She identifies with lower-middle class. In her household currently are just herself and her son, and she says she moved to the current city to get “different surroundings”. She went to school some before she got pregnant but then stopped for a while and started back. She stopped again when she and her ex-husband got divorced and she then moved here to finish school.
Tonya is in school for medical sonography. This is her third round of college. She works full time as a CNA in an assisted living facility, and she is a part-time student. She says that her son motivates her to finish school. Tonya works the night shift so that she can work full time and go to school, and her son stays with a sitter at night while she’s at work. She says when she finishes school that she’ll go wherever the jobs are. She says keeping her schedule is tiring. Tonya notes that it was easier when she was married because she had that extra instrumental support. With her current schedule, she does not get much sleep and tries to make up for that on nights that she’s off work. Her employer works with her school schedule so that she can do both. Basically, her son is at daycare all day and then a sitter at night.

Tonya says that her mom, aunts, uncles, sister, and grandparents are her support system, even though they do not live nearby. Her family is very supportive of her being in school, and she talks to her twin sister each day. She is a first generation student, and she says that her sister is not only an emotional support, but also instrumental. Tonya’s son actually lived with Tonya’s sister (an hour away) for an entire semester once, and Tonya came to visit them on the weekends.

_I think my sister’s probably the only one who really understands because at one point in time it was hard finding someone to keep him here and paying for daycare. My sister kept him for a whole semester for me while I was in school, so she’s really the one who really understands, like, what I’m going through and how hard it is and me being here myself._
So it made it easier because I could concentrate on my classes a little bit better, and I didn’t have to worry about, you know, who was going to keep him and how I was going to pay for him for his childcare because childcare is twice as much here than it is back home.

Tonya has financial aid but no loans. She was unable to get her child into the on-site daycare. Her ex-husband pays some child support, so that helps, and she claims her sister and best friend, who is also at MCC, are her emotional support system. Her best friend being at MCC makes it easier to come to school because she has a built-in support system.

Tonya is one of the co-leaders for Circle of Sisters, an all-female group/club at MCC. She says her club members are a great support system, as well. They do service projects together and go on outings such as dinner, movies, etc. The priority of the group is to help female students gain leadership skills and to access resources. Tonya says her position with Circle of Sisters is good for her and has helped her come “out of her shell”. Tonya speaks of her Circle of Sisters advisor and also a counselor on campus as being a support for her. She has anxiety, and her advisor has helped her deal with some of that anxiety.

Yeah, it’s made me more...what’s the word I’m looking for? It’s made me more, like, come out of my shell a little bit. It’s made me more organized in getting people together and doing what needs to be done and kind of, you know, letting me see the authority that I do have over certain things and not being so, I guess, scared to say certain things with certain people and just, you know betting my confidence that I need.
Well, our (Circle of Sisters) advisor, she’s a counselor here, so if I have anything that I feel like I need to talk to anybody about, I’ll talk to her. And she’s helped me out a lot because I do have anxiety…so she sent me out to see somebody to help me be able to deal with my anxiety a little bit better.

Tonya also feels guilt over not being able to see her son and spend time with him. She tries not to let the guilt get in the way of her responsibilities. Tonya says when you have worries about your children/family it’s difficult to concentrate at school.

Overall, Tonya seems sweet, relaxed, soft-spoken. She seems mature for 25 but a little timid. She says that she suffers from anxiety, but is conscientious about her grades. She sacrifices time with her son in order to finish school, but she remains hopeful that her sacrifices will provide a better life for them in the future.

Savannah

Savannah is a White 36 year-old single mother of two, but only her five year-old lives with her. The other child is 16 and lives in another state; she also has two children that she has not raised. Her sister adopted them at birth because Savannah was in addiction. Savannah self-identifies as lower class. She works part time and does have student loans. She has been clean and sober for five years, and she is in the Human Services Substance Abuse program; she does suffer from anxiety. Her cousin encouraged her to come to MCC to school, and she chose to move to McGregor City to go to MCC.

Savannah hopes to transfer to her home state university (she will move there, as well, to be closer to her family). She originally came to the east coast to go into a rehab facility here. Savannah works as a Teaching Assistant on campus, so her son got moved up on the
Savannah is head strong and determined. She is in sobriety and working her way to success. She sees school as the next step in a goal-oriented anti-addiction process. Though she has overcome many challenges, she still faces financial challenges and instrumental challenges. Savannah is goal-oriented and wants to do well.

*I get Pell Grant and then I pay for my tuition and my books and whatever I have left over goes, you know, into that check of whatever I get from my loans. And I usually get the max, and I know it’s really bad to do and I know I’m going to have to pay it back, but I’m not able to work full-time right now. So what I did is I talked to my mom about it, she’s like, “Look, this is what you need to do. Put it in savings and use it when you need it, live off of it, pay your rent in bulk as far as months ahead” which I’ve done – I paid four months ahead so I don’t owe rent until January.*

Savannah says that she can relate to Kendra and the feeling of being pulled in different directions. She cries during the discussion of Kendra’s situation, and she talks of her own struggles with guilt and says that she doesn’t have time to feel sad and guilty.

Savannah’s financial support consists of pell grants and loans. Her sister helped her pay for child care before Department of Social Services started paying for childcare. Savannah also has guilt over not spending enough time with her son, as well as residual guilt stemming from her situation with her first two children.

*I feel a lot of guilt. The other day, he (her son) says to me [sigh], he said, “Mom, I really want to see you more. I miss you.” And I said, and all I could think about*
saying to that was, “Mommy’s doing all this so we can have a backyard.” Because he really wants a backyard...And that’s why I’m doing this because, you know, that’s what I’m striving for so in the end, it’ll all be worth it, you know? I mean, it’s worth it now, but being able to have him see in the future, I mean, he may not be able to comprehend exactly, you know? It just amazed me how he said that, he just wanted to see me more and he missed me. And I’m just like, what do you say to that?

Savannah utilizes the resources on campus, including tutoring. She has no one to offer instrumental support here. If her son is sick, she has to leave immediately to take care of the situation. For emotional support, Savannah cites her mother and daughter as people she speaks to each day, as well as her friend who lives in her apartment complex. She doesn’t really have friends on campus and doesn’t like to work in groups.

Savannah notes that she used to strive for As, but realized that she was overwhelmed and chose to lower her own expectations so that she could maintain her sanity.

I am very proud of myself. At the beginning, I was an “A” striver constantly. A, A, A, A, A. Then I realized I was overwhelming myself and I’m not saying that that – I mean, I was doing better than my best if that makes any sense. Like I was pushing myself over and I wasn’t giving myself any time to, like, relax or, you know, have any kind of outside outlet. And so this last semester in the spring, I realized, just do your best...not better than your best. Just do your best, don’t overachieve, you know, overanalyze, overwhelm. You know, all those “over” words. I had to ex all of them out.
Savannah says she bottles up her stress and that she doesn’t have time to deal with stress or emotions. She worries that she doesn’t have time for herself. She says that her son is a great motivation, and she wants to provide him with a house and a back yard. She says the guilt has gotten worse the closer she gets to the end of her program.

Layla

Layla is a 26 year-old married mother of one. She was born in the United States, but her husband is from Yemen. Layla wears a scarf around her head and neck and traditional Muslim garb, and she explains that she became Muslim long before meeting her husband. Her son is one year old, and Layla self-identifies as lower class. Layla is very talkative and eager to share her stories and her challenges as a mother/wife in college.

Layla has returned to college because she wants to contribute to the financial stability of her family. Her husband is an immigrant, and she says that immigration is expensive. She met her husband in New York, and they later moved here to live near and work with one of his relatives. Layla spends much time explaining the challenges that she has had with educational institutions. She explains that she got behind in school as a young woman. She had health issues, and her school sent a teacher to conduct home-bound education, but Layla says that she did not learn what she needed to learn in those sessions and fell behind in school. She says that the school failed her. Layla’s parents did not want the stigma associated with having a child who needed help academically, so she did not receive the help that she needed. She did not graduate from high school but later earned her GED.

Layla was very determined to come to college at this point in her life. She says that her husband was not supportive, and she attributes his lack of support to cultural differences.
Layla explains that women in Yemen are more submissive and traditional in their roles. They do not go to school or work. They stay home and take care of domestic chores. She also faced the financial burden of out-of-state tuition as a barrier to returning to school. She was able to appeal the out-of-state tuition and to also get a grant for childcare. Without these resources, she would not have been able to come to MCC.

Because my husband’s culture and everything, he’s trying to adapt. He’s from Yemen. It’s extremely, I mean, they’re night and day, America and Yemen are night and day. They are just totally, just way different. You know, the woman is very traditional, stays home, does not even leave, doesn’t even drive. Doesn’t, I mean, sometimes there’s some instances, but I’m talking for the majority. A lot of them don’t even finish high school; most of them get married, like fifteen. It’s different, you know? I did tell him, “Yes, I am Muslim, but I am still American, you know, so you do have to, you know, we both have to make sacrifices”

Layla’s family is not close by. She says that her relationship with her father is rocky at best. According to Layla, her father does not support her conversion to Islam and constantly makes jokes or speaks badly of it. Because of this, Layla has distanced herself from him as a form of stress management.

My dad, I’m currently not talking to him right now. I was talking to him while I was going to school and I found out there was something…he just keeps making some jokes, like Islamic jokes, Muslim jokes…I was just like, “This negativity I don’t need right now.” I’m not saying I’m never talking to my dad again, but I told my mom,
“Right now, I just need to focus on school. I need to take a break from Dad. I’m not saying I don’t love him.”

This is part of my stress management at this point because I’ve shown him every kind of love that a daughter – he should be extremely proud of me. Yes, I’m not going to Harvard. Yes, I’m not going to whatever, but I feel like overall, I’m a pretty dang awesome daughter to have, you know? I would be proud of myself – I mean, I would be proud of my daughter if she was me.”

Layla is quite reflective. She talks about life lessons that she has learned that have affected her identity development. According to Layla, she has had constant financial challenges and is working to end that. She also talks about her experiences with different cultures. She discusses her experiences living in “the hood” when she moved here, and also about her intrigue for joining Circle of Sisters because the membership is primarily African American. She wanted to experience what it would be like to be a White Muslim in a mostly African American group for women and is surprised to find that she feels welcomed there. She explains that the Circle of Sisters members are very mature and lack the drama that may come with other all-female groups.

I’m trying to join Circle of Sisters. It’s just because I want that support from other women because there’s other women in this that have children and I’m like, “They’re managing it, I’ll manage it.” It helps encourage you to see, okay, if they’re doing it, I can do it.
It’s just, like, positive stuff and leadership skills and, you know, sometimes my husband is like, I can’t. There’s times he just wanted me to quit because he’s like, “It’s too much.” And then, like, just being around other women – just, like, especially there’s a lot of I noticed that African American women, they have…that’s one of the reasons why kind of, I saw that there was a lot of African American women. There’s other clubs, but there was a lot of White people. I was like, “I need to kind of be around them because I haven’t before.” And I just – I want to expose myself to that and see I’m not uncomfortable. I’m not “that White girl” uncomfortable that knows she’s white in a black crowd, but I noticed too that a lot of them are kind of the backbone of their families a little more than…so I’m like, “This could be good for me.” This could be, you know, strength….And I do. I like all of them, every one of them. There’s no drama. I have not, none of them fight, none of them get – everybody’s very mature.

Layla is very passionate about her goal to change the educational system. She wants to be a life-long learner. With all of the instability that Layla describes in her life, it seems that school is a safe, stable environment for her that feeds her need to explore and contemplate new ideas.

Maria

Maria is a 38 year old African American single mom trying to get into the radiography program. She and her 13 year-old daughter moved here from Connecticut with another family, and there are 13 people currently in her household. She and her daughter share a room in the friends’ household. They left everything behind and came here with
nothing. Though she has very little in the way of financial sustenance, Maria says that she self-identifies with middle class.

Maria has been in college before. She has an Associate’s degree in Business Administration, but after several years in the workforce, realized that she did not like working at a desk all day. She has tried to return to school several times but had to drop out twice. The first time, she dropped out because she was pregnant, and the second time she dropped out because she became so sick herself that she was hospitalized and could not complete the work for her courses.

Maria followed her support system here. When her friend announced that she was leaving their former state, Maria decided to join her. Maria’s family is small. She has a sister who lives several states away and a grandmother and brother who also live several states away. She expresses that she feels pressure from her family to move closer. They also question her judgment to move away, and her sister, in particular, shows jealousy toward the friend with whom Maria lives now. Thus, Maria’s support system is limited to the best friend and the best friend’s older daughter who is also a single mom, attending university, and living in the same household.

Maria constantly considers moving out so that she and her daughter can have their own place. They have given up their privacy to stay in a household that offers more instrumental support and financial support. However, though Maria receives such support, she is also a form of support for the others. There are ten children in the household, many of them small, and Maria is like a second mother to them. She disciplines them and is often
responsible for watching them when the friend/mother leaves. In addition, the friend’s husband still commutes to several states away for work, so he is often gone on the weekends. Maria does receive financial aid and student loans. She knows that she will eventually have $30,000 - $40,000 in student loan debt by the end of the three years that she plans to be in school, and the thought of so much debt is stressful. In addition, she is still considered out-of-state, so her tuition is much higher than someone who is in-state.

And I’ve kind of figured, okay, by the time I’m done I’m looking at, like, thirty…between thirty and forty thousand in student loans and I’m like holy crap, that’s a lot of money that I’ve got to figure out how to pay back and work and, you know, my daughter. She’s thirteen now, and in three years, she’s going to be sixteen and she wants a sweet sixteen and I’m just like honey, we might have to put that on hold because I’ll just be done with school and I’ll have to get a job and have to figure out if we either already have an apartment or if we’re going to stay here or if we’re going to move, you know? So I’m like we can kind of put that plan on hold for right now.

Maria is very open about how she questioned her decision to return to school. Her daughter is her largest emotional support and reminds her that she can get through school and do well. Maria’s daughter advises her to get a tutor and to study harder.

When I first started, oh my God, when I first started, like, the first two weeks, you know, I would go home like, “What the hell was I thinking?” No, I really was. I moved, I went through this crazy phase where I’m like, “Oh my God, did I really make the right decision?” You know, I did pray about it, I felt peace about it, I went
to my pastors about it, but I was just like, was I sure? You know, what was I thinking? After, like, ten years of not going to school...holy crap, this stuff is hard.

And biology, we did the cell and I read the chapter – read it twice – I was like, I think I just read something in Chinese. I don’t even know what I read. And I just started crying because I was just freaking out because I didn’t understand what I’m reading.

And my daughter’s like, “Mommy, it’s okay. It’ll just take you a little longer, but you need to get a tutor and you can do it Mommy. Do you want me to read it to you?”

This support runs both ways. Maria is a very conscientious mother. She tells a story of when she worked and was away from home a lot which resulted in her daughter doing poorly in school. Maria’s daughter complained that Maria was never home to support her. Maria quit that job the next day so that she could devote more time to her daughter. She says that she does feel guilty for not being able to give her daughter more. She explains that the only time she’s missed one of her daughter’s cheerleading events, her daughter got hurt and was upset that Maria was not there to give her a hug. Now, Maria works hard to change her class schedule so that she can be there for her daughter. She mentions, though, that she has told her daughter that she may not have a “Sweet Sixteen” because they may not be able to afford it in three years. Maria and her daughter are both sacrificing for the cause of Maria returning to school.

Maria has struggled with one of her math classes and was not made aware that she could take a placement test to help her decide upon the correct course. According to Maria, her instructors have admitted that many students who may have taken the prerequisites many years ago really needed a refresher course before moving onto the next math class. This was
frustrating for Maria and she says that students need better advisement. She also suggests mandatory counseling for students. Maria would likely see a counselor, but she was raised with the notion that seeing a counselor is inappropriate, and this stigma has stayed with her. She says that if this was mandatory, she would go, and it would likely do her more good.

My thing is that I don’t know what to talk about (with a counselor). And I was just, like, I was kind of raised you just don’t talk to people about that stuff and, you know, and I’ve kind of...I don’t want people’s perception of me to change so it’s just like, oh you can’t know something’s wrong with me because you might think a little less of me or something. I don’t think that they would and I don’t think that counselors do that, but that’s just my mentality and I think that’s a lot of people so it’s just, like, yeah, I don’t know.

I think it actually might work if it was a requirement at least to see them (counselor), you know, at least three times during a semester, just check in.

Maria is also a pre-member of Circle of Sisters. She will become a member when she finishes this semester and has a GPA. She enjoys the camaraderie and support that the group lends to women. Maria is a conscientious student. She studies often, has a tutor, and does not like to miss class. She refers to herself as an “internalist” when it comes to handling stress. She doesn’t like to put her problems off on others, so she tries to deal with them internally. She has been known to put school ahead of her own health and says that she feels many women do this. She says she doesn’t have time to be sick. She also doesn’t have time to cultivate relationships outside of her daughter and the family she lives with. She does
have some friends on campus, but they do not interact off campus. Maria does reference her own spirituality as part of her coping strategies, but has not found a church family yet since moving from her previous state.

**Holly**

Holly is a 20 year-old engaged mother of an 18 month-old son. She lives with her son and fiancé and self-identifies as lower class. She is preparing to apply to the nursing program and hopes to work with babies of addiction.

Holly seems very maternal for just 20 years of age. She is young but has the responsibilities of a full adult. Holly claims to have no support system and becomes quite emotional while talking about that lack of support. She says:

*But like it’s hard because I feel like he just doesn’t really understand. And it’s like no one recognizes, like, what I’m going through being in school, like, it’s hard, you know?*

Her fiancé does not help with domestic chores, though he does take care of Holly’s son during the day while Holly is in class. Holly’s mother lives nearby, but Holly doesn’t have a good relationship with her. She feels that her mother abandoned her maternal role when she (Holly’s mother) began dating several years ago. That feeling of abandonment causes conflict for Holly and fuels her need to be an exceptional mother herself. Holly’s stepdad lives in Louisianna, and her half-sister lives in Florida, and Holly does not include them in her support system at all.

Holly’s son gives her motivation to do well in school and to persist. Having a child gives her direction that she did not have previously. Holly gives several examples of times
when she feels pulled between being a good student and being a good mother. She speaks often of the financial challenges that she faces. Holly says that she could never afford to send her son to daycare, so she feels fortunate that her fiancé can watch her son during the day; however, this means that her fiancé works at night and every other weekend. Thus, they do not get much time together as a family or a couple. Holly has a strong desire to spend time with her son and describes trying to persevere through classes even though she really just wants to be at home with her son.

Holly has conflict with her fiancé over the value of work. She feels that her fiancé doesn’t value the mental work that is involved in earning a degree, and she explains that they argue over who deserves to sleep in or to get more rest.

*I feel like he doesn’t he doesn’t understand that things can be mentally demanding as well and just because I’m sitting down doesn’t mean I’m not doing something, you know what I mean?...I’m not just sitting around and he kind of makes me feel like I’m not doing as much as him and, like, you know, he kind of deserves more rest or whatever it is – or sleep in later than me and so it’s kind of a tit for tat back and forth thing and it [sigh] …it gets frustrating.*

Holly does not take online classes. Financial barriers have kept her from having a computer and internet service. Her attempt to take online classes without having internet at home was challenging because she was forced to spend more time at the school library to get her work done, which ultimately prevented her from spending time with her son. Though she has a computer and internet service now, she seems to distrust the technology and refuses to take more online courses. She does take one night course, which she dislikes, but she says
the course would not fit into her schedule any other way. Holly relies on a friend to care for her son on those evenings, but she does not consider this friend to be part of her support system because the friend does not understand what it’s like to be in college.

Overall, Holly seems to feel that no one understands the challenges she faces and that no one values the sacrifices that she makes to attend school while also trying to be a good mother. She seems to have a need to be validated in some way, and is very emotional about her need for more support. Holly refers to women as “strong” and feels that women should be able to do anything that they want, including earning a degree while being a mom.

**Tanisha**

Tanisha is a 32 year-old African American student. She is single and has two children ages 10 and three. She self-identifies as lower class. She is currently unemployed and is a full-time student in the Early Childhood program with only has one more semester before finishing her degree.

Tanisha is not very talkative and doesn’t elaborate much. I decided to have her read the scenarios early so that we would have more talking points. Her mother does have a college degree and is a prominent part of her support system. Tanisha has been at MCC for two years and is near the end of her program which may be the cause of the lack of anxiety that she feels. She has her mom and aunt to help her. Tanisha finished cosmetology school in 1999, so she has some experience in continued education. She intends to continue working at a hair salon when she finishes her degree but on a part-time basis.

Tanisha and her children live together, and Tanisha’s mother lives close by and helps with her children. She says she feels happy with her current academic success. She is on
financial aid and does have student loans. She does use the library to do her homework and says that she doesn’t have internet at home. Thus, she doesn’t take online courses. She tried online courses but prefers face-to-face because she has better access to her instructor. Her son is enrolled in a private school, and her mother and her sister provide financial assistance when she needs it. Tanisha also relies on her grandmother and her son’s paternal grandmother for instrumental help. She says her son’s father is also helpful financially.

Tanisha had to give up her job at the hair salon because she did not have enough time for homework. Thus, she took on the burden of loans in order to alleviate the stress of not having enough time.

Well, every time, every semester, I say, you know, “I don’t want to get another loan, but I don’t have a choice.” And the loans, I mean, they still don’t cover the whole semester when you have, like, car payment and rent. There are bills collectors, you know, they are still calling you and harassing you. That’s another problem that you have to deal with, stress. And they don’t – well, some of them might understand. Okay, I’m at school, I might have a couple late payments until, you know, I graduate and then I understand. But some of them you’re like, one payment and they’re like, going crazy.

She also recalls that having her kids’ father living with her for a period of time made life harder. He did not respect Tanisha’s need for time to do schoolwork. He also did not help much with instrumental work.

Tanisha says that her children are supportive and her oldest will help with the youngest child. Her children encourage and motivate her.
[M]y oldest, he will – say I’ll be like, “...Okay, I need you to help me with your brother. Go in the back room and, you know, play with him with his toys.” Because he doesn’t like to play by himself. Or even take my books and go sit at the little table with him and do my homework while he’s playing, but if I have to study for a test I’ll ask my oldest, you know, “Play with him, I have a test tomorrow. I’ve go to study really hard.” So then I drop them off at school the next morning, he’ll say, “You better pass that test!”

Tanisha says that older teachers who have families themselves seem to understand the challenges of being a female adult learner, but younger teachers do not. Tanisha has a strong work ethic and says she understands why instructors do not want students to miss class. In response to Kendra’s scenario, Tanisha says that Kendra should try to get as much help as she can. She does not recommend that Kendra drop out of school. Tanisha says that she feels guilt, as well, but encourages herself to push through because she’s almost finished. Her personal time consists of cleaning up and doing homework. Sometimes she goes out with a friend for dinner on the weekend, but often, she doesn’t have a babysitter. Tanisha discusses the stress of bill collectors trying to collect on bills that she is unable to pay, even with the financial aid and loans. She says she tries to block out stress and puts it aside by noting that eventually she will be able to pay her bills and pay on time.

For Jamie’s scenario, Tanisha says that Jamie should keep talking to her family and explain that she really needs their help. She recommends that Jamie stay firm in her decision to go to school and not back down from that. Tanisha recommends finding outside help,
possibly a babysitter or after school program instead of trying to rely on the parents and husband. Doing so might prompt the family members to step up.

Advice that she would give to other women considering coming to school: Do your best, use tutoring services, and talk to a counselor if you need to. Do not be afraid to ask for help if you need it from school and family. Register early. Find a study buddy.

Alicia

Alicia is a 23 year-old engaged mother of one. Her daughter is seven months old. Alicia lives with her fiancé, her daughter, and her pregnant sister. She self-identifies as lower middle class. Of interest, Alicia is the founder of the Circle of Sisters group at MCC.

When I first got here, I met the male mentoring group. And, you know, they’re like, on campus and they have their blazers on and, you know, I was like, “What is this group?” and it’s all males and I was asking around on campus. I was like, “Do we have a female organization?” I was like, “It doesn’t have to be similar to male mentoring, but do we have one at all?” And they were telling me “no” and I was like, well, what if we need help and guidance? What do we have? And I was talking to the guy from male mentoring and he told me what they do, how they help males and how they help them be successful and guide them throughout a successful career. And I was like – he was like, “Well, maybe you should start one of your own.” I was like, “Maybe...” I was like, because we have a lot of misguided girls, at the time I was seeing a lot of teens that were pregnant and they would, you could tell – I wasn’t really into school, but I at least took it serious enough – but, you know, they would just be wandering the halls and, you know, you see one just lost. And, you know,
you’re a teen mom and I could tell that their help wasn’t there. I was like, okay, I have to find a way to reel these girls in and so I had one of my friends, I talked to her about it. I was like, “We can start this out here.” Because she was wondering too, where’s the help for the ladies out here? And so it was a long process, you know, getting our constitution. I had a lot of help from different advisors on campus and we made it.

Alicia is very mature for her age. She is wise and insightful. She explains that she started Circle of Sisters because she saw a need for women and dared to implement change. She is a mentor for her classmates, and can be characterized as strong, smart, and driven. She uses her resources and really wants to make life better for others. She has a big heart and a very giving spirit.

They don’t want to go to [our counselor] for some reason, I think because we’re all the same age range they feel more comfortable coming to me. And, you know, sometimes I take on – one thing that I hate – I take on other people’s stress. Like if you tell me a story, oh my God, I’m going to take it on, too and it’s like a chain reaction.

Alicia enjoys being a mother, has a stable relationship with her fiancé, and has good rapport with her instructors. She has a lot to say about what colleges can do to make life better for female adult learners.

Alicia was in school already when she got pregnant. She says that she thought seriously about dropping out, but her counselor advised her against it. Having a child changed her priorities. Before her daughter, Alicia was not focused on school; however,
once her daughter was born, she realized the importance of getting a degree. After switching her major three times, Alicia has decided to study Medical Office Administration. She is in her final year and will get married and graduate within a month of each other.

Alicia’s fiancé works the night shift at the local hospital so that they do not have to pay for childcare. This means that they do not see each other much, though. He’s also in school, but Alicia says that he is going a little more slowly than she is. Alicia says that the fact that her mother never graduated is motivation for her to continue. Alicia’s counselor has helped her to prioritize. Mother first, then student, then leader. Her counselor also encourages her to nurture her relationship with her fiancé.

Alicia talks candidly about Circle of Sisters. She’s proud of the club because they have helped so many girls. She recalls that one girl was suicidal, and the group offered support for her. Alicia, herself, spends many hours on the phone with the girls, helping them through challenging situations. She is nervous that when she graduates and leaves MCC, Circle of Sisters will fail. She is obviously very invested in the group and cares deeply about its success.

Yeah, I think everyone should have one (peer mentoring system) because really, because like I said, we had girls in our club that was suicidal and it’s like, to me, if you could help that one person, imagine if every college had this how many people you could help. Because, like, people, you know, and I hate the whole you think being that we’re in college you know, bullying wouldn’t exist. And I tell these people when they’re talking about other people, I’m like, “You never know what that person’s
going through. You never know why they are the way they are.” And so really this group, I think it helps these girls mature, for them to see the bigger picture.

Alicia also talks about her pregnant sister who lives with her. Her sister is an elementary school teacher, so she has a good job, but she is braving the pregnancy without the Father. Thus, Alicia sees herself as the father figure for the baby and the support for her sister.

Alicia works on campus in Career Services. She says that they have been very supportive of her schedule and her need to put family first. When discussing her support system, Alicia speaks of her fiancé and her counselor, noting that her mother doesn’t seem to understand what she goes through. She also says that she encourages other girls to use counseling services; most women do not know about counseling services or are frightened to use it.

Alicia talks about how becoming a mother and being a student at the same time has affected her relationship with her fiancé. She says that she feels that she neglects her fiancé because she spends every spare second either with her daughter or studying.

Kim

Kim is 22 years old, White, and married. She has a two year-old and self-identifies as lower class. Kim is approaching the end of her program and seems to feel more at ease with her roles and navigating them. She will graduate soon and can see the light at the end of the tunnel. She doesn’t elaborate much and gives quick, short answers.
Because her husband does not drive, Kim is responsible for his transportation. Although she is fairly young, she has been with her husband for five years, married for a year and a half.

She started to college when she was in high school and has been at MCC since then, stopping out for two semesters, which she says put her behind.

*I think I’ve missed, like, two semesters that’s put me behind and that was mainly because my financial aid didn’t come through in time so I had to miss.*

Kim is studying Marketing and Retailing. She was born and raised in McGregor City and says that she will likely stay Kim works at a retirement community and tries to plan her school schedule around her work schedule. She works 10 am - 7 pm each day, and she says that little sleep and a lot of patience is what gets her through. Kim’s husband works the night shift so that they can avoid paying for childcare.

*My husband works nights so it works out he can keep the baby during the day while I’ll get her at night while he’s at work, so we don’t hardly see each other all that much, but I usually go on my break and spend some time with them.*

For Kim, financial support consists also of financial aid and scholarships in addition to her income and her husband’s income. She has little instrumental support. Her husband helps occasionally, but she does most of the domestic work herself. She says that if she has had a rough day and asks her husband to help out, then he will; however, Kim prefers to do it herself because that way she knows it is done correctly. For emotional support, Kim leans on her husband, mother, and friends. She sees her parents a few times each week, and her parents often keep her child on Saturdays when both she and her husband work. Kim names
three friends that she counts on. One graduated last semester, one does online work, and one is actually at MCC. Only one of them has a child. In addition, Kim’s siblings are all younger, and she says that she is a bigger support to them than they are to her.

Kim explains that she has a closer relationship with her advisor, but not with other teachers. She tries to keep home life and school life separate. She says that she tried tutoring once but doesn’t have much time to go more. She says the hardest part about being in school is finding time to do homework and just getting out of bed in the morning to come. She usually does her schoolwork late at night, after her daughter is in bed and after the domestic work is done and her husband is at work.

Kim recalls that she did not like stopping out of school; it was not her choice. Originally, she was preparing to transfer, but that is not her goal any longer. She says, realistically, she needs to finish school and focus on her family and work. Kim does feel guilty sometimes, but she says, “[Y]ou do what you’ve got to do to get through the day, keep everybody happy”. One of the challenges of Kim’s program is that some courses are only offered once every two years. If a student hasn’t planned for that, it can put him/her behind. Kim has two courses that she is waiting to be able to take. She says she could take these courses at another college, but doesn’t want the hassle of completing the paperwork to do that.

Her advice to women wanting to return to school is to schedule carefully and find a way to make it happen. She says that the first semester or so is tough because of scheduling and adjustments, but once you get a schedule down, it becomes easier. She calls this
“zombie mode”. She also says that feelings of guilt are normal, but women can push through them if they keep in mind that it’s only temporary and there is an end.

Addie

Addie is a 46 year-old divorced African American mother of two. Her 24 year-old son no longer lives with her, but her eight year-old daughter does. She self-identifies as middle class. Addie is a very private person, so private, in fact, that we had to have our interview in a different building altogether because she works in the building where I held most of the interviews, and she wanted a more private setting. She is older and more expressive of her spirituality than most of the participants. She takes a while to warm up to, but she offers sage advice.

Addie talks often of her spirituality, which is part of her support system. She mentions that she leans on her siblings for instrumental support and on her spiritual mother for emotional support. She also looks to her elderly grandmother. Addie’s mother passed away several years ago, and Addie sees that as a loss to her support system.

So when I do need some time to myself I do call upon my siblings. I’ll be like, “Okay, I need twenty-four hours.” And they’ll make arrangements, see, okay, who can keep [my daughter] for overnight or something like that so I can have some me time.

Addie is an employee at MCC. In fact, she became a student only after working at MCC for several years. She has a lot of prior college experience. She mentions several colleges that she completed courses in either face to face or online, but she says that all of those courses transferred to her current institution, enough so to earn her a degree. She is currently working on a transfer degree to complete a bachelor’s in education. Her goal is to
work as a specialist in a nearby school so that she can “follow” her daughter through school. It is important to Addie that she has a nine month work schedule so that she can spend summers with her daughter. When asked about why she stopped out of college previously, she says that pregnancy was the first reason and “making money” was the second. She worked for a pharmaceutical plant making fairly good money and decided she did not need the degree. She returned to school after getting laid off from that job.

Addie says that the hardest thing about being a student is not having time for herself, but she gets a break in the summers because her daughter goes on vacation with all of Addie’s siblings. Addie does not have many friends because she does not have time to cultivate those kinds of relationships. She spends all of her “free” time with her daughter.

Addie talks very specifically about prioritizing. She is also very specific about time management and looks to that as a way to reduce stress.

*Well, Monday night is a free night. Monday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday are the days I do homework. Tuesday and Thursday I do not do any homework. I go to school, you know, Tuesday and Thursday I have no time for homework on Tuesday and Thursday. I do not make time. I do not do homework on Wednesday night because Wednesday night I go to get my mind ready for prayer meeting and Bible study, not for homework.*

Addie has taken many online courses and feels it should be the first option for working students. She acknowledges that she does experience some guilt but that prioritizing helps to alleviate that guilt. She sets time aside each day for her daughter and each week for her church, Bible study, and prayer. God is definitely a big part of her support system.
Through her responses to the vignettes, Addie believes that if a woman wants to return to school, she should not expect others in her family to make sacrifices or concessions. She believes that the woman should make these herself. With regard to Kendra, Addie believes that she should prioritize and stop out of school until she has more time to devote to her school work. Addie says that “school is a want, not a need”. Thus, it should not come first in one’s set of priorities.

To other female adult learners, Addie suggests preparing the family before going back to school. She suggests planting a seed with others that you want to go to school and then ease your way into actually doing it. That way, it’s not such a shock. She also suggests that women speak to a school counselor when they need assistance because counselors are there to help you balance and problem solve.

**Jordan**

Jordan is 35 and engaged. She has three daughters ages 14, nine, and eight. She is African American and lives with her fiancé and daughters. She says she’s a private person and doesn’t typically share much. Jordan does say that she has a limited support system but doesn’t seem to be distracted by it; she is very focused. Jordan is local but says that she does want to move.

Jordan is already an LPN and is studying to be an RN. She and her fiancé work different shifts so that they can be available for the kids. Jordan’s mother often helps with the kids and sometimes cooks dinner for their family. Jordan’s older daughter is supportive, as well and tries to be encouraging. Jordan tries to not let the complexity of her situation cause her stress:
I've learned, probably about two years ago, that I don’t let anything stress me out. I’ll be thinking it, but I was like, you know, “Don’t think about it; it’s going to be what it’s going to be.” You know?

Jordan also helps to care for her grandmother who has dementia. She talks about the guilt that she feels having to leave her grandmother, and she also feels guilt for not having time for her daughters. Jordan’s oldest daughter is very helpful around the house with domestic work and with the other two girls.

Jordan talks about feeling old in the classroom with younger students. She tries to get to know the younger students but is intimidated by how they know answers to questions that she is not familiar with. She also talks about the difference in her college experiences. Her first experience was when her youngest child was a baby. She was not living with her fiancé at the time, so her mother and grandmother helped care for the children. She had to drive an hour commute to get to school, and she worried about her children more during that time.

Yes, it was different because I was like, my kids was like, really young. And I was like, even though my grandmother took care of the kids at the time, I was kind of worried about, well, “Make sure you do this! Make sure you do that!” You know? “Feed the baby this! Don’t feed the baby that!” But as they’re older, they can pretty much can talk and do a lot for themselves so I’m not too worried.

During her current experience, she is navigating her employment as well as raising three children. She does have the help of her fiancé and her mother, and she says that focus is important:
I just think about what’s going on. If I’m home, it’s home, and school is school, and then when I leave school, it’s think about whatever else is around, you know? But I try to stay focused; if I don’t stay focused, I’d be lost.

Jordan’s strategy here is to separate the spheres. She tries to avoid thinking about home and children when she is trying to complete schoolwork, and vice versa.

Jordan’s advice to other women is to persevere and use your resources and double check behind your advisors because they do make mistakes.

Taylor

Taylor is 39 years old, married, and has two children, ages 15 and 12. She self-identifies as middle class. She has recently moved to the community near KCC and decided to come back to school because they can now afford it. In their previous location, she felt she had to work so that they could afford their lifestyle, but now her husband has received a raise, and she can stop working and focus on school. Taylor tried college once before and did not do well. She says she did not apply herself. She was very young at that time, and now, 20 years later, she recalls being nervous about going back to school.

Well, just try to think, you know, I’m thirty-nine. I haven’t been in school for twenty years. I haven’t done anything like this in twenty years, so not that I was a horrible student, but the first time I tried college I failed miserably, but that was my fault, not anybody else’s just because I didn’t apply myself. And then I got married at nineteen so whenever I got married somebody had to work and he was closer to finishing school so he stayed in school and I dropped out to work.
Taylor is in the Special Education program; she wants to get her AA and then transfer into a partner program that actually allows her to earn a bachelor degree from KCC.

Because Taylor’s children are older, they are a little more self-sufficient, and she finds time to do homework while they are playing video games. Taylor’s husband works long hours, and she often feels like a single parent.

*My husband, his schedule kind of varies, especially right now they have a big project going on out there so I never know when he’s going to get home. I mean, there’s nights when he walks in at 9:00/10:00 at night and you don’t see him at all because he says, “Hey, how are you?” grabs something to eat, and he falls asleep on the couch or back on in the bed, and you don’t see him again until the next morning. So that’s a little challenging sometimes with him being gone so much, it’s not a single mom thing, but in some ways, at some points in time, it really is a single mom thing.*

Taylor tries to save weekends for her family and avoids doing homework during that time. She does not receive financial aid. They are paying out-of-pocket for her education. They also handle instrumental support themselves. They have recently moved here, so they do not have a network of support, and their family is not nearby. Taylor credits her stable family structure to her relationship with her husband.

*My husband and I are best friends so I don’t worry about anything pretty much with him. We don’t hide anything; we don’t argue very much, we don’t fight.*

Taylor doesn’t have any friends at KCC yet. She says that she doesn’t have time to devote to making and nurturing those kinds of relationships. Taylor’s biggest challenge is trying to juggle everything and stay on top of her homework. She knows that she failed the
first time and doesn’t want to do that again. She cries when she talks about her desire to do well in school, and she admits that she currently has As in her classes.

Taylor actually says that she’s doing better in school here because they are in a new place. If they were back home in TN, her children would be involved in sports, and she would have to find ways to get them where they need to be. Because they are new in this area, her children aren’t quite involved in those programs yet, which makes life easier for her.

Taylor feels guilty when she takes time to study at night. She talks about being overwhelmed with homework sometimes and working hard on the weekends to get ahead so that she doesn’t have to stay up until 1:00 or 2:00 am during the week doing homework. She realizes that when she misses sleep, she doesn’t function as well for her family and for school. Taylor also feels guilty that her husband is supporting the family on his own. She does get an allowance from him, but she knows that he carries a big burden. Taylor uses her experiences as a student to set an example for her children. She tells them not to wait as long as she has to return to school. She sometimes sacrifices time doing homework to spend time with her children. Although her children are older, she still feels a need to be attentive to their needs, to make sure that they get on the bus in the morning and get home okay in the afternoon. Thus, she schedules her courses around their schedule. For Taylor, the biggest challenge of being a student and mom and wife is juggling all of the roles. She says, “I mean, it’s hard to juggle. That’s been a huge adjustment, just trying to figure out how to juggle.”
Maya

Maya is 41, married, and the mother of two boys ages 16 and 11. Her oldest son has Downs Syndrome. She characterizes him as high-functioning, but she says that her youngest child helps out with the responsibilities of the oldest. Maya self-identifies as lower-middle class.

She returned to school in 2008 to take remedial courses while also working as a teacher’s assistant in a local elementary school. Because she was working full-time, she only took one course per semester toward a two-year degree in teaching. However, she cites the economic recession and challenges with her oldest son as reasons why she stopped working and changed her academic goals to nursing. She is now in nursing school full-time. When asked if she currently has employment, Maya says that she doesn’t because she’s in school all day in the nursing program. This signals that being in the nursing program in some way conflicts with her ability to have a job. She plans to finish nursing school in May of 2014. She wants to continue to possibly earn her BSN and MSN.

Maya says that fear kept her from taking that first step to go back to school. She cites fear of being an older woman in a class full of younger, more traditional students as her primary fear. She has learned to deal with the intergenerational classroom, but for her the issue may be more pervasive. In the nursing program, students go through in a cohort. Thus, if there are only a couple of nontraditional students in the cohort and the rest are traditional, then this is the demographic that she deals with on a daily basis. She says that trying to fit into a world full of traditional students is intimidating.
It is [intimidating]. It’s – I know I don’t pick up on things as fast as I used to and but, then again, I’m more serious of a learner where some of the groups that I’ve been in, they’re very nonchalant and that bugs me, you know? [laugh] Because I’m like, hey, wait a minute, you know? I’m all into this and some of them are not so there’s a difference there, learning styles and all, but, I mean, it’s good. It’s good. It’s good to be exposed to.

Although she feels intimidated, Maya has a positive attitude and laughs at her own fears.

Most of Maya’s family lives nearby, and she says that she relies on her mother for help. She did not ask for help in the beginning, but as her studies have become more difficult, she has had to rely on others to help her. Maya is on financial aid. She receives a Pell Grant and also has student loans to help pay for expenses. She says that her husband, mother, and sister-in-law provide instrumental help, and she also cites agencies that she could go to if she needed more help with her oldest son. Maya says that her friends, previous co-workers, and her church provide emotional support. She talks specifically about one instructor who has inspired her to be her best. She also says that she has more confidence in herself than she did when she started school.

It’s a very professional relationship, I respect them as instructors, but I think they know just probably from comments that I make occasionally and then just I think they know, kind of, what area of life I’m in along with all the other students. But just the fact that I think they’re so involved with the program here and so committed to the program here that they’re just, they want to see you succeed and they, just the way they talk to us, it’s amazing. Just little words that they can say now and then are very
supportive and encouraging whether if they do it intentionally and I’m sure that they do, but just, they would be some main ones right now. Because I have one instructor particularly that she has stirred something up in me that I don’t even know that she realizes it, but she’s – a lot of people in the class would think she’s pretty hardcore, but I think her expectations are just up here and I think they have to be in nursing – and she’s just, there’s just something in me...

Maya gives an account of a very hectic morning. She says that her mornings have been this way all semester, and she’s just tired. She is grateful that at KCC, they get to have Fridays free. There are no classes on Fridays, so she uses that as an organization day. She also talks about how hectic her weekends are as she tries to include time for studying and homework. Maya says that her children are more amenable than her husband to this schedule. Her husband is used to coming home from work and relaxing, and now he has to help with the boys and intervene for her.

Maya does not allow herself to loosen up and have fun anymore. She suspects this may change when she finishes school, but for now, her life is more serious and focused. She feels guilty for taking time away from her children, but she has a very positive perspective on this guilt.

Well, I just, I look back on the years that I did have with them. I stayed, especially with my older son, I stayed home for ten years with him and when I look at him and I realize that I had him, really, every day, day in and day out his younger years and I feel like now he’s at a good spot. He can be independent; he may not be fully independent. I know her (Kendra) children are younger so, but it is a very realistic
feeling. But as far as college, I always keep in mind that this is temporary. I mean, you are going to get your degree at some point or there will just be, say you didn’t pursue the degree for whatever reason if in the nursing program you had to withdraw...but as far as my own self, I have faith in God that this is His will, that this is – I am where I am because of not only the choices I’ve made, but for the doors that have opened for me. And I realize that there’s a lot of people that want to help me and, you know, they can. It’s not wrong to ask for help or to take help and just with you kids being exposed to other adults, they’re learning from them, too, and they’re probably learning a lot of different things that maybe I couldn’t teach them. So I look as in it’s kind of teaching my kids to be well-rounded because they’re not just stuck right up under me all the time even though I think you’re still going to feel guilty if you – I mean, I do. That’s just something within me that I probably shouldn’t feel guilty about.

Maya says that being in school has affected her relationships with others. Before school, she was a very attentive and giving person, sending emails and letter or notes to people in her life. But now she doesn’t have time for that. She fears that the people who aren’t in school probably do not understand how being in school has changed her life and her routines.

Maya says that in the beginning of her school career, her husband took over some of the domestic roles. However, now, she does not ask him to do things. To avoid the fuss, she does them herself. This indicates that her husband hasn’t really taken on any of the domestic chores via his own initiative. Instead, she was coaxing him to do more and to help, and when
it became a hassle to ask him for help, she stopped asking and just returned to doing things herself. She feels that people do not really understand the commitment that nursing school requires. Maya also recalls her family members making negative comments about her return to school that perhaps they did not realize negatively affected her, but they impeded her ability to make that first step back to school. Maya has sacrificed her “me time” to make everyone else happy and to complete her studies. She even feels guilty for going to the gym to work out for 45 minutes to relieve stress.

Alice

Alice is 30, married, and the mother of two children, ages nine and five. She self-identifies as middle class. Alice is in the Accounting program. She took a couple of classes last semester, but now she is a full time student. She says that she was nervous about coming to school and not knowing anyone, but as she has moved forward, she has come to know more people and has begun to feel more comfortable.

Alice lives in her home with her husband and two children. They have no family nearby, so they must handle instrumental chores on their own. Though Alice’s husband has no college experience, her mom and dad do, and she calls them for moral support. She also relies on her local friends and military families for support, as well.

Alice’s husband works the swing shift, so he sleeps while the kids are at school and then helps clean up after dinner. Alice does her homework while her children are at school or after they go to bed. She claims 8:00 pm – 10:00 pm as her time each night, but he does not use it for homework. Instead, she uses that time for stress relief. When asked about her husband’s willingness to help out at home, Alice says that he sticks to her plan. He deploys
often, and he knows that when he is away, she has a structure in place and a routine that works. He respects that and helps out where she instructs him. When asked what her biggest challenge is, Alice responds:

*Making sure I have everything done and everybody sticks on their routine and the schedule.*

When asked if she has to negotiate the schedule with her husband, Alice replies:

*No, because it’s kind of whatever I say goes because when he deploys he knows it’s me and my schedule with the kids and it has to be that way. We can’t alter from that. So he just, he say, “You know, when I’m gone for six months (or whatever it is going to be), you know, you have your schedule so let’s just keep that whenever I come home. It’s just going to be easier on everybody.”*

Alice is on financial aid. She says that her children and husband help with chores around the house. For emotional support, she says that she has one friend whose husband is also in the military whom she calls when she needs support. She says she’ll call her in tears and ask if this friend will take the children for a few minutes so she can have some time to herself. Alice admits that being in school has changed her. She is quicker to ask for help now and to push through if she doesn’t understand something. She seems to have more confidence with the learning process.

Alice feels that being a military wife has prepared her for the challenges that she faces in school. She is better equipped to handle change and to accept challenges.

*[T]hey (the military) force you, definitely, they definitely force you to grow up and accept things a lot faster than, I guess, most people would. Because I married my*
husband, we were – I was eighteen, getting ready to turn nineteen. We dated through high school, getting ready to turn nineteen and he joined. We get married, when he got out of tech school we got married and literally moved to Japan a month later. So that was a big shock and a lot of people go through that. You don’t think that they do, but once we got over there and talking to people, it happens.

Alice does feel guilty sometimes for not spending enough time with her children, but she says she pushes through it. She helps herself handle the guilt by reminding herself that she will not be in school forever, and that it will end eventually.

*Just push on through it (guilt). Look, I’m sorry, but I have to do this. It has to be done. We’ve got finals coming up and so look, I have to study; you guys do your homework, I’m sitting here, I’m doing my studying while you’re doing your homework so at least we spend a little time that way, but it’s just one of those things.*

*Push on through it; you’ll have time in the end.*

Alice has difficulty focusing in class if she and the kids have had a difficult morning. When this happens, she has to go back and reteach the material to herself because she did not learn it before. Her nine year-old understands the demands of homework and school far better than her five year-old, so she sometimes has her daughter work on the computer and sit with her while she (Alice) does her homework.

Alice does not like online courses, so she stays away from them. But she believes that when a woman returns to school, she should compromise with her family to create a schedule that works for them all.
Haley

Haley is 21 years old and married. She has a daughter, two years old, and a step son, six years old. She and her husband have her stepson every other weekend. Haley self-identifies as lower class. She is studying business at KCC and has been in school nearly a year now. Haley says although she had only been out of school for two years, she was nervous about returning to school. She and her husband and daughter live with her parents, which for Haley, provides some sense of support. Her mother is on disability and is able to help out with Haley’s daughter. Haley’s mom has a condition that requires care. She often gets sick, and Haley moved in to help care for her. So together, they all care for each other. Haley delayed starting school because of her mother’s illness. She also says that her husband was laid off from work just before she returned.

Haley’s husband has a job now, but he works long days doing manual labor. When he comes home from work, he is tired and just wants to relax. Haley does not work at all. She quit her job so that she could help care for her mother and her daughter while going to school. Haley’s mother has a college degree, but her husband does not. She says that he wants to go to college, but he feels that for now, he needs to provide. Though Haley wants to get a four-year degree, she says she’ll stop with the two-year so that she can begin working and making money. Haley is currently on financial aid, but has not taken out any loans.

Haley’s mother is her primary source of instrumental support. Haley feels that her husband could do more around the house, but she alludes to traditional gender roles as the reason why both her father and husband do little around the house, leaving her and her mother to do the domestic work. Haley is frustrated that her husband doesn’t help out with
the chores or with their daughter. She feels that he does not understand that the mental work of school and the emotional work of mothering are equally as exhausting as the physical work of manual labor.

_Because my husband thinks that because he works all day tht he should just come home and do whatever he wants to do and watch TV and no responsibilities when I might not have been “working” as far as getting paid, but I’ve been working all day and I have to still take care of the baby and feed her and change her and bathe her and everything. And I’m like, “Hello, I didn’t make her on my own. She’s your responsibility, too.”_

For Haley, returning to school has made her more responsible and determined.

_It’s made me a lot more responsible. I mean, which you have to be responsible when you have a kid anyways, but it’s just made me be a lot more responsible and realize, wow, like, this is a lot, you know? I mean, you have to be very motivated and determined to do it. You really do because it’s very easy to just say, oh, well, I’ll just not to go school. I’ll just get a job because I’m broke and I want some money. I mean, you know? And, yeah, it’s taught me a lot about myself and made me be, like, a stronger person._

She cites her mom as her main form of emotional support. Though she wants to cite her husband as well, she says that often, when she needs to vent to her mother, it is because of something that her husband has done. Haley speaks openly about how she loves living with her mother who nearly died of tongue cancer ten years ago, but she does not like living with her father. Her living situation is one of great support, but also great strife. The family strife
extends to her in-laws. Haley recounts the stress of having her mother-in-law also live in the house with her family.

Haley says that the most challenging thing about being a student, mom, wife, and daughter is trying to be good at all of them and trying to have time to spend with her daughter.

_The most challenging… I would say spending time with my daughter. Like, somehow I try to be – trying to be good at all of them, I think, is, like, the main thing. I want to be the best mom I can be. I want to be the best daughter. I want to be the best student. So it’s like, it’s very hard to be the best at all of them when you’re trying to do them all at one time._

When faced with a choice between doing homework and spending time with her daughter, Hayley’s daughter comes first, but then she feels guilty for not doing her best as a student. Haley sometimes feels school should come first because she is going to school for her daughter. She deals with stress by praying and venting and hoping that it gets better, and she feels that the stress is never ending because something always happens to upset the harmony in her world, like her mother getting sick or her husband losing his job. She feels she’s always juggling more than she anticipated.

Haley finds it difficult to focus on class when she has so much on her mind regarding her family and her other responsibilities. She also gets frustrated with her husband for not helping and not offering to help, but to avoid an argument, she simply does the work herself. Haley deals with guilt for not being able to do more for her mother, but she doesn’t really deal with that guilt. She says she “stuffs it away” and tells herself that she’s doing all that she
Haley has difficulty sleeping, as well. She spends most evenings doing homework and then domestic housework. She tries to nap during the day, but her husband makes her feel guilty for napping. Haley does not take online classes because she doesn’t like the format. She says she needs to have the teacher there with her for one-on-one attention. Interestingly, Haley says that Kendra should not feel guilty for not being able to be there for her family, yet Haley feels guilty herself. In addition, Haley says that her husband promised to help her in the beginning, but “forgot” that promise somewhere along the way.

"Hey (husbands) have good intentions, I guess. They’re like, “Oh, yeah, I’ll help you if you go to school. I’ll help you.” Because I’ve heard this from my husband, he said, “Oh, when you start school I’ll help you and I’ll do this and I’ll do that and you really need to have time to work on your schoolwork,” and da, da, da...and then it just, like, slowly fizzled out. You know, they forget what they’ve said and just, like, kind of you do it yourself or it don’t get done"

Haley is one of the youngest participants, yet she has the lifestyle of a non-traditional student with great responsibility. Her frustrations with her husband reflect other participants’ experiences, as well. They feel that the men have good intentions, but fail to follow through. Also, the notion of doing the domestic work yourself so that you know it’s done right is seen throughout the interviews.

**Kesha**

Kesha is 29, married, and the mother of two children ages two and five. She self-identifies as middle class and lives in a household with her children, husband, and her mother-in-law. Kesha already has a degree in Medical Assisting and is now in the nursing
program. She took a year off between the two programs so that she could work. She returned to school when her mother-in-law came to live with them. She knew that she would have the help she needed and could pursue her degree. Kesha was in the military before she went to school, and took a few courses while in the service, but she had no particular focus.

Kesha and her husband are not from the local area. They were stationed here when they were both in the military. Ironically, and to their benefit, her husband’s brother and his wife are also stationed in the local town. However, they are scheduled to get orders to move soon, so when the brother-in-law and his family leave, Kesha will lose part of her support system.

Kesha says that her husband is supportive of her. When asked what motivates her, Kesha replies:

*My kids. That sounds bad or, like, really cheesy – not bad, but really cheesy – but they are. You know, like growing up, it was always me, my brother, my sister, my mom and my dad. My dad wasn’t really there and, you know, so my mom did everything for us and so that’s how I perceived how I need to be with them. You know, do everything you can, get all, everything you can, done. I mean, everything that I do now is for them to have a better is for them to have a better future.*

Kesha receives disability monies from the VA, which she puts toward her schooling. She says that her husband is her primary source of financial support. Her primary source of instrumental support is her mother-in-law who tends to the children during the day. Kesha takes over their care when she returns from school in the evening. Kesha says that her husband and sister are her primary sources of emotional support. She shows care and
sacrifice for her husband when she says that she talks to her sister about things that would otherwise burden her husband.

_There are certain things I can talk to my sister about that I won’t bring up to my husband and that’s not, like, stuff I’m keeping from him. It’s stuff that I know that she would understand a lot more and can give me a lot more feedback than him. I think with him it’s more so I don’t want to disappoint him. I don’t want to seem like I’m giving up on things. Or as, you know, he will give me all the encouragement I need, but it’s just, it’s different coming from my sister and I don’t know why, but I just know that there are certain things that I have to talk to her about and she’ll tell me exactly what I need to hear._

Kesha is currently upset that she will have to miss her daughter’s first appearance in a Christmas play. She has final exams during that time. When I ask if she has thought about asking to take her exam at a different time, she responds, “They won’t do it.” Apparently, these policies have been strictly enforced in such a way that Kesha feels she has no possibility of getting a different exam time. Thus, she is forced to put school ahead of her family and child, and she subsequently feels the effects of guilt. Kesha points out that many of her classmates in the nursing program do not have other responsibilities such as parenting and employment; thus, they are fully focused on school. However, Kesha does have other responsibilities.

_There are some people in class that don’t have families here, they’re not married, they don’t have kids, they don’t have jobs. That’s all they do is eat, breathe, sleep nursing and I can’t do it. I don’t have the time to do it; I don’t have the hours in the_
day to put into the amount of time they put into it. So it’s, like I said, I live here, I go home. I don’t open a book until my girls are down.

She says that in some ways, being in the military has helped her to deal with these issues, but that does not keep her from feeling guilty for missing her daughter’s program. Kesha says that in any other situation, she puts her children ahead of school.

Kesha sacrifices her “me time” so that she has time for everyone else. Going to the grocery store is her “me time”. She also says that spending time with her husband means her studying in the same room where he plays video games. Overall, Kesha has a good, solid support system. She has a good relationship with her mother-in-law who lives with them, and she has a good relationship with her husband. She feels strongly supported in her domestic sphere but feels less support from the academic sphere which offers less flexibility.

**Sonja**

Sonja is Latina, 35 years old, engaged, and the mother of five children ages fourteen, twelve, eight, seven, and two. She self-identifies as lower-middle class and currently lives in the home with her children. Her fiancé does not live with her. She has been wanting to return to school, and her fiancé encouraged her to go ahead and apply. Sonja’s previous college experience was ten years ago when she earned her degree in Basic Law Enforcement. She worked in that field for two years and decided it was not what she wanted to do. Before that, she earned her degree in medical assisting. After leaving law enforcement, she returned to the medical profession which prompted her to return to school.
Sonja does receive financial aid, as well as child support for her two oldest children. Her goal is to get into the nursing program, but for now, she is taking the prerequisite courses. Sonja says that the point system for getting into the nursing program is stressful.

Sonja relies on her sister and brother-in-law to help her with instrumental support. Like, right now I’m just lucky. I mean, I guess I’m lucky to have my brother – my brother-in-law and my sister because my brother-in-law’s been laid off so he’s been very, very helpful, like, taking them to school or getting them from school. Because my daughter’s a cheerleader, she has to stay after school and cheer and then he goes and picks her up or if she has to go do an event, he goes and picks her up if I’m at work.

She also relies on her oldest child, who is nearly 15, to stay home and care for the others from time to time. Sonja’s fiancé is in the Air Force and has orders to deploy, so Sonja has to find other forms of support to help her while he’s away. Her mother lives an hour away and is unable to help because she works in a different city. Sonja cites her church friends as her main source of emotional support.

In addition to being in school and raising five children, Sonja also works the night shift at the local hospital and then one day a week at the local pediatrics office. She gets very little sleep. She says that at the moment of this interview, she has been awake for 36 hours. Working night shift offers time to do homework.

I have a book that I have, like, I made a book that I go by and I try to figure out what I need to do by when and with it I try to decide. I guess working at nights is real good
because we have down time, if all of our stuff is done, then they don’t care what you, you know, you do what you have to. If you want to read or you can do homework.

Sonja vows that once she’s accepted into the nursing program, she will no longer work. At that point, her fiancé will be home and will be able to provide and help.

Sonja feels sad that she cannot devote more time to her children. She has every other weekend off of work and tries to devote that time to her. When asked how she handles guilt, she says that she just apologizes to her children when she cannot take them to places such as friends’ birthday parties. She also feels that she can encourage other students and provide an example for them from her own situation.

I can encourage other women if they’re single parents because when they’re like, “I don’t know how I can do this.” If I can do this with five kids and I’m a single parent, then you can having two children.

Sonja has the most children of any of the participants and has a positive, optimistic attitude about her experiences. She has plans in place for the future and looks toward a time when she will have fewer responsibilities and more support, so she forges ahead. She says that she looks forward to the breaks in school, and she uses them to energize her for the next semester.

Findings

This case study focused on female adult learners in community colleges and sought to answer the following research questions: a) How do female adult learners perceive multiple roles and b) How do female adult learners navigate multiple roles. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with nineteen participants from two community colleges. Data
analysis revealed several findings which have been organized into two sections: Perceptions and Navigation.

**Perception**

The study finds that female adult learners are a part of a new era in higher education where attitudes towards women’s return to college are more positive and encouraging. Participants conveyed that the role of mother is the most important and all-encompassing role in role navigation; when given the opportunity to openly discuss any of the roles they navigate, participants chose to speak most often about the role of mothering. Navigating the mother and student roles simultaneously is most challenging because completing college is a chosen responsibility of and a tangent of the mother role. Finally, findings support the realization that others (spouses, friends, family members, etc.) can help carry out the responsibilities of the mother role, but none can help carry out the responsibilities of the student role. Findings are presented here under the following headings: School IS Cool: The Paradigm Shift in Student Support, “I’m Always a Mom No Matter What I’m Doing”: The Mother Role as Most Important, The Unbreakable Venn Diagram: The Unique Integration Among the Roles of Mother and Student, and Delegation Dilemma: Standing in for the Female Adult Learner.

1. **School IS Cool! The Paradigm Shift in Student Support**

Earlier research in role theory with regard to female adult learners suggests that women who returned to college faced a negative social stigma (Durchholz & O’Connor, 1973; Reisman, 1987; Spence & Hahn, 1997). This attitude was rooted in traditional gender roles and the belief that women should focus more on the roles of wife and mother and should
limit any activity that impeded their ability to be available for their family and to carry out
the duties of traditional gender roles. However, participants in this study revealed a change
in others’ perception of their college attendance. Participants were asked explicitly how they
believed their families viewed their desire to go to college. They were also asked if their
family members had college degrees, as well, which might impact a paradigm shift.

Participants felt supported by family members and spouses with their decision to return
to college. Although some participants do not receive the instrumental assistance (help with
chores and caring for children) they would like from their spouses and families, most
commented that their spouses, parents, children, and friends all generally supported their
efforts to return to school and earn a degree. Participants described a mixture of family
college experience. Some of the participants’ parents and spouses have degrees, which may
explain the increase in support, yet other participants are, in fact, first generation college
students whose family members recognize a college education as a way to improve and
create financial stability, improve socio-economic status, and positively impact future
generations. In addition, some family members desired more time from participants, even
though they knew that the participants were in school and had a new set of obligations. The
paradigm shift has affected social beliefs but has not fully permeated the practice of
supporting female adult learner return to college.

Alice asked her husband for his opinion when she decided to return to school, and he
told her if that’s what she wanted to do, then that was fine with him. He does not have a
degree, but her parents, who live several states away, do have a degree, and she says that she
turns to them when she has academic questions. Alice’s first comment after reading Jamie’s vignette (in which, Jamie is not supported by her husband) was:

*I say kick him to the curb. [Laugh]*

She advises Jamie to “push on through” to finish school.

Others share their decision-making process and describe consulting with their spouses or significant others before returning to school.

Taylor says that her husband (who already has a degree) encouraged her to return to school:

*Well, he kind of encouraged me because I’ve worked in special ed for seven years in a school system as an aide and wanted to go back where we were but because of, I guess, we bought a house that was – it was still within our means, don’t get me wrong – but without two of us working it was going to be outside of our means. So, and then running kids to everything else, between trying to work and take care of them with him being gone most of the time, there wasn’t a choice to go back up there. So whenever we got here and he got more of an income raise I didn’t really technically have to go back to work so it was a good time for me to start school.*

Taylor was strategic in her timing to return to school. She chose to delay a return to school because she needed to work; her family needed the extra income, and Taylor implies that going to school while also working full-time would have had negative effects on their family. Thus, she waited until her family was in a more secure situation that did not require a second income.

In response to the focus group vignette about Jamie, a fictional student who wants to return to school but receives some push-back from her family, Taylor offers:
I don’t have a husband like that. He may sleep, but he still helps with the housework. He does laundry, all that kind of stuff, and he’s the one that encouraged me to go back to school.

She adds of her decision to return to school:

It’s a, yeah, it was a... well, I mean, the kids really didn’t have too much say in it, but it was definitely a husband-supported decision. He said, “Go do it now,” you know? Because I was scared and trying to put it off and he said, “No, you need to make your appointments, go do it, go do it, go do it.” And so when I finally did it he was like, “Thank you. Good job!” you know?

Maya also consulted with her husband before returning to school and says that her husband (who does not have a degree) was very supportive:

Yeah, I consulted with my husband, and I’ll tell you, it’s something that I wanted probably since, I don’t know, way back. I knew I needed to do it, but it was taking that first initial step and I thought, “God,” I remember saying, “Oh, it’s going to take forever to get done.” And now I look back and I see how time, you know, has just really flown by and now I have, I do have my two year degree – an Associate’s in Arts, I did finish that at Johnston with all the pre-reqs that I had to get done for nursing it gave me a two year degree. And so it was just that first initial step and I remember my husband saying, “Just take one class at a time.” And it’s, like, once I got in that routine, even around Christmas break and in the summers, I mean, I would take classes in the summer because I was on a roll and I didn’t want to stop, you know? And it really
wasn’t bombarding me too bad, it was just, it was... I had that momentum going, you
know, and I could see the advantages of keep going ahead.

She also talks about how her family feels about her return to school:

*They’re very supportive, even sometimes – even though sometimes they have, they’ve
seen where I have a lot of time that I have to commit to studying, especially because it’s
a nursing program. You may not would see that maybe in another program, but
sometimes they’ll make comments. Well, maybe my dad, he just wish it wasn’t so time
consuming for me because he knows I’ve always put my family first and I’ve had to
back up a little bit on some of my responsibilities, which is... it’s not that I’m neglecting
any area, it’s, like, I’ve had to hand over responsibilities to certain people where I used
to try to handle it all on my own. Now I ask for help which is, that was hard for me to
learn how to do, but it’s a good thing in a way because it gets more people involved,
you know, with the kids and all. And, I mean, even for myself, I’ve had to ask for help
on certain things and, you know; but it is time consuming and I think that’s the part that
they wish I could go to every family function or I could go to, you know, and I just tell
them, “You know, hopefully by May 2014.” You know, even though I’ll hopefully have
a job, it won’t be like I’m stuck to the books all the time.*

Maya refers to the more pervasive conflict of family members wanting her to be
available. Though her family supports her efforts to return to school, they would prefer that
it take less of her time. Maya’s situation illustrates the gap in the paradigm shift. Society
now encourages the return of women to college, but has not mastered the art of putting those
beliefs into practice. Maya’s father wishes that her studies were less time-consuming
because she has always put her family first, which implies that having returned to school, Maya no longer puts her family first. Her father’s comments are a reference to those traditional gender roles in which the woman’s first priority is the daily care of her family. Maya does not indicate that she is neglecting her family. Instead, she feels that her efforts in college will improve her family’s financial situation. Maya’s family supports her to return to college, but her father is disappointed that she has less time for her family, which seems like disappointment and in turn makes Maya question her decision. Thus, Maya receives mixed signals about her choice to return to school; she is simultaneously supported in her decision but also faced with disappointment from her father about the time that she will have to take away from her family. It should be noted, however, that Maya’s father is from an older generation that may more often support traditional gender roles. Maya gives no indication that her husband or children feel her absence in the same way.

Sharon’s situation is a little different. Sharon already has a degree from Finland, and her husband has a Master’s degree, so they have previous first-hand experiences in higher education. Importantly, when Sharon decided to return to school here in the U.S.A., she had two small children, yet her husband still supported her desire to return to school. She recalls that he said:

“Sharon, you can do it. You can do what you want.” Like you will set your mind to it and you can do it.

Sharon and her husband earned their degrees prior to having children. The fact that Sharon’s husband supports her return to school after having a family indicates that he is less tied to traditional gender roles and that he sees a value in postsecondary education. Sharon
notes in the interview that she finds the notion of traditional gender roles in America astounding. As a native of Finland, Sharon explains that she did not grow up with the same concept. She explains as she responds to Jamie’s vignette:

*I’m sorry to say that!* [Laugh] So I guess I am lucky. Seriously, I... yeah, that would not work. I would not be – I have never and I guess it comes from my home because we never had the roles of “Okay, this is a woman’s job” or “This is a man’s job.” My husband – or not my husband, my dad, he cooked, he loved to bake. He made the bread for us, like, we didn’t even buy bread from the store. And then especially when my mom was in school he would clean, he would do dishes, he would do everything. I guess that’s where it comes from. That’s what I’m expecting.

Thus, for Sharon, perhaps she has not experienced a paradigm shift because the paradigm in her culture is different. As Sharon points out, traditional gender roles do not exist in Finland as they do in America. Having not grown up in America, Sharon has not experienced the original paradigm of traditional gender roles and the subsequent shift. However, her husband has always lived in America and has been exposed to the American paradigm yet supports and encourages his wife’s return to school.

Alicia explains the decision-making process she experienced when she decided to come back to school. She describes her fiancé as not only being supportive, but also encouraging her to return to school.

*I really did. I was – it really was weighing heavy on my mind. I was like, well, maybe I can just go get a job and then my fiancé told me, he was like, and “We have a child now. You can’t just get a job; you have to get a career.” And so I was like, okay, so I*
need this. And he’s like, “You’re so close, you only have two more semesters, just go ahead and finish because I had my daughter in April and I wanted to go back to school and during the summer I was like, well, maybe I can just push this through, but some classes started in May so that wasn’t logical. So I was like oh God, if I can’t get this semester there’s no need for me to go back. He was like, “You’re so close. You, like, just have to take off the summer, but at least you’ll be able to finish Fall and Spring.”

So he really pushed me through it

Alicia’s fiancé makes the distinction between having a job and a career. A job pays a wage, but a career offers more stability and longevity. Though other participants did not use this language to make this distinction; their choice to return to school seems to support Alicia’s fiancé’s feelings that a career will better support a family than a job. They all indicated that they had jobs before or during their return to school, but earning a degree signals a commitment to a particular occupation or profession.

Further in the interview, Alicia shares that her mother does not have a college degree, which is another aspect that motivates Alicia.

Kesha says that her husband is always supportive of her:

He has always been supportive with anything and everything I’ve decided to do so it was just one of those, “I need to be back in school.” He said, “Okay, go.” And that was it, there was no, “But we need this” or “You need to work.” No, it was, “Okay, go.”
Kesha shares that her mother does have a Bachelor’s degree, but her siblings do not. She says that she relies on her sister to provide emotional support. In response to Jamie’s vignette and the lack of support Jamie receives from her family, Kesha offers:

*I don’t know. I’ve never really been in a household where there’s traditional roles.*

*You know, my mom, she felt she filled in those traditionals. She cooked, she cleaned, she did everything for us, but I guess just growing up in a city and not a community like that, like, I have different views of stuff like that. Like, yeah, I understand that I have to be there for my kids, but that doesn’t mean that their father can’t be there either. The not being supportive of her like that would really get to me because my family’s always been supportive with whatever decision I decide to do. She stopped talking to her husband with that, for me, that’s just bad. You have to communicate, you have to even if you think you’re going to hurt their feelings, even if you think you’re going to get in an argument, you have to communicate anything and everything that you’re feeling because if you don’t then just aggression builds up and then it’s just when everything does come out it comes out bad. I don’t know, she… that, I can’t picture myself being in that situation. I don’t think that she should stop taking classes, but at the same time, she needs to not manage her time, but she needs to let others know how they feel even if they aren’t in agreement with her.*

Sonja shares that her fiancé encouraged her to return to school:

*Well, it’s something that I’ve wanted to do for a long time and so my fiancé – like, I work at the emergency room, so my fiancé been pushing me and he’s the reason*
Sonja was ambivalent about returning to school for fear that she could not afford it, but her fiancé helped to provide for her and her children financially so that she could return to school. Sonja is the first in her family to earn a college degree, and her mother and siblings tell her that they are proud of her. In response to Jamie’s vignette, Sonja explains that Jamie should go to school anyway, even if her family is not being supportive. Sonja’s response to Jaime’s situation is similar to responses from other participants. When asked to give advice to Jamie or when asked about Jamie’s desire to return to school, participants explained that Jamie is entitled to a college education and should pursue her degree regardless of her family’s opinions and level of support. However, participant beliefs about Jamie may not translate to participant actions regarding their own situations. In the interviews, participants describe being deliberate in their timing to return to school. They chose to return to school at a time that was optimal for the family either in terms of support of finances. They may have waited until they knew they had more instrumental support to return to college or until they had more financial support. Though they may feel entitled to return to school, their decision-making suggests that family support does affect timing and the final decision to return.

Haley’s family is also supportive of her decision to go to school. She and her husband and young daughter currently live with her parents. Her mother has a college degree in nursing, but her father does not. When asked if her husband has a college degree, she shares:
No, no, no. he wants to, he wants to go to college bad, but right now it’s just somebody’s got to provide. So he wants to go to college so bad. He’s like, “You’re so lucky, you get to go to college. I want to go.” Because he wants to do something with technology, like computers, he loves to do all that mess. So he wants to get some kind of technology computer degree.

Haley responds to Jamie’s vignette:

Like, her parents not supporting her, that would have to be the worst thing I think. For me, anyways, it would be if I were in her shoes. It would be my parents not supporting me because it’s, like, your parents always want better for you and education would be better for you than just staying at home. Even if all you wanted to do was get a degree and go back to being a housewife, I mean, you know what I’m saying? If education, that’s something nobody can take away from you and for your parents not to support you in furthering your education, you know, that would kind of hurt. Like, why would you not want me to be smarter? [Laugh] And be able to make money if I, you know, because what if he lost his job tomorrow? Then who’s going to pay the bills? I mean, if she had a degree and she could jump right in and get a job easy somewhere that way he could take time to find a new good job so he didn’t have to just take anything. I mean, those are things you have to think about.

Participants who do not have a spouse or significant others have supportive family members who encouraged them to return to school. Both of Lisa’s parents went to college, her father to a military college and her mother to a university, and they support her efforts to also earn a degree. For Lisa, the ultimate conflict is the feeling of powerlessness against the
demands of her parents. Lisa is a young, single mother who lives with her parents. Her parents were disappointed that she got pregnant at a young age, and they want her to finish college, so according to Lisa, they have taken on the primary parenting role with Lisa’s daughter. This is a switch on the traditional paradigm in which the woman’s priority is to stay at home and care for the child. Here, Lisa’s parents imply that her ultimate priority is to finish college. Thus, Lisa goes to college because her parents encourage her, but she feels she lacks time and opportunity to be a good mother. Being good at both and making parenting and school both a priority seems to be difficult if not impossible.

When Tonya was asked if her family supported her decision to return to school, she replied, “Oh, they think it’s great.” She and her twin sister are first-generation college students, and though her mother does not have a college degree, she supports her daughters’ efforts. In reaction to Jamie’s vignette and the lack of support from her husband and parents, Tonya offers:

Tonya: No, so I can’t empathize with that part because I haven’t been raised in that type of community and I don’t have those same values and morals as her family does and how she was raised. So I can’t really...

Tara: So you’ve never had anyone make you feel like you couldn’t do it? Everyone’s been supportive of you?

Tonya: Yeah, because everyone knows that nowadays you have to have something underneath your belt to get anywhere basically. And nobody in my family has ever been a homemaker so... [Laugh] No.
Tonya’s statement highlights the paradigm shift. Getting a college degree is expected; it is not just something that the wealthy or privileged get to do. It is not a gender divider that helps men support their families while women stay home with the children. A college degree is necessary “to get anywhere”. In this sense, Tonya is referring to financial success and independence. She is a single mother, and in order to provide for her son and herself, she must have a college degree. In the previous paradigm, a college degree was not necessary. Fewer families needed a double income. Fewer single mothers sought a college degree as an option for supporting their families. Perhaps, college degrees were considered unattainable or unaffordable for low-income single parents. Perhaps college was considered gender specific or specific only to certain socio-economic statuses. Tonya conveys, however, that she believes those assumptions no longer guide decision-making with regard to college.

Now, college is necessary.

Savannah gives her cousin credit for encouraging her to return to school:

But my cousin had a lot to do with encouraging me. I had the motivation, but I was kind of skeptical because it had been so many years since I had done anything as far as productive because I was, you know, in addiction for so many years that it’s not that I didn’t believe I could do it, I just didn’t know how to do it.

Savannah explains that she feels supported in her efforts. Her mother and her older daughter, who both live in another state, support her, and she talks to them daily. She would like to return to her hometown to be near her family so that she can get the instrumental support that she needs:
My uncle Mike, my mom, my sis – or my daughter - my sister’s going to be moving to Texas so she’ll be twelve hours away, you know, and I adore her. My uncle, my brother, my sister, my daughter, my mom, a couple of cousins that have been there basically as my brother/uncle, you know what I mean? There’s just so much more there of availability to help me juggle. You know, I’m not juggling myself, it’ll be kind of like, “Okay...” you know? And he’ll have a lot more interaction with just not me, you know? To have – I know that if I get frustrated, that he’s got to get frustrated only having one individual in his life on a constant basis has got to be, like, “Really? Give me some variety!” You know?

However, as mentioned earlier, there is a distinction between moral support and encouragement to return to school and instrumental support.

Jordan is engaged, and her fiancé supports her return to school. Her mother, who does not have a college degree, helps take care of the children and cooks meals because she knows that Jordan is busy and needs help with the roles of mom, wife, and student. Jordan’s mom did not go to college but supports Jordan in her efforts.

Well, my children, you know, they still young, but my mom, she didn’t go to college so she don’t really understand, but she sees what I go through so...

Further, Jordan conveys a sense of entitlement for women who want to return to school. She says of Jamie’s vignette:

Wow, if I was Jamie, you know, I would do what my heart desires. She wants to go back to school, I would make it possible. That husband is just lazy and he’s not trying to help no means necessary.
This sense of entitlement was evident in several interviews. Of Jamie’s situation, participants offered that she should have the opportunity to return to school to do something for herself. Kim says:

I don’t think anybody’s family should discourage them from wanting to better themselves, but I know if that’s what she wants to do then she’ll find a way to make all of it happen. That’s, again, part of the role. Learn to make things work!

Holly adds:

I feel like they [Jamie’s family] should be excited for her [Jamie] because women are powerful, women are strong and, you know? We’ve been stronger than, like, they know, you know what I mean? We’re mothers, we have children, we love our children so fiercely. I mean, women are very powerful and, you know, that kills me.

Participants allude to the fading or restructuring of traditional gender roles.

Taylor states that Jamie’s community seems “pretty old-fashioned”. When asked if she thinks that type of community still exists, she says:

I think in some places it does, but I think in today’s society it’s probably very uncommon…

When Maria read Jamie’s scenario and was asked about the nature of traditional gender roles, she said:

No, those have definitely changed with more and more women going to school and being in the workforce and men, you know, being what it is right now they’re staying home and taking care of the kids. So that role definitely has changed.
Though Maria expresses that gender roles have changed, this is Maria’s perception. This study finds that perception of gender roles has changed, yet the practice of gender roles has not. Participants feel supported in the decision to return to school, which may lessen the inner conflict that affects women as they try to navigate multiple roles, but it does not eliminate inner conflict completely. Socially speaking, women are now encouraged to return to school, earn a degree, and have a career. An even exchange of gender role responsibility would suggest that men are now encouraged to do more household chores and childrearing. Yet, participants in this study described a lack in instrumental support, usually with regard to spouses who promised to provide more help domestically but fell back into their typical routines after a semester or two. Participants explained that this lack of support was not intentional, just a return to the normal ways of the family and home. The disconnect between current social beliefs of gender roles and women’s return to college and the practice of supporting them suggests that though women benefit from the new social acceptance of gender role equality, those beliefs have not transferred to domestic practices and women still take on traditional gender roles in the home.

II. The Unbreakable Venn Diagram: The Unique Integration Among the Roles of Mother and Student

A Venn diagram usually focuses upon the area grouped in the middle where the two circles overlap (the aspects that the two roles have in common). However, findings for this study indicate that there is something more to see in the Venn diagram, something that perhaps we do not see when we look at the diagram on a sheet of paper. This new aspect is the strength of the connection that bonds the two roles. Participant interviews show a strong
relationship between the role of mother and the role of student such that to fail as a student would mean failure as a mother.

Figure 1 above shows the weak link between components compared in a traditional Venn diagram. They are made to overlap and show places where the two have similarities. This traditional Venn diagram has dashed lines with small breaks in them to illustrate the ease with which one might break the two components apart. The lines show that the boundaries are permeable and that the roles are integrated. In Figure 2: Mother/Student Role diagram, the lines are wider, darker and have no breaks, illustrating the strength of the bond between the two components or the two roles. The intensity of the lines in Figure 2 shows that the boundaries are not permeable and cannot be easily separated. The link between the two roles is revealed in participant interviews.
Holly shares her perspective:

*I, at first, when I first started high school I really wanted to go to college. I knew it was, like, the right thing to do and I wanted to do it and then the further on I got in high school, I actually dropped out my senior year. I got my adult high school diploma and I actually ended up finishing six months sooner than I would’ve if I would’ve stayed in high school, but I just couldn’t – I couldn’t, like, take high school kind of. At the time it was just, like, so much going on and I just, like, kind of just didn’t do anything for maybe two or three years and then I, like, got pregnant. And I was like, “I need to go back to school because I need to. This isn’t just my life anymore,” you know? I have to do something.*

For Holly, the decision to return to school was a selfless one and integral to providing a good life for her child. Before she became a mother, school was not a priority for Holly. She dropped out of high school and had no motivation to return. At this point, she could not see the value of an education. When Holly became a mother her perspective shifted. She saw the value of the education and how it would impact others, particularly her son.

Taylor also shares her motivation and how it helps her manage her guilt:

*Yeah, you know, like I said, there’s still guilt’s in there... feeling like I don’t take enough time to spend with them because of school, but the guilt’s not there coming back to school. Just because now it’s a time in my life when I need to do something not just for me, but because it is something that I’m doing, it’s going to benefit the whole family eventually.*
Taylor weighs the outcome of getting a degree against the guilt of not being able to spend enough time with her family. Like Holly, Taylor sees her return to school as a way of helping her family in the long run. The guilt that she feels now is temporary, but the positive repercussions of earning a degree will be long-reaching. Taylor is not just earning a degree for herself; in her perspective, she is doing this for her family.

When asked about her motivation for returning to school, Kesha responded:

- *My kids. That sounds bad or, like, really cheesy – not bad, but really cheesy – but they are. You know, like growing up, it was always me, my brother, my sister, my mom and my dad. My dad wasn’t really there and, you know, so my mom did everything for us and so that’s how I perceived how I need to be with them. You know, do everything you can, get all, everything you can, done. I mean, everything that I do now is for them to have a better is for them to have a better future.*

Kesha, too, ties her decision to return to school and earn a degree to her obligations and responsibilities as a mother. This is a philosophy that she learned from her mother, and she puts it into practice in her own life by earning a degree. For Kesha, earning a degree is necessary for offering a better future for her children. These participant perspectives speak to the changed understanding that college is no longer reserved for certain types of people but is now a necessity for success.

Jessie also explains:

- *I work different jobs. You know, like, work full-time jobs, but I worked at different places. I worked food and then I worked road construction for a while, then I was back in the food industry and I got pregnant with my first child and I had a high-risk...*
pregnancy so I wasn’t able to work. And I said, you know, “I just cannot. I can’t see me not working while my children are growing up because that’s not teaching them good work ethics.” If you’re not working and you’re sitting at home watching soap operas all day… and so I decided that I would come back to school and try to finish this out. [Laugh]

Jessie’s motivation to return to school is also fueled by her need to be a good mother. She believes that being a working mother will set a good example for her children. Her choice to return to school indicates that she wants more than just a job; she wants a career, and she wants to finish school. Jessie has set goals as a mother that hinge on her ability to do well in school.

Likewise, Maria mentions her daughter as motivation, “And even though she’s older, she knows that Mommy’s doing this to better our lives.” Maria’s daughter is 13 years old and may have a better understanding than younger children of the sacrifices that her mother makes as both a mother and student. Maria’s motivation is to better her life and her daughter’s life. Thus, if she fails as a student, then she fails at her effort to improve their situation, and she ultimately fails her daughter.

The participants’ children are their motivation for returning to school. Participants in this study were returning to school to provide a better life for their children or to set a good example for their children. This is not to say that all participants stated their children as their motivation to return. Lisa, for example, chose to go to college because it was what her parents expected of her. However, Lisa is one of the youngest participants and still lived
with her parents. She has never left the parental home to live a life on her own, which may affect her perspective and motivation.

In the focus groups, participants had a chance to expand on the original findings, and one participant offered this in response to another participant’s dilemma about navigating the mother/student roles:

*Woman: But at the same time [by choosing school] she’s still choosing her kids too because the education’s what’s going eventually... [Two girls talking overlapping]*

*yeah, get them into college and get them, you know, some way if you chose school you’re still choosing your child in the long run. (FG1)*

This participant reveals the bond between the roles of mother and student. By choosing school, a woman is also choosing her children. The two cannot be separated because the one (school) is fueled by a desire to improve the other (life, opportunity, possibility, future for the other). Understanding this connection in participants’ perspectives will provide a basis for understanding participant decision-making and role navigation. It also allows for a deeper understanding of the internal conflict that female adult learners face when forced to choose between the two roles.

**III. “I’m Always a Mom no Matter What I’m Doing”: The Mother Role as the Focal Point**

Applying role theory to female adult learner situations requires consideration of the many roles that women fulfill, including mother, wife/significant other, employee, daughter, sister, friend, student, etc. In this case, when discussing the challenges of role navigation and the student role, participants’ primary focus was their role as mother. During focus group
sessions, participants drew a pie chart and labeled the sections based on how much time they devote to the various roles in which they participate. In one focus group, the women said that the pie chart activity was difficult. When asked why, they responded:

*Woman: See, like... an example: I do my school work and then at the same time I’m taking care of the kids so it’s kind of, like, combined. Like, I’m doing something with the computer and then the kids are doing something so then I have to stop doing what I’m doing if they need something. So it’s not like I can – the only time that I can really sit down and just do schoolwork is after the kids have gone to bed already.*

*Tara: Okay. So that being a mom thing kind of weaves its way into the other roles?*

*Woman: Yeah, yeah.*

In the other focus group, one of the participants explains why she thinks she should just color her entire pie chart green, which is the color she chose for the role of “mother”. She explains, “I’m always a mom no matter what I’m doing.”

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**Figure 3: Traditional Pie Chart**
The two pie chart figures illustrate the difference between a traditional pie chart (Figure 3) in which the boundaries between components is clear and distinct based on color and the nontraditional pie chart (Figure 4) that illustrates Holly’s point that she is always a mother. Figure 3 is a digital graphic representation of Holly’s actual pie chart that she drew in the focus group. She did not offer percentages, only labeled the sections and designated each with a color. Figure 4 has been simplified using only 3 of the roles that Holly mentions which are not shown in direct correlation to the percentages that Holly gave in her pie chart. Fewer roles allows for a more robust understanding of how the mother role (represented in green) pervades the entire chart. Motherhood is depicted in green for this chart because green is the color that Holly used for motherhood in her chart. The other roles are distinguished by a different color, but they lie atop the green, showing that the mother role is always there.
Another participant explains that even when she is not physically involved in the responsibilities of motherhood, she is still cognizant that her son and his needs are her top priority:

*Woman:* I definitely think about it a lot. I make sure that my son is always first so that’s why it’s thought about so much because I want to be sure that he’s... I'm his mom. I'm the one that’s responsible for his life and how he's being raised and how he feels and how he’s going to turn out so that means that that’s my number one job because he needs the most.

For these women, being a student is a means to an end. It is one phase in the role of motherhood. It has a completion date. Likewise, the role of worker is also one phase. In the United States, a typical work week is 40 hours per week. Exceptions occur when people work overtime or take on several jobs, but jobs are often clocked by the hour. Mothering, however, is not. It is an ever-present role that does not stop between the hours of 8:00 am and 5:00 pm when the workday begins. Being a mother is the role that never ends. There is no completion date or time, and when the women are no longer students, they will still be mothers. Philosophically and perhaps inherently these women feel that the role of mother should precede and supersede all other roles, including the student role.

**IV. Delegation Dilemma: Standing in for the Female Adult Learner**

Earlier research regarding role conflict and the female adult learners shows that women do feel conflict when navigating multiple roles (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Fairchild, 2003; Home, 1998). This study also found that women feel that conflict and as a result, they also feel guilt. In this study, when asked to discuss perception and navigation of multiple
roles, women focused primarily on the roles of mother and student. These were revealed as the two primary roles that offer the most conflict for women. Success in the role of student is in many ways tied to success in the role as parent. For participants, these roles work in tandem. At times the female adult learner is forced to directly choose between her obligations as mother and student. When this happens, participants describe a two-fold dilemma. First, other people (spouses, friends, family members) step in to take on the role of the parent. The participants may rely on their husband or other caretakers to care for sick children, appear at school events, or take children to doctor’s appointments. The participants find a person to fill in for them and carry out the obligations in the mother role. However, because of the nature of the student role, participants do not seek a stand-in for their obligations as a student. They cannot ask their husband to take their final exams or to participate in mandatory classwork. They must do this work themselves; thus, they are forced to compromise in their role as mother, instead. This reveals the second aspect of the delegation dilemma. As the participants are forced to choose between the two tightly linked roles, and as they realize that they must essentially choose the role of student over the role of mother by delegating someone to stand-in for the mother role, these women also acknowledge that no one can provide for their children what they themselves provide, and thus, they experience guilt. Several participants offered examples.

Kesha describes having to make a choice between watching her young daughter’s first performance in a school play and taking a final exam:

_Tara: How do you deal with those emotions like we just talked about, when you know you can’t be with your daughter?_
Kesha: Oh, it drives me nuts.

TARA: Yeah.

Kesha: Because I’ve talked to my husband about it, he’s like, “She’s only five. She’ll have, like, fifty million more.” I’m like, “But it’s different though because it’s the first.” He’s like, “I’ll record it.” I’m like, “It’s not the same!” You know? And he’s like, “It’s going to be okay. I’ll be there, Mom will be there…” and he was naming other people that are going to be there and I’m like even still though, like, I feel bad and I’ve talked to her, you know? We don’t keep anything from our little ones. If we know that they can understand it, we’re going to talk to them about it, you know? I’ve talked to her about it, she’s like, “it’s okay, Mommy.” You know, she’s very… she’s so sweet that it breaks your heart even more because she understands. She was like, “Okay, you have to go to school. It’s okay, I understand, Mommy. I’ll sing it for you when you get home.” And I’m like, “Okay.”

Sharon shares a similar situation:

So my little boy had some problems with his ears. He got tubes put in, I think, about four years ago and then two, three weeks ago we started noticing some bloody discharge from one of the ears. And they were thinking at his doctor’s office that, “Yeah, it’s probably a ruptured ear drum.” And I’m like, “How can that be possible?” Because he has never had any problems, no pain, nothing. So we took him to the specialist and then it was inverted ear tube. So the tube never fell out and then it started growing scar tissue around the tube and it started getting enflamed and that’s where all the discharge was coming from. So then the doctor told me that,
“Well, if this was an adult I would be able to take the tube out over here at the clinic, but since this is a smaller child I do need to anesthetize so that there is no complications.” And so they scheduled the surgery on Thursday, which is my day when I have eight o’clock organic chemistry lab that I really cannot miss unless it’s something very, very important. So there I was, after I heard that, there I was and I was like – and he was, of course, saying, “Mom, I really want you to go with me. I want you to go with me.” And there I was, like, having this big debate in my head. I really want to be with my son and this is going to be one of those labs that I know is going to be on the midterm, what am I going to do?

So I went to talk to my teacher and sometimes I feel like the male teachers, don’t quote me on this, but even though they have their own children, they are not as sympathetic as the female teachers are. And I told my husband, I was like, “If this had been a bio-technology class, one of my teachers over there, they would have been, like, perfectly fine with it and said, ‘Okay, just don’t worry about it. That’s perfectly fine.’” And I can see also where he stands for, like, he just wants because I’m doing really well in that class and I guess he was looking at it in that angle too.

So his response was, “This lab is only offered once a year.” And he was like, and I was like, “Well, if they schedule the surgery earlier in the morning and I will be late like half an hour, will you be okay with that?” And he was fine with that. He said, “I just want you to come to the lab.” So that didn’t help. So there I was with this big debate in my head again [Laugh]. What am I going to do? I really want to be with my little boy and then there is the, my – that I really want to be in the class too because I
know that that’s how you learn. So we talked about that and [my husband] is like, “Don’t make a big number out of this. It’s a very minor surgery. It will probably be over, like, in a couple hours. I’ll be there with him; my dad’s going to come with me. I can handle it, just go to your class and do what you need to do.” So that’s what we ended up doing.

Sharon allowed her husband and father-in-law to handle the situation with her son, even though her son told her that he wanted her there. She was torn between her obligations to care for her son both physically and emotionally and to fulfill her obligations as a student and maintain her record of success. When I asked Sharon how she felt about her choice, she replied:

Bad! I still felt bad. I was like, I – and then I talked to him in the morning and I was trying to keep my emotions down and I’m like, “You know Mommy loves you, that I really want to be there with you, but...” And I just tried to explain it and he was fine with it and he’s like, “Mom, I’ll be fine...” and da, da, da, da, da. So he was like - so it made me feel a little better, but those are the situations that are the hardest when, even though I keep on saying that I always put my kids first, but then there are the situations where you really... and everybody else said, too, they were like, “Anita, just calm down. Frank is there, it’s not like you’re sending him over there by himself.” And I’m like, “Yeah, I guess that’s true, but...” So those are the hardest situations when you have to debate whether it’s your child or whether it’s school or work.
For these participants, the choice eventually came down to one of delegation. “Who can fill in for me and where?” And the answer is that no one can fill in for the student role, but others could step into the mother role. However, delegating someone to step into the mother role creates guilt because although others can stand-in in the logistical concept of “mother,” they cannot necessarily fill in for the emotional concept of mother. In her individual interview, Jessie expresses the notion that mothers offer an emotional security that no other person can offer:

*Because they’re not going to cry to for somebody else; they’re crying for their mama when they’re sick.*

Jessie expresses the uniqueness of motherhood, which is formed by a bond, not just a social contract, which elicits emotions from both children and mother.

These types of situations create a cycle of behavior and perception for the female adult learner. The paradigm has changed for female adult learners, and there is no longer a negative stigma attached to the woman’s (particularly mother/wife) desire to return to school. Women are supported in their desire to return to school, but may not receive the necessary instrumental support to help navigate the roles. The two most challenging roles for female adult learners are the mother and student roles, which are also called “greedy institutions” in previous literature (Coser, 1974). Knowing that the two institutions are greedy is a surface understanding of the roles. To say that both family and school are greedy is not enough. We must also try to understand why and how they are greedy to find ways to reconcile the roles of student and mother. This study offers that the roles are inherently linked because the female adult learner desire to return to school is grounded in the female adult learner’s love
for her children and her desire to improve their livelihood and future. Of the two roles, student and mother, the mother role is the most important. The mother role spans a lifetime while formal education spans only a few years. In addition, self-efficacy as a mother supports women’s overall self-efficacy. However, the student role is still an extension of the mother role. While the mother role is the most pervasive role for female adult learners, at times, female adult learners are forced to choose school over mothering as a result of the delegation dilemma. These perceptions provide a basis for understanding the ways that female adult learners navigate multiple roles.

**Navigation**

The previous set of findings addresses the first research question: How do female adult learners perceive multiple roles? Participants feel supported by their spouses and families to return to school, calling into question the existing paradigm of women being discouraged from returning to school. The previous set of findings also reveals that participants cite their children as a motivator for returning to school and persisting. Thus, the roles of mother and student are tightly linked. The third finding explains that participants find the mother role to be the most pervasive and most important role of the many that they fill. Finally, previous section findings show that one of the challenges of navigating those roles is that women can use proxies or stand-ins to fill some of the responsibilities of mothering but cannot use proxies in the role of student. These findings in perspective highlight how participants view the roles that they embody. The next set of findings explores how participants choose to navigate those roles. Participants described a number of strategies to help them maintain control and set boundaries, remain positive, reduce and
manage conflict between roles, and reduce and manage the stress that comes with role navigation. The findings are organized into two sections: a) Strategies for Staying in Control and Setting Boundaries: Strategic Planning, Sacrificing, and Separating the Spheres, and b) Strategies to Stay Positive: Support Gathering, Self-Encouragement, and Avoidance.

I. Strategies for Staying in Control and Setting Boundaries: Strategic Planning, Sacrificing, and Separating the Spheres.

As mothers, participants are responsible for making schedules and tending to the needs of the individuals in the family, and as students, participants are responsible for learning and organizing class time and study time. If participants are also employees, then they must also manage their time in that role. Conflict occurs when these roles intertwine and overlap each other, causing role overload, role conflict, or role contagion. Role conflict may cause stress and negatively affect role navigation. Participants use strategic planning as a navigation strategy to maintain control over the roles and reduce conflict and stress.

A. Strategic Planning

Perhaps the most overt strategy that participants describe is that of strategic planning. In this study, the navigation of roles is a key challenge. As female adult learners recognize that they will have challenges to face, they plan their lives so that they can optimize their time in their roles. Getting children to and from school, doctor’s appointments, and activities, while also managing their own schedule of courses, finding time to study, performing domestic duties, and making time for their spouses is stressful and requires strategic planning. The routines they plan have to be carried out perfectly, and all involved have to execute the plan as expected, or chaos could ensue. Part of this navigation includes
finding chunks of time to study. Studying generally happens either on campus between classes or at night after children have gone to bed. Other time management strategies include taking online courses, deferring courses that do not fit ideally into the schedule, and communicating with instructors when domestic issues conflict with school schedules. For many, this strategic planning also means managing the schedules of their husbands/partners and their children.

Participants describe having a routine that helps them to stay organized. Addie’s routine took some time to revise and perfect, but now she has a routine that she feels comfortable with:

*When I first got started I did, but as I, I’m going to say, I learned by trial and error. You know, I know I work 8:00 to 5:00, so if I cook dinner – when I cook dinner – on Sunday morning, I cook that I can do warmer on Monday, Tuesday. Wednesday, bible study night, I knew I’m going to bring dinner home or I’m going to pick my daughter up we’re going to stop and grab some food and proceed on. On the nights I do not have class, which would be Monday night and Friday night, those are my nights then, okay, I get my laptop, my feet up in the den and I’m watching TV with my daughter. I’m doing my homework as I watch TV, I know that’s not proper, but that’s what I do sometimes and then sometimes on Saturday and Sundays. So Monday, Friday, Saturday, Sundays are the days that I find time to do my homework.* (Addie)

Addie has certain days for homework, certain days for church, and certain days for class. She prepares dinner on Sunday that she can reheat the rest of the week, which shows how busy she is during the week and how tightly her schedule is prepared.
When asked to offer advice for other female adult learners, Kim also comments on the importance of a routine:

*I mean, it takes a while to get down a schedule, but if that’s really what you want to do, then you find a way to make it. It’s going to be tough at first getting it worked into your schedule, but once you get it worked in, you just got it down to a pattern, kind of in zombie mode at that point* (Kim)

The phrase “zombie mode” is humorous but also appropriate. The routine should be something that requires little thought. It should work like a machine when each person does his or her part on auto-pilot, As other participants point out in the section on “Challenges”, this doesn’t always happen, but having the routine in place adds a sense of security.

Lisa, Maria, and Jessie explain how they find time to do homework:

*I get all my work here. I don’t go home and study. I get it all done in here before I go home because if I don’t I’ll never get nothing done. I won’t even touch my papers. If I had a paper due, I wouldn’t touch it if I have to do it at home.* (Lisa)

*No, I try to get it done before I go home just because there’s so much going on in my house that you can’t focus. You know, you have the little kids, who’s running here, who’s running there, who’s screaming, who’s crying, who’s getting beat up? Is the dog licking anyone or eating anything off the counter that he’s not supposed to be eating?* (Maria)
I don't get to study until after my children have gone to bed and so most of the time it's ten o'clock before I get my book. And sometimes I’m up until one o'clock studying. (Jessie)

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Numerous times, there were numerous times where I’ll try and figure out what needs to be for the rest of the night and my little ones are talking to me. “Hold on, just wait, give me two seconds.” And they’re like, “No...” and you’re like, “Okay, yeah? What do you need? What do you want to do?” So yeah, my husband, these past couple weeks, like, I try to save the day times for the girls and him because at night I have to go into my book mode. And he’ll take the girls out and go to the mall or go to [indecipherable] and get them something, you know, just something so that they’re out of the house and I can just kind of de-stress everything. (Kesha)

Lisa and Maria use their time at school to finish homework because they know they will not be able to focus at home. Jessie and Kesha cannot focus when their children are buzzing around them, so they wait until they go to bed to try to do homework. For Jessie, this means very late nights.

Jessie discusses having a “Plan B” in case the first academic plan falls through.

Yes and I saved my chemistry book. Because I had taken classes that were for Nursing because I wanted to go into Nursing, but I said, “You know, I’m too old not to have a back-up plan.” And so I had taken classes that would also get me accepted into Medical Assistant if I didn’t get accepted to the Nursing program because I knew
that there was a lot of people that applied and you pretty much had to have an A average. And I knew I had A and B and a couple of C’s. And I said, “You know, let me make sure I’m taking classes that’ll get me accepted into one or the other.” And so that helped me, you know? (Jessie)

Jessie’s first plan is to apply to the Nursing program which is a limited admissions program. This means that only a few people get accepted into the program each year and that acceptance is based on a points system whereby a student gets more points for having higher grades. Jessie knows that her grades may not be competitive, so she has another plan for utilizing her credits.

Alicia explains the way that she and her fiancé have structured their personal schedules to create a workable childcare situation:

Yes. Mainly I run all my decisions first by my fiancé. I ask, I’m like, okay, if I’m going to go back to school or I’m going to go back to work, we’re going to have to figure out how to change our schedules because my daughter has health issues and I’m not comfortable with a lot of people watching her so we feed off each other’s schedule. So I had to sit down with him and he ended up changing his work schedule to the graveyard shift so I can work and go to school and take care of her in the daytime. Well, he can take care of her during the daytime and I can work and go to school and then we switch off at night so we probably see each other, throughout the day, maybe two hours then he goes to work. (Alicia)
Holly and her husband have created a similar situation:

I get financial aid and my fiancé, on his job he makes... he only makes, like, four hundred dollars a week, but, you know, he works really hard. And he works nights so I’m able to go to school and he can watch him during the day. He watches my son during the day. So yeah, that’s how we’re able to do it really. And I just started a part-time job at Blockbuster. (Holly)

And my mother, she, you know, we’re not able to – we have somewhere, like, who’s going to have to be work at... I’ll work different shifts, but mostly third, sometimes I’ll be on call. If he’s working or if I’m off, my mom, she’ll pick them up or something like that. (Jordan)

Part of Alicia, Holly, and Jordan’s routine is to rotate childcare through the home. They and their fiancés/husbands have chosen to work opposite shifts to accommodate the need for childcare and avoid the cost of out-of-home care. Jordan mentions having her mother as a back-up plan when she is on-call.

Sonja uses a planner to help her stay organized:

I have a book that I have, like, I made a book that I go by and I try to figure out what I need to do by when and with it I try to decide. I guess working at nights is real good because we have down time, if all of our stuff is done, then they don’t care what you, you know, you do what you have to. If you want to read or you can do homework. (Sonja)
Sonja also works the night shift so that she can be available for her children during the day. She mentions here that the night shift is a slower shift, so she has time to work on her homework at work.

Part of Jessie’s strategic plan involves getting her work done early to avoid last minute panic. She also works with her advisor to choose classes that allow her to be available for her children.

And then, like I said, when I bought the computer at home and I’ve done some web-based work on it and then now I have two online classes, but I was worried when they signed me up for online classes that I was not going to be able to keep up with the work load. But I try to go ahead and do the work and have it at least turned in the day before it’s due so that I’m not panicking on that last day that it’s due. “Oh, I haven’t done this work!” (Jessie)

Yes and I try not to go for afternoon classes because I like to be there when my daughter gets off the bus. I don’t see having to pay extra child care if I can get that class in the morning and take it in the morning that I’d rather do that. (Jessie)

Yes because I haven’t been in a situation where it had to be a weekend class or an evening class. Because I let my advisor know, “You know, I just cannot do an evening class.” I probably could do a weekend class, but I prefer not to. I try to spend Saturday morning - Friday night and Saturday morning doing my homework so that I can turn it in or go ahead and submit it online if I have to. (Jessie)
Alicia’s strategic planning includes taking online courses, which allow her to be available for her family.

Yeah, I love it [online courses] because it allows me to do stuff on my time. They give you your due date schedule and it’s like, well, okay... it allows me to plan my day out better versus just going to class, sit for fifty minutes because I’ve never, like, been in class for some reason. I never take in the information, it’s almost like I have to sit down, process it, visualize it and then do it. I’ve never liked being in class. (Alicia)

The participants reveal their secrets to successful time management in these excerpts. These include remaining proactive in creating course schedules and keeping their instructors informed, telling their advisors explicitly when they can and cannot take courses, letting instructors know in advance if they know they have to miss a class, trying to work in study time in an otherwise really busy schedule, and studying late at night and into the early morning to keep from studying during “family” time. They do this in part to avoid the guilt of taking time away from their children, but they also reveal that they have difficulty studying when children are afoot. In order to focus, they need a quiet house, which means waiting until the children are in bed. Still other participants describe modifications in the work schedule, either theirs or their spouses, such that they work alternating shifts. The husband may take on the night shift so that he can care for the children during the day when the wife is at school and vice versa. This plan was employed more than expected and raises concerns about the ultimate price that the couple will pay for not having time to nurture their own relationship. The payoff, however, is that they avoid the cost of childcare.
Strategic planning is in some ways the backbone of navigating multiple roles. It provides the “show up” part of the plan. With strategic planning, the participant is available for her family and can actually show up for her classes. Yet, as mentioned in part of this section of Strategic Planning, that type of planning sometimes requires sacrifice, which is another navigation strategy employed by participants.

B. Making Sacrifices

Role navigation requires sacrifice. For female adult learners, this can be difficult because these interviews show that women closely relate their role as student to their role as mother. Sacrificing one for the other is the ultimate challenge. However, other types of sacrifices occur when female adult learners attempt effective role navigation.

Kim and her husband sacrifice quality time together so that they can avoid the cost of childcare:

Oh, yeah... especially this semester I’ve gotten – because I have a class from 9:00 to 9:50 every day and then I normally go to work as soon as I leave out of class and I’ll come home on my lunch break. My husband works nights so it works out he can keep the baby during the day while I’ll get her at night while he’s at work, so we don’t hardly see each other all that much, but I usually go on my break and spend some time with them. (Kim)

Being a student, mother, and wife all require time and energy. As Alicia mentioned in her interview, something will have to suffer. In this case, Kim sacrifices time with her spouse to accommodate the other roles. Because her relationship with her husband is potentially compromised with less quality time, Kim takes on more of the domestic chores:
Kim: If he knows that I’ve got a lot to do, if he knows that I’ve got a lot of schoolwork to do when I get home, if he knows that I’ve been working all day then he – you know, if I ask him to help – then he’ll do something. He knows if I’ve had a rough day he needs to jump in.

Tara: He does, but otherwise you take care of all that?

Kim: Yeah.

Tara: Okay, is that what you prefer to do?

Kim: Most the time, yeah. [Laugh] That way I know it’s getting done right.

Kim knows that if she asks her husband for help, he will help her, but she tries to avoid asking him for help because her husband’s efforts may not meet her standards. Thus, Kim sacrifices her own time and does the chores to prevent conflict with her husband. Kim concludes:

Sometimes, I mean, not all the time because you just... you do what you’ve got to do to get through the day, keep everybody happy. (Kim)

Savannah actually sacrifices grades for her own sanity and time for her family:

I’m very proud of myself. At the beginning, I was an A striver constantly. A, A, A, A, A. then I realized I was overwhelming myself and I’m not saying that that – I mean, I was doing better than my best if that makes any sense. Like I was pushing myself over and I wasn’t giving myself any time to, like, relax or, you know, have any kind of outside outlet. And so this last semester in the Spring I realized, just do your best, not better than your best. Just do your best don’t overachieve, you know, overanalyze, overwhelm. You know, all those “over” words, I had to ex all of them out. (Savannah)
Though Savannah has the ability to earn As, she admits that she is willing to forego the A for a lower grade to reduce stress. For some women, this choice may mean sacrificing the ultimate goal of being accepted into a limited-admissions program such as Nursing, which accepts students based on a points system. Students get more points for earning higher grades. Thus, earning a lower grade may put them out of contention for a place in the program. The women in both focus groups have a similar conversation when asked about their biggest challenges:

Participant 1: Mine is studying and schoolwork definitely because I could be — I mean, anybody could be a straight A student if they just try, you know?

Participant 2: Yeah, take time to study.

TARA: Have you ever chosen to not get an A in class?

Participant 1: Yeah. I’m like, you know what? I can afford the C or maybe get a B on this test so I’m just going to relax and go to bed early or something like that. [Laugh]

Participant 2: Yeah, I have the same moments. Especially when you’re tired and sleepy. (FG1)

Participant 1: I know I could sometimes study a little more, you know, really dig in and do it, but it’s just like, “No, I’m good.” You know? I’m too tired; I can’t focus on something else. But I’m okay, I mean, I’ve set my standard high, but at the same time I already know that I’m not going to make it so I’m bringing it down to a more realistic spot for myself. I think I, not that I set myself up, I just — for my first semester I wanted to get a 4.0, but I know that I’m going to be close to it, but I really don’t think I’m going to make the 4.0, but that’s where I want it. (FG2)
Knowing that they cannot be excellent in all roles, some participants choose to be mediocre in the role of student to prevent mediocrity as a mother.

Alicia has chosen to sacrifice her own personal relationships:

*Mhmm, they do because they affect my relationships on all levels whether its friends – I don’t have time for, like, a social life so they kind of dwindle by the wayside. And my sisters, we used to be, because my older sister has two sons, but we always had time for each other; now that I have a daughter and she has two sons, you know, it’s just, like, I have to get my daughter dressed, she has to get two boys dressed. And, you know, it’s just, like, we don’t have time to, like, be sisters anymore. (Alicia)*

Alicia simply doesn’t have enough time for everyone, and she speaks candidly in her interview about priorities. She makes her daughter her top priority which means sacrificing her relationship with her husband with whom she spends little time. Here, she admits also sacrificing relationships with her sister and other friends. She goes on to say:

*My older, yeah, my oldest one that doesn’t live with me. And I can imagine that’s the same thing that’s going to happen when my sister has hers is our sisterly bond is just going to be more... okay, we got kids now. You know, we can’t just go here and just have fun or, you know... you know. And with my mom, you know, being that I feel that she doesn’t understand me a lot, it’s like I don’t confide in her, you know? The things I would talk about [before her daughter], that would be okay, she could understand that, but now that I have her it’s just like, “Mom, you just don’t understand because you never had to go through it.” So our relationship is, you know, not as strong as it*
used to be. And my fiancé and I, we have our struggles of course, because you always
take your frustration out on the closest one to you. (Alicia)

Sonja speaks frankly to her children about sacrifice:

Sonja: I work at night. I’m at the hospital and one day a week at [Indecipherable]
Pediatrics.

TARA: Oh, my goodness. What kind of shift is that at the hospital?

Sonja: It’s 7:00PM to 7:00 AM.

TARA: When do you sleep?

Sonja: Like, last night I had went, like, thirty-six hours without sleep before I went to
sleep.

TARA: Oh, my gosh.

Sonja: But I tell my children it’s the sacrifice that I have to make, but in the long run
it’ll be all well worth it.

Sonja sacrifices sleep and consequently, her own health, to navigate the roles of student,
mother, and employee. Talking to her children about the sacrifice means that they are aware
of the choices their mother is making.

This participant from the first focus group speaks about sacrifices:

I can’t, like, trick myself, you know, into think – I still feel it, you know? It’s hard for
me to, like, tell myself something that I feel, you know, that’s not true, you know? I
have to be real with myself and it is how I feel. I feel bad, but, I mean, I don’t even
know why. I can’t critically think about it. [Laugh] It’s just, like, you feel like you
should be able to be a mom and provide and just that be automatic and it’s not and
it’s so hard to try to get to that point. And, like, you have to make so many sacrifices so... and as long as I feel like I’m not sacrificing my son’s life, you know, his happiness so... [Sigh]. And, like, just now I got a text, and this is what it says – and this is what kills me – he said, “He started calling for you and crying when he got his shots.” Like, it kills me. (FG1)

As long as this participant is not sacrificing her son’s wellbeing, then any other sacrifice is acceptable to her. This is a philosophy shared among other participants, as well. They sacrifice personal relationships with spouses, partners, family, and friends; they sacrifice grades and potential career paths, and they sacrifice their own health and wellbeing, but they are less likely to sacrifice their children’s health or wellbeing.

Perhaps the ultimate form of role navigation is found in sacrifice. Many of these excerpts are reminiscent of the previous forms of navigation. Participants are giving up something in one area of their life in order to make room for something else. One form of sacrifice is giving up relationships with friends and family members because they do not have time. These relationships may be good forms of support, but there is no time to nurture them. Another form of sacrifice involves sacrificing “me time” or personal time in order to make sure that children and spouses feel loved and nurtured. Participants also sacrifice academic success in order to fulfill responsibilities as a mother. Sacrificing academic success is a conscious decision to earn a lower grade or a less desired major than that which they are capable of because the effort required to make the higher grade would take too much time and energy away from their family. While this may seem like trading As for Bs or 4.0 GPAs for 3.5 GPAs, the larger implication is that these women may not be accepted into the
limited admissions programs for which they are striving. Savannah made this point in her interview when she said that she used to make As but made a conscious choice to settle for Bs because she needed to allocate her time less to studying and more to her family. Programs like nursing and sonography may only accept 30 students each semester, and hundreds may apply. To be competitive, students must earn points. Higher grades earn more points. Thus, sacrificing that grade in that one class may have far-reaching effects.

Interestingly, the participants in this study did not speak negatively about the sacrifices they make. Their tone was very matter-of-fact. These sacrifices are simply necessary for ultimate success in navigating roles. Still, navigating roles remains challenging. Another strategy used by participants is Separating the Spheres, which is the mental and physical act of trying to pull apart that Unbreakable Venn Diagram. Keeping school activities and in one space and time and domestic activities in a separate space and time helps participants avoid conflict between the roles.

C. Separating the Spheres

Ironically, though participants closely link the two roles of student and mother, one of the strategies that participants used to navigate the roles is to attempt to separate the spheres. This is a mental effort to stay focused on the task at hand instead of allowing the mind to wander to other responsibilities in other roles. Lisa explains:

*I don’t let it bother me. When I’m in school I just erase it, focus on school, but when they call me it comes back. I go in a corner; I leave the office, the Trio or I leave my classroom. Go to the bathroom, calm myself down when I hang up with them and then*
start my routine over. Just calm down. I don’t let that get to me at school. At home, it
gets to me. I just go in my room, lock my door until I get my child. (Lisa)

For Lisa, separating the spheres is not always easy, but it is essential for retaining focus.

Holly has a similar strategy:

Yeah, but I try to put myself wherever I am at that moment. I try to keep myself there.

And then after that I might leave straight from work, straight from school at 11:00
and head to Blockbuster for work for three hours and I just do different stuff around
there. And then I go home around 2:00 and then I try to eat a quick lunch with my
fiancé before he leaves at 2:45 to go to work. (Holly)

Holly says that she “tries” to keep herself in the moment and admits that successfully
separating the spheres is difficult.

Jessie adds:

When I’m in class I try not to think – I try to think, “Well, one’s in school; one’s with
the babysitter. If anything goes wrong they’ll call me.” And I try to just focus on that
class and make sure that I take my notes and do whatever is required in class or lab
and then after class I’m like, “Oh, dear!” And so I always check my phone after class
because I leave it in my car. (Jessie)

Jessie leaves her phone in her car because the instructor has asked that students not bring
cellphones to class. Thus, for Jessie, separating the spheres actually involves leaving her
only connection to her domestic sphere in her car. She mentions that feeling of panic “Oh,
dear!” when class is over and she realizes she needs to check in with the other sphere.
Alice shares:

_I try real hard to push it aside as best I can and take my notes because otherwise it creates that much more homework for me to do which makes it that much tougher on me._ (Alice)

For Alice, separating the spheres is an exercise in reducing work load. She knows that a lack of focus in class means more work later.

Tonya’s strategy for separating the spheres means changing her living situation. She actually has her twin sister, who lives an hour away, keep her son for one entire semester.

_Well, I went back home every weekend I was off and it was kind of easy because I saw him on my weekends I was off. I went home every weekend I was off to see him and as far as taking care of him, I would just send my sister money to take care of him. So to me it made it easier because I could concentrate on my classes a little bit better and I didn’t have to worry about, you know, who was going to keep him and how I was going to pay for him for his childcare because childcare is twice as much here in Greenville than it is back home._ (Tonya)

For Tonya, having her son live with her sister allows her more opportunity to focus on school. The implication is that when her son is with her, she has difficulty with focus.

For Jordan, separating the spheres is simply a mental exercise:

_I just think about what’s going on. If I’m home, it’s home and school is school and then when I leave school it’s think about whatever else is around, you know? But I try to stay focused; if I don’t stay focused I’d be lost._ (Jordan)
Separating the Spheres is an act in control and setting boundaries. If left unattended, the student and mother role individually can overwhelm female adult learners. Having both roles vying for time and energy requires great focus and attention to boundaries such that needs get met but participants are not usurped by each role.

Strategies like Strategic Planning, Sacrificing, and Separating the Spheres are attempts at maintaining control of the roles and setting boundaries. These strategies require participants to get their proverbial hands dirty in the work of scheduling. However, participants also describe the importance of having a positive mindset to help them forge through the mire of mixing roles. Those strategies include Support Gathering, Self-Encouragement, and Avoidance.

II. Strategies for Staying Positive: Support Gathering, Self-Encouragement, Avoidance

In the interviews, participants understood the nature of the journey they were on as a female adult learner. Participants seemed to be, overall, self-aware and cognizant of the benefits of being a female adult learner and the challenges, as well. They highlighted challenges of being a female adult learner, which included managing schedules, finding time to do homework and to study, finding sufficient financial support and managing a tight budget, making sure their children felt cared for and loved and not neglected, managing their own stress levels and well-being, and finding instrumental support. In addressing these challenges, participants conveyed a need to be positive and create a positive environment. One strategy for staying positive is gathering and recognizing supporters.
A. Support Gathering

Support comes in several forms including academic support, financial support, emotional support, or instrumental support. Participants try to surround themselves with people who will help them find the resources they need and encourage them as they navigate multiple roles.

Addie is quick to ask for instrumental help if she needs it:

My siblings, my aunt, my grandma who is ninety-seven, she actually helps me out too. So I let them know ahead of time before I even started taking classes like, “Okay, this semester I got two classes on Tuesday/Thursday night from 6:30 to 8:50 so who’s going to take care of Angie this week? Who’s got Tuesday night? Who’s got Thursday night?” I plan out ahead of time who’s going to keep my daughter while I go to class at night. So when I do need some time to myself I do call upon my siblings. I’ll be like, “Okay, I need a twenty-four hours.” And they’ll make arrangements, see, okay, who can keep Angel for overnight or something like that so I can have some me time.(Addie)

Addie’s family treats her academic endeavors as a family event. They all pitch in to help her care for her daughter. Addie even calls when she needs some personal time, which other participants admit is difficult to do. Notably, Addie is the oldest of the participants and arguably the most self-aware. She does not hesitate to employ her entire family in her postsecondary endeavors.
Maria has literally surrounded herself with people who can give her instrumental support. She lives with another family of 13. This living situation is not ideal for privacy, but it does offer a level of instrumental support that she could not find elsewhere.

*I live with my best friend, yeah, and her eight kids and her grandson so it’s thirteen of us and the ages for the kids go from nineteen to about to be one, the youngest. The baby, he’s eleven months, he’s about to be one so we got it all in between there, but, I mean, it is nice because my daughter doesn’t have to be alone. So the fact that I’m going to go back to work, she... there was a point where I was working full-time, you know; she would come home from school and was home alone at that point in Connecticut. And she was like, “I didn’t like that.” Even though I was less than a mile away, in the house, you know, we were upstairs, the door is downstairs. We’re locked, no one can get in... she didn’t like it. She was like, “I didn’t like being home alone.” So we did put her in an after-school program so she wouldn’t have to go home and be alone, but now she comes home from school, the whole house is full. So she will go to our side because she wants to be alone because there’s too many people and they’re bothering her! (Maria: FG2)*

Maria says that she has considered moving out so that she and her daughter can have their privacy, but she has decided to stay because this situation offers financial assistance, instrumental support, and emotional support that she cannot provide on her own.

Tonya reached out to her sister for help with childcare. She asked her sister to let Tonya’s son live with her one semester while Tonya went to school. Tonya’s sister lives an hour away, so she only saw her son every other weekend, but she feels it was a good choice:
I think my sister’s probably the only one who really understands because at one point in time it was hard finding someone to keep him here and paying for daycare. My sister kept him for a whole semester for me while I was in school so she’s really the only one who really understands, like, what I’m going through and how hard it is and me being here by myself. (Tonya)

Tonya’s sister not only offered instrumental support by caring for Tonya’s son, but because of her efforts, she sister also provided a source of emotional support for Tonya. Other participants also describe feeling a sense of emotional support by those who offer instrumental support. Alice explains:

I have one friend in particular, her husband works with my husband and we’re very close. I call her up in tears, when I’m happy, any time, frustrated when he’s gone. “I need you to come get my kids; I need ten minutes to myself.” She’ll take them for the day or if I get sick, she’ll take them, keep them overnight. (Alice)

Alice lives in a town where she has no family and few friends. This one friend not only provides the emotional support that Alice’s needs, but also provides instrumental support when Alice asks. It is possible that the two types of support reinforce each other, such that as a person provides instrumental support, the female adult learner feels, also, that she is being supported emotionally, and as a person provides emotional support, the female adult learner feels more comfortable asking for instrumental support.

Other strategies for gathering support include joining groups such as church groups or local organizations, relying faith and belief systems, and reaching out to friends. Addie relies on her belief system for emotional support:
Yes, yes. I keep looking at that, you know, Thanksgiving coming up. You know, so when I think about where I’m headed at it kind of gives me strength and then I have some of my favorite scriptures, like the, “Join the Lord, everybody’s strength,” so I feel like I’m about to pass out, especially at night I feel like I’m about to pass out, I just throw a [indecipherable] within my mind my scriptures that bring me strength.

Before I know it, I got this urge or surge, like I’m regenerated all over again. (Addie)

Addie refers to her spiritual leader as one of her primary forms of support. She nurtures her relationship with her spiritual leader because she knows that it will nurture her. Addie’s son, who is in his early twenties, also provides a source of support for her, as does her church. Addie surrounds herself with the support that she needs to best navigate multiple roles.

Jessie also describes her church as a form of emotional support:

You know, I go to – I take my children to church. We go to Free Will Baptist Church and I have some (I say) friends there: some ladies that I talk with and they’ve been really nice. They’ve been really supportive; my first semester here they helped me out. They gave me a card for some gas and I cried when they gave it to me because I never had – I say “never had…” Since my parents have passed away when I was in my twenties, I haven’t had that somebody you could call if you’re broke down on the side of the road or if you need twenty dollars for gas. And it was just so unexpected and I cried. I was like, “Oh, I thank you guys so much!” and they were like, “We just want to see you do well.” And I have a lady that goes to our church and she’s let me know that if there comes a time when my babysitter can’t watch my daughter that’s not in school, then I can call her and maybe she would watch her if she could. And I
told her, I was like, “That’s really a big help because my babysitter, her daddy just got diagnosed with lung cancer and I know that there’s coming a time when she’s not going to be in any shape to babysit for me.” And it’s nice to know that I don’t have to worry about paying $150 for daycare that I can’t afford, that they would be willing to babysit here, you know, while I’m coming to class. Which I’m only, I’m only here – I’m not even here half a day. I’m here from, like, eight ‘til eleven o’clock. (Jessie)

Jessie has few friends in her town, so she joined the church to find support. Though the women in the church do offer forms of instrumental support, they also encourage Jessie, so she continues to attend the church that she might be nurtured there. Jessie says:

I’ve learned that, you know, not everybody is out to see you fail. That, you know, that there are people that will encourage you to do better, to want to do better and you just have to, sometimes you have to seek them out. (Jessie)

Maya also mentions her church family as a sort of emotional support, as well as her friends and instructors:

I would definitely say friends that I have worked with in the past. My previous coworkers definitely, just the bond that we’ve made over the years even though we don’t work together now, we’re really good friends. And people in my church, they’re constantly, every Sunday it’s, like, we’ll fill out a, you know... you have, like, a prayer request card. And my husband always puts down “Maya’s school” so every now and then I’ll get stuff in the mail, I don’t know who sent it, but it’ll just be little encouragement cards, you know? But definitely too, my instructors, they are awesome. (Maya)
Participants have described how difficult it was to nurture friendships once they became students, so the fact that Maya remains close with her former co-workers is telling. She has taken the time and effort to stay in touch with them because they do provide a form of emotional support for her.

In addition to churches, campus organizations can also offer a form of support. As the original founder of Circle of Sisters, Alicia not only sought out emotional support, she formed an organization that would give emotional support to other women:

Because... oh my God. When I first got here at MCC, I met the group At Level, it’s a male mentoring group. And, you know, they’re, like, on campus and they have their blazers on and, you know, I was like, “What is this group?” and it’s all males and I was asking around on campus. I was like, “Do we have a female organization?” I was like, “It doesn’t have to be similar to male mentoring, but do we have one at all?” And they were telling me no and I was like, well, what if we need help and guidance? What do we have? And I was talking to the guy from male mentoring and he told me what they do, how they help males and how they help them be successful and guide them throughout a successful career. And I was like – he was like, “Well, maybe you should start one of your own.” I was like, “Maybe...” I was, like, because we have a lot of misguided girls, at the time I was seeing a lot of teens that were pregnant and they would, you could tell – I wasn’t really into school, but I at least took it serious enough – but, you know, they would just be wandering the halls and, you know, you see one just lost. And, you know, you’re a teen mom and I could tell that their help wasn’t there. I was like, okay, I have to find a way to reel these girls in
and so I had one of my friends, I talked to her about it. I was like, “We can start this out here.” Because she was wondering too, where’s the help for the ladies out here? And so it was a long process, you know, getting our constitution. I had a lot of help from different advisors on campus and we made it. (Alicia)

Asking for help is difficult, and as a mentor, Alicia encourages other Circle of Sisters members to ask for help:

Yeah, I really do because what I noticed with some of my girls are they’d rather just deal with it and not seek the help like I did from [Circle of Sisters Advisor] and then they blow up at the end and they end up quitting something that could’ve been avoided. So of course, we deal with our struggles, but you at least have to – when it gets to that point – you have to know when to ask for help and I was always terrible asking for help. That’s why I try to teach them now, like, if it gets to that point ask for help. Someone else is probably in your shoes and if not they probably can help you through it because they know someone that’s been in your shoes. So I think it’s real tough for girls to prioritize. (Alicia)

Alicia visits her Circle of Sisters advisor, who is also a school counselor, for help often. Other participants see Circle of Sisters as an opportunity and a place to get resources and camaraderie that provide emotional support:

And [The Circle of Sisters Advisor] and... oh my God, I forgot the other lady’s name, they seem like, you know, if you needed them for something they would definitely be there so it’s cool and they made it very clear that their door is always open to come in and the other members as well, you know? (Maria)
He’s gone, yes. I’m with my son most of the time, there’s a few times I’ve taken him out. I try to meet new people, you know? I’m trying – that’s one of the reasons why I did join, I’m trying to join the COS [Circle of Sisters]. It’s just because I want that support from other women because there’s other women in this that have children and I’m like, “They’re managing it, I’ll manage it.” It helps encourage you to see, okay, if they’re doing it I can do it too. (Layla)

Layla knows that she needs encouragement and feels that being around other female adult learners will provide that support. She describes some of the activities that she enjoys with Circle of Sisters:

Yeah, it does. I did the Fall Fest and that was fun to just do something that wasn’t school related. I mean, it was school related, but it wasn’t, like, schoolwork related and that was just something for fun kind of. And we’re going to be Accidental Artists and it’s all good because I don’t go to parties, like, where there’s alcohol and stuff like this so that’s why I like this because it’s all... you know, there’s certain policies and it’s just, like, positive stuff and leadership skills and, you know, sometimes my husband is, like, I can’t. There’s times he just wanted me to quit because he’s like, “It’s too much.” And then, like, just being around other women – just, like, especially there’s a lot, I noticed that African American women, they have... that’s one of the reasons why kind of, I saw that there was a lot of African American women. There’s other clubs, but there was a lot of white people. I was like, “I need to kind of be around them because I haven’t before.” And I just – I want to expose myself to that and see I’m not uncomfortable. I’m not “that white girl” uncomfortable that knows
she’s white in a black crowd, but I noticed too that a lot of them are kind of the backbone of their families a little more than... so I’m like, “This could be good for me.” This could be, you know, strength. This could be... you know. And I do, I like all of them, every one of them. There’s no drama, I have not, none of them fight, none of them get – everybody’s very mature. Everybody has some kind of life going on so everybody’s down to earth, you know? It’s not like some silly sorority where there’s all this drama, it’s nothing like that. (Layla)

Layla describes Circle of Sisters as a friendly environment. She has met new people, tried new things, and made new friends who, she feels, support her, and she, in turn, supports them. These organizations do take time out of an otherwise busy female adult learner schedule, so the fact that these participants sought out this opportunity and continue to actively participate shows that they value the support they receive there.

Other participants seek academic support, which refers to help with course material. Lisa talks about the TRiO program on campus:

Yeah, really supporting. Yeah, especially like with the homework – English or math they always have a tutor there from Trio that can help me out. With the English, if I have a problem they will help me. And especially with math, since math is my favorite subject, but sometimes I forget the formula sometimes and I see one of the tutors; she’s a good math teacher and she helps me out real, real well on it and I understand that completely. (Lisa)
Maria also recognized a need for academic support and seeks a tutor:

*I did. I got a tutor for both math and biology simply because math, I took the math that was needed, you know, like ten years ago and I was able to go into this one math that I need for radiography and I didn’t need the refresher course (Maria)*

Jessie nurtures a relationship with a friend from class who has helped her understand computers:

*You know, I have a friend that she and I are in the same classes and so she’ll tell me, “Look, I need some help to make sure I’m typing these letters right.” And so we’ll both go to the library or to the little computer lab and if I have questions she helps me out. And she’s been a great help to me; a great help to me because I wasn’t sure how to upload a file and I learned successfully how to upload a file within the past two weeks or past two or three weeks. (Jessie)*

Though Taylor hasn’t been to tutoring at the college yet, she does seek academic support through friends who agree to help edit her work:

*I haven’t yet. No, not yet. I just kind of work through the stress and feel like I can get it done. I want it to be done to the best of my ability so I like to do it early. Like I said, my husband comes home and sometimes crashes out, but I have friends of mine that are, you know, teachers or whatever that are happy that if I’m sending them my papers that they will proofread and kind of help me correct, you know? Because after you, I know you know, after you’ve looked at it for so long you’re going to have comma splices and sentence fragments and things like that, you know? (Taylor)*
Finally, participants also seek financial support. In most cases, the participants receive financial aid, which means that they actually fill out an application and request aid. Other participants take out loans to help pay bills and other expenses. Again, participants have to actively seek out these loan opportunities. Still, some participants ask family for financial help. Savannah shares her experience:

*Oh, yeah. My sister actually financially helped me pay for child care prior to getting DSS assistance. I paid her back once I got the money in my account. I paid her in increments, but I paid it all back and she was just like, “Wow, this is definitely...” you know? And she was just, like, proud of me. She’s, like – because normally I would borrow money and just whatever, but I made sure I paid it back if not in full, then in increments of however – how much I could afford. She’s amazing though. She – I didn’t say this earlier, but I actually have four kids. She adopted two at birth so they’re actually her – I gave birth. I’m the birth mother, but I’m not their mom. She’s their mom.* (Savannah)

Participants convey that asking for help (support), regardless of the type (emotional, instrumental, financial, or academic) is not easy. However, participants who have been in school a semester or two have learned to be more intentional in seeking the particular kinds of support they need. Alice and Kesha expound:

*Definitely more social than I used to be. I’ll reach out for help more, before I was more of a “If I don’t understand it, I’m never going to understand it” type person. I wouldn’t just go ask someone else, a classmate or go to the tutoring, ask for help.* (Alice)
If you’re not going to get the support that you need with the ones that are around you, you need to surround yourself with people that will support you. That’s how I see that. If you’re going to constantly bring me down, I don’t want to be around you, you need to go somewhere else. Even if that is, even if you are my husband, you could support me in other ways that you think you are and I will go over here to friends that are in a similar situation or understand or agree that what I’m doing is right. (Kesha)

In these excerpts, the participants reveal the different ways in which they find support. Some participants reveal a determined effort to find academic support by finding tutors or study partners. Others describe emotional and instrumental support offered by family or church and community members. One participant explains how she meets with her entire extended family before each semester to organize care for her daughter and personal time for herself. One participant even creates a support group on campus. Several participants are involved in Circle of Sisters, a support group for female students. They talk about the camaraderie that they find with other members and how those relationships add a resource for support. Specifically, they enjoy knowing that there are other women who face similar challenges on whom they can call for guidance or support. The advisor of the group is a counselor at MCC, which offers an extra layer of support for the members. Several participants mention the advisor/counselor as a trusted mentor and counselor. Inasmuch as these women find ways to detach themselves from those who do not support them, they also put effort into finding those who will.
**B. Self-Encouragement**

In addition to acknowledging and gathering support and being encouraged by others, participants described strategies for self-encouragement. This could include reminding herself that she is worthy of the opportunity to be in college, that she can successfully complete a task, or that she can successfully navigate all roles and that she and her family will survive the experience.

Layla explains how she encourages herself:

> Yes. I like to make comments, I like to joke. I like to make learning fun. I’m not – it’s weird, maybe some people may think I am a teacher’s pet, but I’m not. It’s just I am so happy to be here. I’m just so appreciative, like, I cannot tell you, you know? I’ve seen women, I’ve seen [Sigh] – I’ve seen a woman that had tuberculosis: her husband left her in this country, she did not know any English; she lost half of her lungs; she was homeless because her husband just dropped her off at a hospital; she tried to commit suicide and this lady was learning English and just trying to make it. And I’m like, that lady… I mean, yeah, she’ll probably have, you know, a hard life most of her life, but if she’s overcoming that and making progress over all of that, you know? She didn’t even have papers, she’s illegal living here in this country and she’s going through all of that kind of stuff. You know, that just motivates me. That just… it says a lot. It just, you know, it’s like, wow. I’m just, like, grateful. (Layla)

Layla is American born and converted to Islam several years ago. Her husband is from Yemen. In her travels, she lived in New York for several years, and she talks about the horrible things she saw there. Here, Layla explains how grateful she is to have the
opportunity to learn. Even if her situation is difficult because her husband works 7 days a week and she feels like a single mother, and even if she and her father are estranged because her father doesn’t support her, she is still grateful to have the opportunity for higher education. Here, Layla talks about the importance of having a journal to chronicle personal and academic goals:

*Mhmm, you know, but at the same time have a big goal, but put it down and don’t look at it every day, but look at it, like, once a month, you know? Just to remind yourself; but not, like, every single day be like, “Oh, I still have four years... still have three years... still have two years!” Don’t look at it like that, you know? Write it down in a journal – and that’s another way that I manage a lot of things. Nobody told me to do that and sometimes I don’t even do it, but there are certain days that are so bad I don’t feel like I have anybody to talk to. I actually have a USB at home on my computer, on my laptop – I don’t trust anybody, I have it hidden. I will write things down on my computer because it’s easier and just save it and just put it away. And there’s some times I look back and I’m like, “Oh my God, I was going through that at that time? I’m not even through that.” You know, like, I might not even... I think my situation’s bad now and then when I go back and I read some of the stuff I’m like, “Well, I was in a worse situation so...”* (Layla)

Layla uses her journal to remind her that life is getting better and she has already overcome obstacles in her life. This practice is a way of encouraging herself to continue in school and to build confidence.
Jessie’s self-encouragement is a reaction to those who tell her that she will not succeed. Instead of allowing their negativity to lower her self-confidence, she uses it as motivation to “prove them wrong”:

Like I have… like my children’s father and just other friends and some family members. I have a couple of family members that are like, “Oh I’m so proud of you!” but it seems to be that there’s more that are like, “Well you’re not going to do anything” you know? And it just gives me the mindset that I’m going to do it. I’m going to prove you wrong. (Jessie)

Like Layla and Jessie, Sharon uses self-encouragement to gain perspective:

“[Sigh] This is just crazy schedule, it doesn’t work and I don’t have enough time and I want another twenty-four hours!” And then I’m like, “You have nothing to complain.” Like there are other people whose schedules are even worse than yours, so it’s just going back and thinking about those people who don’t have the main support right next to them. (Sharon)

Sharon talks herself out of depression or feeling discouraged as a student. She reminds herself of the positive aspects of her life and thinks about others who have a more difficult situation than she does.

Tonya’s self-talk is also a form of motivation:

Because I feel like, like I said, there’s going to be a better day, somewhere along the way, but don’t quit doing what you want to do or accomplish your dreams because you have these boulders in the way. Because if you – I have faith and I believe in God
so I believe that whatever I’m going through that eventually at some point in time that it’s going to get better. It has to. That’s just what I believe. (Tonya)

Tonya’s self-encouragement involves her belief system, and she feels encouraged that eventually, things will get better. Her self-encouragement helps her to endure the difficult moments.

Savannah uses self-encouragement to help her find balance:

I’m very proud of myself. At the beginning, I was an A striver constantly. A, A, A, A, A. then I realized I was overwhelming myself and I’m not saying that that – I mean, I was doing better than my best if that makes any sense. Like I was pushing myself over and I wasn’t giving myself any time to, like, relax or, you know, have any kind of outside outlet. And so this last semester in the Spring I realized, just do your best, not better than your best. Just do your best don’t overachieve, you know, overanalyze, overwhelm. You know, all those “over” words, I had to ex all of them out. (Savannah)

Savannah is struggling to balance being an excellent student and an excellent mother. Eventually, she gains perspective and decides that earning As is not as important as feeling balanced. Her self-encouragement helps her to find that perspective and retain it. She goes on to explain:

You are what, you know, so if I’m thinking in my head, “Damn, I can’t believe I failed that test. I’m such a loser.” That’s what I’m going to feel like. If I say in my mind, “Okay, I did my best and that’s what I got. Next time I’ll just try to do better or I’ll attempt to do better.” so I mean, just staying positive, you know? And being your own cheerleader. (Savannah)
The participants mentioned in this section are being “their own cheerleader” as Savannah explains. Having a positive outlook is essential to finding balance and maintaining it. Others can belittle their efforts, but if the participants can remain positive, they have increased self-confidence and are better equipped to persist. Sonja adds:

*I keep telling myself I can and I have to stay positive because if I start moping or start thinking negative then nothing will come out right so I try to keep my head up high and, you know, like, take it one day at a time.* (Sonja)

Sonja is her own cheerleader. She motivates herself to stay positive, as does Jordan:

*I've learned, probably about two years ago, that I don’t let anything stress me out. I’ll be thinking it, but I was like, you know, “Don’t think about it, it’s going to be what it's going to be.” You know?* (Jordan)

Staying positive doesn’t always mean avoiding the possible moments of frustration that come with being a female adult learner:

*Participant1: It’s like once a month you have to have that half an hour/an hour, crying, crying, crying. That’s what I do and then after that I’m like, “Okay, I feel much better. Okay, let’s move on.” That’s it.* (FG2)

This participant has an awareness of her own needs. She allows herself the time to cry or purge her emotions, and then she talks herself back into that positive frame of mind.

Some people actually talk out loud to themselves:

*Tara: Okay. So do you know people – you said that you feel that same guilt that Kendra has talked about and maybe some of your friends here have as well, but do*
you ever stop to deal with that kind of emotion? Do you ever talk about it or do you just try to plow through it?

Taylor: I usually talk about it to myself. [Laugh]

TARA: You do?

Taylor: That’s weird, I’m sorry. I talk to myself. I ask myself questions and answer them too so... It’s just part of a thought process. You know, because a lot of times whenever I deal with it I’m sitting at home by myself, the kids are at school, [my husband is] at work.

The examples of self-encouragement here are varied. One participant admits to having conversations with herself out loud. Another describes writing in a journal. Still others explain the self-encouragement process that happens internally as they encourage themselves, reminding themselves that they can accomplish their goals. Staying positive in the face of adversity is an important strategy for effective role navigation.

Support Gathering and Self-Encouragement help participants build confidence that they can navigate roles successfully and earn their degree. In some ways, these strategies affect participants’ emotional well-being. Another strategy that participants employed in an effort to remain positive involves avoidance, which means avoiding negative feelings like guilt and also avoiding negative people.

C. Avoidance

Negative emotions, such have the potential to derail participants, taking their focus off of their families and studies. Thus, participants engage in avoidance during which they
avoid dealing with their own feelings or stress. These are participant responses when asked how they deal with guilt and stress:

*Layla: Just kind of... a lot of the times I don’t deal with it. I’m, like, I really don’t because – like the way she did, she just keeps it moving because don’t, like, I try not to get too deep in my thoughts or my feelings or stuff because I’m, like, I might just break down or I feel I just try to keep it moving, just keep it moving, you know? Try not to dive in too deep and try to keep a very positive outlook, try, you know, see some hope, see the end of the tunnel, you know – or the light at the end of the tunnel – and that’s what helps me out (Layla).*

Layla explains how addressing her feelings could make her “break down”, which could stop her from moving forward. For her, this is a strategy for remaining positive. In the same context, Maria describes herself as an “internalist”:

*So I do talk with my friend about it, but mostly I’m kind of an internalist. I put everything in. that’s me and I need to learn to stop doing that and let it out so that’s what I’m trying to work on. (Maria)*

Maria admits that the practice of being an internalist is not a healthy one. Savannah also hides her stress. She says, “What do I do to handle stress? I bottle it up”. Savannah has been on a journey of recovery and understands the need to mediate emotions to help reach goals.

*Alicia admits that she doesn’t deal with her emotions well:

*I don’t think I deal with stress very well. Sometimes I just... I try to blank it out. I try to just, like – and [my counselor/advisor] will [indecipherable] at it – build up inside and then it slowed. That’s how she explains it, like a ticking time bomb. And so*
sometimes I just think that she’s very helpful, I know she has an ear, you know, she’s always willing to listen, but sometimes I think like [Sigh] oh, I have another issue to talk to her about. You know, God, is she tired of me coming to her like this? You know, sometimes I think, you know, I’m being worrisome and, you know, it’s just like well, maybe I’ll just keep that to myself and deal with it later. And then I’ll come to her and explode, tears, just frustrated, you know, lost. When really I could’ve just pulled it out piece by piece and had her walk me through it, but I really do not deal with stress very well. (Alicia)

Alicia is one of the few participants who says that she utilizes counseling services on campus. In this excerpt, she sees the value in speaking to her counselor, yet she still tries to deal with her emotions on her own. Alicia tries to “blank it out” as if this will make her stress and emotions disappear or make them less of a hindrance.

Haley shares similar feelings about dealing with emotions:

I guess I just stuff it away and just try to do better. Just try to do the best I can and just know that there ain’t but so much I can do, I mean, I ain’t but one person and there ain’t but twenty-four hours in a day which is not enough. (Haley)

For Haley, “stuffing it away” is a way of managing her challenges. By saying that she’s only one person, Haley conveys that perhaps she is taking on more than one person can handle. Thus, when she faces negative emotions, she simply puts them aside and reminds herself that she is doing all that she can.

In a focus group, participants discussed the idea of emotion avoidance:
Participant 1: I don’t talk about it because it’s just another thing that’s going to bring me down to that level. And I do have problems with depression and anxiety so for me to just kind of open up that wound because… it’s just hard.

Participant 2: I feel the same way. I really feel like I really don’t have time to feel guilty. This is something that I need to do because when I get it done hopefully this is better, me and my child’s life. (FG2)

The participants express the need to stifle their emotions and their guilt or frustration rather than to deal with it openly. Some say that they just do not have time to deal with it. Dealing with negative emotions takes energy and may require participants to question their own motivations to return to school. In addition, emotions like guilt are difficult to control. For female adult learners, locus of control is very important. Giving into emotions that are uncontrollable may negatively affect the stability of the female adult learner. Even speaking to a counselor about the negative emotions could open a proverbial can of worms that could take the woman out of that controlled zone and into an uncontrollable emotional spiral. Interestingly, Alicia does speak occasionally to her counselor/advisor on campus, but she often feels an added layer of guilt for constantly expressing her frustrations to the counselor. Thus, even if students have an outlet or a resource at the college, they may not consistently utilize it.

Here, avoidance is the practice of avoiding one’s emotions. It’s a way of trying to remain positive, though it is not necessarily a healthy strategy. Having a support group for women or encouraging them to seek counseling may be a way to help the women deal with emotions instead of avoiding them. Though participants in this study did not describe any
negative effects of avoidance, this may be a result of the avoidance in action. In the interviews, participants were asked to acknowledge the feelings that they have been trying to avoid. They were asked to describe guilt and stress, and many participants cried during the interviews. This process in some ways required participants to ignore their efforts to avoid the feelings. It is possible that they were not as forthcoming in the interviews as they could have been because they were trying to apply avoidance.

Another strategy for reducing negativity is detachment from non-supporters. Detachment is the act of detaching from negative forces, especially negative people. This is one way to avoid stress. Women realize that they are faced with great challenges to meet the needs of their families as well as the obligations of school. Through many of the navigation techniques, the women try to maintain a positive outlook and encourage themselves that they can succeed. Detaching from negative forces means steering away from people who are not supporters. Fewer of the participants discussed detachment. Interestingly, few participants had actual instances of detachment, which indicates that perhaps society in general is more supportive of the FAL desire to earn a college degree. However, it is important to note that some participants encouraged the fictional female adult learners in the vignettes to detach from non-supporters rather than give up on the desire/dream to go to college, even when that non-supporter is a spouse or parent. For Layla, her father was not necessarily a non-support of her desire to go to college, but he did represent a negative force in her life, so she detached in order to reduce negativity and increase her own self-confidence.
Some participants chose to detach from non-supporters to avoid the emotional sting and possible derailment by those who pose as obstacles. Layla describes how she deliberately detaches from her father because his behavior added stress to her life:

My dad, I’m currently not talking to him right now. I was talking to him while I was going to school and I found out there was something – he just keeps making some jokes, like Islamic jokes, Muslim jokes. And, like, he’ll text me – like, there was an issue not too long ago. Every time there’s an issue in the Middle East or there’s American soldiers (he was in the military for a long time) he will text me the news and just make jokes and enough is enough, you know? And I found out that he had said something that was very... and I was just like, “This negativity I don’t need right now.” I’m not saying I’m never talking to my dad again, but I told my mom, “Right now I just need to focus on school. I need to take a break from Dad. I’m not saying I don’t love him.” This morning I woke up and I thought - it’s funny because I actually woke up this morning and I said, “Maybe I should try to just...” – he doesn’t let me talk. He will not listen like the way you are kind of thing, he just interrupts me, but maybe, I was thinking I could send him in a text, like, “If you’re ready to show me some respect we can have, you know, a relationship, but if not I don’t like the way things are.” (Layla)

For Layla, she doesn’t have space in her life for that kind of stress right now. She mentions that as her life becomes less stressful, she may have room for her father, but for now, she has to remove him from her life.

Jessie talks about her detachment from people who have chosen to not support her:
I had someone tell me – because it was a family member and I said, “I’m thinking about going into nursing” – and they said, “I don’t think you’d be a good nurse. You can’t handle the sight of blood.” I said, “What makes you think that?” Because, you know, I’m a woman, I’ve had to deal with all kinds of stuff and now being a mom I’m taking things in my hand that I never, ever would’ve reached out to before. And so I just told the person that had told me that, I’m like, “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” Because they just assume that, “Oh, you don’t want to do that. That’s a nasty job. That’s – you’re going to have to deal with people being sick or people that you don’t want to put your hands on.” And I’m thinking, “I’ve seen people like that at family reunions…” that I didn’t want to talk to or go up and give them a hug and stuff like that. But, you know, I try not to fuss at anybody that tries to discourage me, but I just, I won’t talk to them. I won’t. (Jessie)

Yeah, because some people can be very discouraging and some people don’t really mean to come across that way. They just are thinking they’re helping you to see their side, their views, but when they discourage or when they said things that discourage you it makes you not want to call and share, “Hey, I made good on my test grade!” or “I got accepted into the medical assisting program!” or “My GPA is this!” (Jessie)

And like in my case, I try to ignore family members that say, “You’re not going to do anything. I don’t know why you’re doing that.” So I don’t call them and then when they say, “Oh, I haven’t heard from you in so long!” I’m thinking, “Well, you know,
if you were a little bit nicer and more support...” And it’s not like I’m asking, “Can you send me a hundred dollars for gas?” (Jessie)

Yeah, they’re not one of the people that I call and say, “Hey, I made a ninety-seven on my test!” I’m thinking, “I made this ninety-seven to prove them wrong.” (Jessie)

For Jessie, detachment is a form of survival and motivation. She refuses to share the positive parts of her life with anyone who has shown a lack of support.

Alice and Kesha discuss detachment in response to the vignette about Jamie whose husband and parents are not supportive of her efforts to return to school.

Alice: I say kick him to the curb. [Laugh]

TARA: You say kick him to the curb? The husband? [Laugh]

Alice: Yes! Bye! See you later! [Laugh]

TARA: Yeah, that’s, I mean...

Alice: That’s awful.

Yes. Oh gosh, yes. If you’re not going to get the support that you need with the ones that are around you, you need to surround yourself with people that will support you. That’s how I see that. If you’re going to constantly bring me down, I don’t want to be around you, you need to go somewhere else. Even if that is, even if you are my husband, you could support me in other ways that you think you are and I will go over here to friends that are in a similar situation or understand or agree that what I’m doing is right. (Kesha)
Though the participants themselves may not have experienced the lack of support that requires detachment, they advise others to detach if faced with non-supporters.

Some of these participants describe situations in which they have stepped away from a relationship simply because the person did not support her efforts to return to school. In one of the excerpts, the participant advises (in terms of Jamie’s vignette) that if a woman’s husband refuses to be supportive, she should just leave him. In these cases, the detachment is not a result of anger toward the other person. Instead, it is a reaction to the emotional stress caused by the lack of support. These women need to feel confident in their ability to be mother, student, spouse, etc., and when others doubt that ability, they begin to doubt it as well.

In this study, participants discussed their experiences as female adult learners in community college and revealed perceptions of multiple roles and the strategies they use to navigate them. This chapter illustrates the findings from those interviews and focus groups. The section on female adult learner perceptions of multiple roles shows that women perceive a shift in the paradigm of traditional gender roles, they focus most on the mother role, they tightly link their role as a student to their role as a mother, and they find that there is no way to delegate that someone else step into the student role and, thus, they choose to delegate the mother role instead when faced with conflict among those roles. The second section of findings focused on the female adult learner strategies for navigating multiple roles. These strategies were divided into two sub-sections: a) Strategies for Staying in Control and Setting Boundaries: Strategic Planning, Sacrificing, and Separating the Spheres and b) Strategies for
Staying Positive: Support Gathering, Self-Encouragement, Avoidance. The next chapter will situate these findings in other female adult learner research and literature.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This case study focused on female adult learners in community colleges who are also mothers and explored their perception and navigation of multiple roles. Interviews and focus group data from participants at two community colleges revealed role perceptions and navigation strategies. Some of these findings are extensions of findings from previous literature while others are new to female adult learner research. This chapter will situate the findings from this study into the existing literature on female adult learners, community colleges, and role theory.

Perception

School IS Cool! The Paradigm Shift in Student Support

Earlier literature suggests that the social acceptance of traditional gender roles has kept women from returning to college and persisting in their efforts (Hayes, 2000a); yet more current research reveals a change in those beliefs and trends (Spence & Hahn, 1997; Twenge, 1997). For example, in their 1997 study, Spence and Hahn reflect on previous research conducted in 1982: “We were gratified to find that the trend toward egalitarianism found in our earlier study (Helmreich et al, 1982) continued in the groups tested in 1992.” Spence and Hahn focus specifically on the change in attitudes toward women over time, and they found that although women were more nontraditional in their egalitarian beliefs, the change among men and women over a decade was similar in magnitude. They offer:

Psychometric considerations aside, the AWS (Attitude Toward Women Survey) and other similar instruments mirror genuine changes in publicly expressed attitudes that
have taken place over the course of the last 3 decades in most segments of society. In actual behaviors, genuine progress has also been made toward breaking down gender barriers, although the changes in behavior lag behind the level of endorsement of egalitarian beliefs” (p.31)

In other words, the move toward egalitarian practices among the genders is slower than the move toward egalitarian beliefs. Spence and Hahn (1997) concede, however, that old fashioned sexism was still evident in the college students who participated in their study, and they were concerned that the politics of the late 1990s would incite a return of such sexism.

Hayes (2000a) found evidence that women were ignored, overpowered, or oppressed and cautioned that a return to college might cause conflict for women in the home. Hayes found that the social patriarchal structure was prevalent in the home and contributed to identity conflict for women who tried to have a career or return to school. Participants in this study did not reveal conflict regarding the decision to return to school, and instead felt supported in their choice to go to college. The social patriarchal structure may be less apparent as a social norm, signaling a paradigm shift. However, the patriarchal structure may continue to exist on some level in the home, which may, as an institution, be less amenable to change than society as a whole. In other words, the paradigm shift may be slower to manifest in the home than in society in general which may explain the reason why families support women’s return to school, but may not fully offer the instrumental support needed to maintain the home when the woman takes on new roles.

Twenge (1997) conducted a meta-analysis of attitudes toward women from 1970 – 1995 and found that the “social climate for women has changed considerably since the
Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS; Spence & Helmreich, 1972) was developed in the early 1970s, but the pattern of change in AWS scores throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s is unclear” (p. 35). The AWS scores were collected from undergraduate student surveys, and Twenge explains, “Scores show a steady trend toward more liberal/feminist attitudes, with no appreciable reversal or slowdown during the 1980s. Gender differences steadily increased from 1970 to 1985 and decreased from 1986 to 1995. Southern samples were marginally more conservative and traditional.” (Twenge, 1997, p. 35) Twenge’s findings regarding southern attitudes are important. The research study was conducted in the southern United States. Thus, the attitudes toward women at these schools may still be more traditional than in other parts of the country. It should also be noted that of the two sites, one of the community colleges was in a town with an Airforce base. Many of the community college students in that town are not from that town. They are, instead, spouses of Airforce members. Thus, Southern belief systems may not apply to these particular situations.

Twenge (2001) studied women’s assertiveness as an indicator of changing values and beliefs. Twenge noted the increase of mothers in the labor force in the 1980s and its effect on the acculturated belief systems of young girls.

Thus, a girl growing up in the 1950s received very different views of women’s status compared with a girl growing up in the 1980s. It is thus important to view women’s educational attainment and work roles not just as individual behaviors, but as trends that create an overall environment. (Twenge, 2001, p. 134)

According to Twenge, the change in women’s attendance and persistence in college is a reflection of a larger change in accepted societal beliefs and values. Twenge cautions that
these beliefs can fluctuate depending on current social politics. However, the participants in my study suggest that in 2013, women feel entitled to a college education and feel that it is socially acceptable for them to attend college. Though they may face challenges associated with role navigation, the perception of the female role has changed in a way that supports a return to school. No AWS studies were found for the current decade, but this case study suggests that the trends that Spence and Hahn (1997) and Twenge (1997) described have continued into the new century. Currently, we see women attending college in record numbers. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2013) shows that the percentage increase for enrollment of women in undergraduate postsecondary education has been higher than that of men. Currently, women make up 57 percent of total enrollment and men only 43 percent. This data indicates some change in social expectations for women. Other indicators also point to a change in the paradigm of social norms for women. In addition to NCES data, the expectation that women will return to school is evident in the programs created to support them. Women are encouraged to seek financial help through scholarships created just for women. Some community colleges also offer childcare and counseling services primarily for women, which may indicate that women’s return to college is more acceptable in current societal norms. Both of the community colleges in my study offered childcare for students, and one site offered a support organization for female students, which indicates these community colleges are aware of the growing number of women enrolled and are at least in part, aware of their needs. However, the belief that women should earn a college degree and the practices to support that belief may not always be synchronous.
Moen and Sweet (2004) discuss this paradigm shift, as well, and explain that the shift is not fluid. They examined the inequalities created in the inconsistencies in social beliefs and behaviors through life course research. They note:

One such concern is the persistence of the traditional male breadwinner, female homemaker template of family life and work life. The ramifications of this outdated conception of the family and workforce is compounded by a secondary belief in the standardized, lock-step life course that, for workers, is patterned after traditional male career paths (e.g. first education, then continuous full-time employment, then the continuous full-time ‘leisure’ of retirement). Increase in longevity, a global competitive economy, the rise of single-parent families, and the ascendency of the dual-earner couple as the new workforce and new family norm, are all creating mismatches and cultural contradictions between today’s realities and the existing rules of the game emanating from these taken-for-granted schema (see also Moen, 1994, 2003a; Riley, 1987, Riley et al, 1994). (p. 212)

Although Spence and Hahn (1997) and Twenge (1997) point to a change in cultural and social attitudes toward women, Moen and Sweet (2004) point to existing inequalities in beliefs and practices. Moen and Sweet (2004) show that though social beliefs have changed, practices such as those found in the workplace or in the academic sector have not. They point to specific issues in education:

At the university level, most schooling is still designed for a ‘young’ clientele without job responsibilities, even though 40 per cent of students enrolled in colleges or universities are age 25 or older. Growing numbers of both men and women are
returning to school as a path to shift careers or to continue educational career goals that have been interrupted by the demands of caring for children (Bradburn, Moen, & Dempster-McClain, 1996; Han & Moen, 1999a, 1999b; Sweet & Moen, 2003). These ‘nontraditional’ students face serious challenges managing the complexities of their work and family lives (Home, 1998; Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998). (Moen & Sweet, 2004, p. 215)

In 2004, Moen and Sweet were exploring a paradigm shift. They noted the shift in social beliefs but a lag in the matching of practice. They explain, “Our evidence, along with the evidence of others (e.g. Bailyn, 1993; Bailyn, Rapoport, & Fletcher, 2000; Moen, 1994, 2003a, 2003b; Riley et al., 1994; Williams, 2000), has shown that the twenty-first century represents a time of mismatch, but also of systemic, albeit uneven and uncertain, change.” (Moen & Sweet, 2004, p 215). This shift and the subsequent issues of “mismatching” are evident in this case study. The participants in this study are realizing the consequences of systemic change in that they are well supported to attend college by family and friends, and the community colleges they chose to attend offer some resources for women. However, the lack of instrumental support from home and the lack of flexibility by their instructors illustrate the lag between a change in beliefs and practices.

Buchman, Diprete, and McDaniel (2007) explored gender inequalities in education and found that for the second half of the 20th century, women have gained the college advantage. They write:

[S]tandard-of-living and insurance-against-poverty returns to higher education have risen faster for women than for men. Thus it is plausible that the female-favorable
trend in college completion may derive at least in part from student responses to 
gender-specific changes in the value of higher education.

The authors point to institutional factors that have also likely influenced a paradigm shift. These include changes in life-course trajectories for women and men, declining discrimination against women, and the growth of community colleges. Buchman, Diprete and McDaniel (2007) add, “In the US, there have been large changes in gender-role attitudes in recent decades with the clear trend of declining numbers of Americans expressing support for traditional gender roles and far greater numbers expressing more egalitarian views (Brewster & Padavic, 2000; Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004)”. (p. 23). Thus, a paradigm shift for women in postsecondary education has been a process of change among societal groups as well as institutions, yet there are still gaps in the road from belief to practice. Regardless, the existence of a paradigm shift itself is clear among scholars and is evident in the findings of recent studies. In 2010, Kirby et al, found that 70 of their 185 participants “indicated that they received support and cooperation from their family. This was stronger for respondents with partners (20%) than those without partners (6%). Many reported that attending school enriched family life.” (p.73)

Edwards (2013) also published findings that support a paradigm shift:

[T]here were students whose spouses or adult children were not only supportive of the nontraditional-aged students, but were either responsible for suggesting that the student attend school or made changes or major sacrifices in their own lives for the adult students to be able to focus and concentrate on their obligations as students. Those very supportive situations were mainly described by students who were
middle-aged women, married, middle-aged men, gainfully employed immigrants struggling with the English language, or adults of any age who had forgone their educations or careers to spend time as homemakers. (Edwards, 2013, p. 113)

Edwards’s findings are consistent with current findings in this study. Participants describe spouses and family members who encouraged them to return to school even when they had doubts.

Studies over the years show a trend toward more egalitarian attitudes toward women, particularly in the workforce and in education. However, as Moen and Sweet (2009) suggest, institutions are not a quick to align policies with the changes in social attitudes. A quick scan of programs and scholarship offerings suggests that colleges (community colleges in particular) are more aware of the paradigm shift and offer more services to support women in their return to school; however, these programs are only a small sample of what could be done for female adult learners.

The Unbreakable Venn Diagram: The Unique Integration Among the Roles of Mother and Student

This study found that participants tightly link their roles as mothers and students. When given the opportunity to discuss any and all roles that they felt they upheld, participants focused most on the byplay between the mother and student roles. In Chapter 4, this link was described as the “Unbreakable Venn Diagram”, suggesting that the roles do not just overlap; they are integrally bound to each other. Participants explained that they decided to return to school to either provide a better lifestyle for their children or to set a good example for their children. In some cases, these motivations were coupled with other
motives, but the focus for participants in this study was the effect that returning to school would have on their children.

   Literature that focuses on multiple roles doesn’t adequately illustrate or define the places where one role ends and another begins. The boundaries of roles are less fixed than some role theory studies suggest (Goode, 1960). In 2002, Colbeck discussed role integration pertaining to faculty and described the roles as blended.

   In 2006, Gatmaitan explored the effect of school on single mother students (SMS). Gatmaitan (2006) found that SMS “place importance on their education and on obtaining their degree while also placing priority on the needs and future needs of their children when making their decision to return/attend/continue their journey. (p. 46). Gatmaitan’s participants cited family issues as both barriers to education and motivators to education. Of motivation, Gatmaitan explains:

   Through my conversations with all twelve SMS, I discovered two distinct sources of their motivation and persistence. First, all SMS interviewed for this study had prior positive college or university experiences that gave them the feeling that they could endure their journey as SMS at UTA. Second, all SMS acknowledged that family issues such as “being a good example (role model)” for their children and being able to secure better opportunities in the future were the two most important aspects of their persistence through college. (Gatmaitan, 2006, p. 69)

Though Gatmaitan specifically studied students who were single mothers, I found that the same motivations were apparent for student mothers who were also married and/or engaged to be married. All of the participants in this study are mothers. Some are single mothers.
Some are married or engaged, but all are mothers, and these findings suggest that the motivation that Gatmaitan attributed to single mothers is true for other student-mothers, as well.

In addition, Gatmaitan’s participants felt conflict in the student/mother roles: These women experienced a feeling of being simultaneously pushed to continue their education for the sake of their children and being pulled back by their sentiment of responsibility for their children. The women who experienced the push/pull effect reported feeling conflicted about their college journey, guilt from being away from their children, and doubt. Yet, these women persisted in their journey through college despite their conflicted feelings. These SMS derive strength from their role as mothers, which “enables them to withstand the difficulties typically faced in adjusting to the academic and social demands of college life” (Tinto, 1987, p. 124).

(Gatmaitan, 2006, p. 71)

The push/pull effect that Gatmaitan describes is the result of this study’s findings that the two roles are tightly linked. When women link their role as a student to their role as a mother, which this study suggests, then women experience the push/pull effect that Gatmaitan describes. Though the linking of the two roles offers motivation for female adult learners to persist, the mother and student roles do not operate synchronously and are sometimes at odds with one another. Sharon, a participant in this study, describes feeling conflict when her son wants her to go to his surgery but her instructor wants her to be in class. If she goes to her son’s surgery, in her mind, she is not doing her best as a student which may set a less than ideal example for her son. However, if she goes to her class and doesn’t go to her son’s
surgery, then she is disappointing her son. In both cases, in the mind of the participant, there is a consequence that negatively affects her child. If Sharon could separate the roles of mother and student, perhaps she would feel less conflict or perhaps she would have made a different choice (ultimately she chose to go to the lab and miss her son’s surgery). But because she sees her role as a student as an extension of her role as a mother, Sharon feels conflicted when forced to choose between the two.

Gatmaitan (2006) also found that success and self-efficacy in the individual roles of mother and student depends somewhat on the other. Gatmaitan’s findings not only address SMS choice to return to school but also the reasons they persist. “Not only did these SMS believe the benefits of having a college degree would allow them to secure a better future for their children, they also believed that their journey itself, their persistence despite unaccommodating circumstances, would set a good example for their children.” (Gatmaitan, 2006, p.71) Though Gatmaitan is speaking specifically about single mothers, this may explain why female adult learners persist even when faced with situational, emotional, and financial barriers. Other explanations for female adult learner persistence may include dream fulfillment, pride and not wanting to be considered a failure, taking advantage of current funding, and lack of other options. Another option to consider involves the psychological effects of returning to school. Making the choice to return to school means making sacrifices. Women who return to school may fully understand that they will have to sacrifice time with their children. By connecting the roles of mother and student and saying that they are returning to school for their children, these women may be working to alleviate the guilt of taking time away from their children to pursue a personal dream. In other words, they
may be subconsciously associating the two roles to avoid feeling selfish and consequential guilt.

In the study of single mother students, Gatmaitan (2006) found the mother role, in relation to the student role, to be multidimensional:

Throughout the interviews, the women continually attributed the pursuit of their college degree to wanting to secure a better future for their children. Essentially, their college degree was for their children. Many SMS realized that a college education was not a panacea, but that it would eventually benefit them by allowing them access to more resources. In general, the family was the driving force that both motivated the SMS to enroll and continue their education and simultaneously made their college experience difficult. (Gatmaitan, 2006, p. 101)

Gatmaitan found that the mother role is often both the motivator and the barrier to college for single mothers. While the findings from this study mirror those of Gatmaitan’s, this study illustrates the strength of the bond between the two roles.

Gatmaitan points to the push/pull effect that the roles of student and mother have on the learner. This study supports Gatmaitan’s findings and further suggests that the strength of one role relies on the strength of the other. For the participants in this study, being a student is very much about being a good mother. The one role was born of the other. In the same way that children are often extension of their parents, the student role is an extension of the mother role.
Pearish (2006) explains why women may subconsciously link the roles of mother and student:

In order to keep from falling prey to the limiting attitude of having to “balance” life’s demands, both Kegan (2000) and Secretan (2000) suggest using a strategy of not thinking about “balancing,” but instead “integrating” competing life responsibilities. They suggest that school, work and family be viewed as a single unit rather than as separate entities. The students must realize that rather than taking from one priority and adding to another they are just temporarily focusing on one aspect of improving their lives as a whole. By thinking differently, cognitive research suggests they may more adequately meet the demands of society as a whole. (p. 18)

The notion of role integration is important to the overall understanding of how roles coexist. Literature on role theory tends to separate roles with strict boundaries without recognizing the strength of byplay between them. Even concepts such as “role contagion” and “role overload” illustrate roles as singular entities rather than a fabric of responsibilities that often overlap and integrate with blurred lines.

Findings from this study indicate that female adult learners do in fact integrate roles to some degree. Though some discuss ways to separate spheres as a form of navigation, they also describe the student role as an extension of the mother role. They note that sacrificing and spending time away from their children to study will benefit their children in the long run. The cognitive map that they have created links the mother and student role in a way similar to Kegan (2000) and Secretan (2000) suggest. However, as Moen and Sweet (2004) contend, institutional practices are not always aligned with the psychological needs and
beliefs of the student. As we will see in the Delegation Dilemma section, there are institutional barriers that keep female adult learners from truly integrating the two roles.

The institution plays an important role in the context of these findings when we consider that in 2011, over 4 million women were enrolled in a public community college in the U.S., which is over half of the total enrollment in community colleges for 2011, and more than 20% of the total enrollment in all postsecondary institutions (NCES, Table 230). In addition, over 60% of community college students are characterized as “independent”, meaning that they are no longer financially dependent on their parents, and over 50% of community college students in 2003-2004 were over the age of 23 (NCES: Spotlight, 2013). Women, who now, because of the paradigm shift, feel supported in returning to college, are choosing community colleges. Community colleges that offer childcare and female support organizations seem to understand the needs of their students, but only to an extent. It seems that community colleges struggle to offer necessary student services yet retain academic rigor by remaining inflexible in the classroom. Community colleges need to see the importance of the mother/student link.

The glue that links the mother and student roles together so strongly is the notion of self-efficacy. Participants in this study explained that being a good student and succeeding as a student made them feel as if they were succeeding as a mother. Participants were motivated to return to school and persist in school because they wanted to set a good example for their children regarding the value of education and the value of hard work and they wanted to provide a better lifestyle and future for their children. Dropping out of school permanently or not doing well academically would be a reflection of their efforts as a parent.
Failing in college would mean failing to set a good example for their children and failing to provide a better lifestyle for their children. Thus, self-efficacy as a mother is linked to self-efficacy as a student.

Van Rhijn (2012) suggests that self-efficacy and the notion of success should be considered more holistically.

Motivation, goals, and self-efficacy beliefs each play a role in contributing to success. For student parents, success can be defined in domain-specific ways such as school-related success (e.g., grades, course completions, program completion) or family-related success (e.g., family functioning, relationship quality). It is possible, however, that student parents define success in a more holistic fashion. The question becomes, what does “student parent success” mean? In other words, what does it mean to be successful in the multiple domains and roles that student parents inhabit? Perhaps success has to do with individual perceptions of feeling balanced or capable of dealing with the various demands of one’s life in addition to feedback from important others as to one’s role performance. (p. 10)

According to Van Rhijn (2012), motivation is one component often left out of role conflict theory but is important for understanding the byplay among roles. Van Rhijn explains, “Examination of their experiences in only the school context or only the family context is insufficient. Rather, it is important to consider the experiences of “student parents,” recognizing that the roles are never truly separate, but are intertwined. Van Rhijn claims that Donaldson and Graham’s (1999) “life-world environment” model and MacFadgen’s (2008) more holistic model of understanding the relationship between multiple roles are deficient
because they focus only on academic success and not “student parent success”. Van Rhijn calls for a theoretical model that examines the interplay among all roles, including motivation and self-efficacy as possible factors among roles.

Using Possible Selves Theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986), Van Rhijn (2012) explored decision-making and motivation among adult student parents:

Student parents seemed to be quite willing to work through difficult situations now in order to achieve their ideal selves in the future. In many ways, the ability to envision their idealized future selves seemed to provide student parents with the motivation to make necessary, and often challenging, behavioral choices today. These future selves provided more than simply individual motivation; rather, student parents also shared their ambitions with the important people in their lives to have a shared vision for an idealized future self that included those important people. Their idealized future selves were quite strongly connected to their relationships with these other people, especially their children. (p. 65)

The shared vision of the possible self indicates that what a student parent does as a student greatly affects stakeholders in other roles. Again, this points to a strong bond between the two roles as well as an understanding that success in one role affects self-efficacy in another.

In a recent comparison of nontraditional and traditional college-age student mothers, Wilsey (2013) cautions against role disassociation:

By disassociating the student role from the mothering role, educators may be largely unaware of student mothers’ primary motivation in attending and succeeding in higher education. Additionally, a prior study (Burns & Gabrich, 2001) on our campus
indicated that adult student mothers have a positive outlook regarding how their college enrollment affects their children. Although much research on the family lives of adult college students focuses on families as additional stressors, it is important to note that students’ families may also serve as significant motivators for college enrollment and achievement. (p. 209)

Among adult student literature, there is no consensus regarding a theory of understanding roles. There are suggestions, however, that role conflict theory is not sufficient for understanding adult student experiences, and there is a call for a more holistic understanding of interplay among roles. Understanding how one role affects or influences another can provide an avenue for understanding adult student decision-making. This study’s findings that female adult learners are motivated to return to college and persist in college by their desire to set good examples for their children and provide a better lifestyle for them in the future is consistent with recent literature on multiple roles and motivation. This study also supports research that suggests that self-efficacy and the notion of success are important factors for understanding role interplay and role navigation. Participants indicated that feeling successful as a student made them feel better about what they were sacrificing as a parent.

“I’m Always a Mom no Matter What I’m Doing”: The Mother Role as the Focal Point

The first two findings from this study relate to participant perspective. The first finding suggests a paradigm shift in how society views women’s return to college. Participants in this study feel supported and encouraged to return to school. The second finding suggests that the mother and student roles are tightly linked such that the action and
outcomes in one role affect the other. The third finding explores participants’ perceptions that the mother role is the focal role. In other words, of all of the roles in which participants engage, the mother role is the role that receives the most thought and attention and is the role around which other roles must plan.

Previous studies show that domestic roles place a disproportionate burden on women and blame family commitments as the reason that women are underrepresented in higher levels of career and academia. (Drago et al., 2006). Yet women continue to enter postsecondary education in record numbers. Coser (1974) points to the school and the family both as “greedy institutions,” yet as one participant explained, she is a mother always. Thus, the greedy institution of motherhood will outlast the greedy institution of academia. The institution of family involves more than just the role of mothering. It also involves the role of “wife” or “partner” (if the woman is married or living with a partner), as well as the domestic duties of cleaning, cooking, and managing the home. In some cases, the institution of family may also involve the roles of daughter, sister, daughter-in-law, or caregiver, depending on the student’s perspective about role obligations. However, when given the chance to discuss all of the aspects of domestic life and the challenges that they present as a female adult learner, the participants in this study focused more fully on the role of mother. There is something unique in the role of mother that doesn’t exist in the other roles. The emotional attachment to the role of mother makes it more pervasive and more secure.
This devotion to the role of mother is apparent in Gatmaitan’s (2006) study, as well. In Gatmaitan’s study of single mother students, she found:

A majority of SMS expressed experiencing a lack in study time. And although children were occasionally mentioned as an obstacle in getting study time in, none of the SMS mentioned wanting to cut back on child care responsibilities. Having children present when they needed to study only presented to be a minor issue. (p. 37)

Gatmaitan shows that though the women may have needed a quieter environment for studying, they did not want a quieter environment if that meant cutting back on their child care responsibilities. They were not willing to sacrifice their children’s contentment to support their own academic needs. These women would rather make sacrifices in their own academic life than to upset the harmony in their children’s lives. Thus, being a mother and providing for their children’s physical and emotional needs was their first priority.

Gatmaitan (2006) also found that single mother students would choose to not complete homework or extra credit assignments and would choose to forego studying when it interfered with the mother role. Her participants reported “feeling like mothers first” (p. 99), further supporting the finding from this study that the mother role is the focal role.

Pearish (2006) also points to the domestic role as most important. Pearish explains how Ziegler, Ebert, and Henry’s (2003) term “balancing of life’s responsibilities” is problematic:

The term “balancing” suggests taking away from one thing and moving it to another in order to make them equal. Since taking care of their families is often the primary concern of adult students, the term balancing means taking away from their families
in order to make their jobs and schooling of equal importance. Many adult students are not even willing to consider this concept and end up abandoning their academic endeavors. (p. 17)

Like Gatmaitan (2006), Pearish (2006) finds that the domestic role, or the role of mother, is the focal role. Adding the role of student, another “greedy institution”, creates conflict that may result in a potential student’s choice to not enroll in college or a current student’s choice to drop out.

Van Rhijn (2012) suggests that role salience is one way of understanding the hierarchy of student roles:

Participants did not see themselves as being successful if their success only occurred at school. The centrality of the family role with regards to being successful seemed to push the student role to a more secondary status. (p. 65)

Van Rhijn (2012) found that participants who had more salient domestic roles also had more salience in the student role. Thus, success in the student role depended upon the success in the parent role.

The finding that the mother role is the focal role instead of the student role may seem like an obvious finding. People may be apt to concede that of course the role of mother is most important because it is a long-term role as opposed to the role of student, and it is also the role with more responsibility. After all, being a mother means being responsible for another person’s life and well-being. However, a look at college policy shows a lack of accommodation for the mother role. Gatmaitan (2006) found that single mother students did not want to reveal to their instructors that they were mothers for fear of being treated
differently. The current study also found that participants are forced to make very difficult choices, sometimes having to choose school over their children because community college policies did not take motherhood into consideration as a student need and responsibility. To look closely at the reasons that female adult learners do not persist in community college means understanding their perspective of role navigation and how female adult learners value roles with respect to each other. Though the student role is tightly linked to the mother role, the mother role is still the most important role. It may help to explore this hypothetical question: If female adult learners were required to give up one of the roles, either the mother role or the student role, which would they give up? The findings in this study suggest that they would walk away from being a student but would not walk away from being a mother. This may be more an issue of identity. The mother role is a more defining role than the student role, and perhaps female adult learners more fully identify with the mother role than the student role. This does not discount the role of family. Though participants in this study chose the mother role as the most important role, all participants were mothers. Thus, for students who are not mothers, perhaps the family role is most important. In addition, women who have older children may have more flexibility to set the mother role aside and focus on the student role. The underlying reasons and psychological understandings of role attachment should be dealt with by other disciplines and in other ways to better understand the bonds between and among roles.

**Delegation Dilemma: Standing in for the Female Adult Learner**

The final finding in female adult learner perspectives relates to delegation and follows the first finding that women and society-at large continue to evolve in their perceptions of
women in higher education and the second finding that the student role is tightly linked to the mother role and that the student role has to align with the mother role. In this context, delegation occurs when a female adult learner has to ask someone else to step in and do the tasks that she would normally do in one role so that she can perform tasks in the other role. Goode (1960) refers to this as delegation (one of three types of role manipulation) and describes delegation as the form of role manipulation most used by women. However, as this study shows, conflicts in the student role make delegation difficult.

For example, Sharon shared her story about delegating her husband to go to her son’s surgery instead of herself so that she could go to her science lab. Sharon explains that because her young son would be under anesthesia, she felt the surgery was critical. She also recalls that her son asked her to come to the surgery and that she really felt that’s where she needed to be. However, Sharon says that the instructor felt that the lab was extremely important, even though he knew her situation with her son, and he encouraged her to come to the lab. Sharon could not be in both places at the same time, so she chose to delegate a replacement at the surgery. That delegate was her husband. And Sharon went to her lab. The delegation dilemma is that Sharon did not have the choice of choosing a replacement or stand-in for the lab. The role of student is to learn. In traditional ways, this requires that the student attend class, complete assignments, and take tests herself. However, there are a number of ways to address these items. With technology, students can attend class in real time via the internet. Instructors can also video classes so that students can watch them at a later date. Yet, according to Sharon, her instructor gave her no such options, and because policies of academic integrity forbid students from assigning proxies for student attendance
and work, Sharon attended the lab. Sharon felt that her role of mother was more important and felt she should be with her son, and even though she felt guilt for her choice afterward, she still felt that her only choice was to delegate that responsibility to her husband and for her to attend the lab.

Van Rhijn (2012) explains how forcing students to choose school over family can be detrimental to persistence:

The concept of school-family balance may also provide some explanation of school-related attrition. It is likely that student parents who feel unable to handle the demands in their lives or are getting feedback from important others that they are not meeting their role-related expectations (i.e., they are not balanced or successful) ultimately choose to reduce their demands. The student role is voluntary and typically related to future-oriented goals and is easier to withdraw from than either family or work roles. This underscores why research focusing on school-related success is insufficient to understand the behavioral choices and experiences of student parents, in particular attrition (i.e., stopping out or dropping out from school) or perseverance. (p. 10)

When students are forced to choose a delegate for their domestic roles, they experience guilt, which adds a level of stress to an already stressful situation. In addition, female adult learners may experience backlash from children or other family members for being absent from the domestic role, which also adds another level of stress. Van Rhijn continues:

The student role is generally more voluntary and less salient than the family role.

While there has been little research exploring reasons why student parents abandon
the student role, Bean and Metzner (1985) suggest that nontraditional students will drop out of their programs when experiencing undue stress, even when their academic outcomes are positive. (p. 65)

Part of the problem, Van Rhijn explains, is that student parents, “may be challenged by having contradictory goal aspirations; for example, being a good parent by spending time with children and being a good student by spending time completing school work” (p. 66).

The competition for time and resources is exacerbated when a student’s secondary role (student role) offers fewer options for compromise. In Sharon’s situation, she acknowledged that her role as mother was more important than her role as student, but school or instructor policy was inflexible. Because being successful as a student is tightly linked to being successful as a mother, and because she could delegate her responsibilities for the mother role, Sharon went to her science lab and chose the guilt of not being with her son during his surgery over the guilt of failing in school and ultimately failing in that part of her role as a mother. These are really tough decisions for parents to make. Miller (1976) discusses women’s tendency toward service of others, primarily men and children, and how this service-oriented identity creates both internal and external conflict for women. Likewise, Daloz (1988) explored female adult learners’ struggle to break free from the “tribe,” which is essentially their more traditional roles as mothers, wives, and caretakers, and how this breaking free forces some women to “lose their balance” in negotiating life roles and understanding their own beliefs and values. (p. 234). The change in social perception of women in higher education has opened more doors for women to break free from the tribe; however, as Sharon’s situation shows, negotiating the roles forces women to
review their beliefs and values and may require that they revise them or that they act against them.

An issue related to the idea of delegating in real life is an extension of the “can’t be in two places at one time” issue that many people face in their daily lives. When this problem occurs, a person is required to make some concessions, change their schedule, or choose a person to step in during one of the roles. Participants in this study describe choosing proxies to step in for them in their parenting role for events like school plays, doctor appointments, caring for a sick child, or attending surgeries. However, making the choice and feeling that it’s the best choice are two different concepts. Participants chose to delegate the responsibilities in their mother role because they could not delegate their responsibilities in the student role. This is not to say that schools should begin to allow proxies in the student role. Academic integrity should still be upheld. But school and instructor policies could be more flexible so that when the delegation dilemma occurs, female adult learners have options in the student role for rescheduling exams, labs, or other school activities.

**Navigation**

This study focused on two research questions. How do female adult learners perceive multiple roles and how do they navigate them? These two questions are linked because how female adult learners perceive multiple roles may inform how they navigate them. In this study, participants revealed several navigation strategies that were categorized as the following: a) Strategies for Staying in Control and Setting Boundaries: Strategic Planning, Sacrificing, and Separating the Spheres and b) Strategies for Staying Positive: Support Gathering, Self-Encouragement, and Avoiding Negativity. These are the strategies that the
participants used to navigate multiple roles. Yum, Kember, and Siaw (2005) refer to navigation strategies as “coping mechanisms” which include sacrifice, support, and negotiation. According to Pearish (2006):

- **Sacrifice** is giving something up for the sake of study. Support means finding an outside source to take on some of the tasks normally handled by the adult student.
- **Negotiation** is rearranging and prioritizing of life patterns in order to make time for studying. While there will of course be some overlapping, implementing these mechanisms within the important domains of self, work, family and social life may ease the anxiety of adult students as they try to fit attending college into their often already busy lives. (p.21)

Yum, Kember, and Siaw’s (2005) use of the term “coping” denotes a state of crisis. I have chosen to use the term “navigation” to provide a more neutral form of the concept because though there were times when participants in this study described being in a state of crisis, these instances were less common and certainly not categorical. More often, participants described a state of being that required thought and careful planning. Thus, navigation seems to be a more appropriate term than coping. In addition, the findings from the study support and further explore Yum et al’s concepts of sacrifice, support, and negotiation. The findings here are expanded and organized into two groups. The first group is titled “Strategies for Staying in Control and Setting Boundaries: Strategic Planning, Sacrificing, and Separating the Spheres”. The second group is titled “Strategies for Staying Positive: Support Gathering, Self-Encouragement, and Avoidance.”
Strategies for Staying in Control and Setting Boundaries: Strategic Planning, Sacrificing, and Separating the Spheres

The participants in this study used several distinct types of strategies for navigating multiple roles. Some of the strategies were geared more toward helping participants retain control over their lives and environments. They described the need to not only control their own schedules, but also those of their children and families. This form of control is less about being in charge and more about managing and keeping crises to a minimum.

**Strategic Planning.** One way participants control or manage their environment is to plan strategically. Knowing important personal, academic, and work related dates ahead of time allows female adult learners to create schedules that are effective and efficient. During strategic planning, female adult learners change doctor’s appointments to accommodate class schedule or plan childcare as a stand-in for the mother role. They may plan transportation to and from school or find ways to work their children’s extracurricular activities into an already full schedule of classes, domestic chores, and weekly work schedule. Once these plans are in place, they offer little room for change. A change in one part of the plan may impact the other parts, creating a domino effect. Participants describe the need to stick to the plan in order to fulfill their obligations in all roles. Gatmaitan (2006) found that single mother students use similar navigation strategies:

The interviews revealed that SMS coped with the act of balancing college, family, and work responsibilities with careful planning and scheduling of their time, cutting back on housework and school work, and utilizing different means of childcare. (p. 28)
Pearish (2006) studied time management as a navigation strategy for nontraditional learners, describing time management methods as a source of power and categorizes them as “multitasking, task integration, and task elimination” (p. 79). As part of their strategic planning, participants in this study describe efforts to multitask, integrate tasks, and eliminate tasks, thus supporting Pearish’s findings. However, use of the term “strategic planning” offers a more deliberate way to understand what female adult learners do to ensure that they can persist in their studies and simultaneously satisfy their roles and those who depend on them.

**Sacrificing.** In this study, sacrifice refers to the choice that participants made to give up one thing in order to support or maintain something else. Sacrifice was not uniform among participants, but interviews offered a range of sacrificing, including giving up personal time and hobbies in order to maintain equilibrium in the academic and domestic spheres, giving up greater academic success (making better grades) to spend time with families, and sacrificing financial stability by giving up full-time jobs and taking on student loans in order to free up time for studying and spending time with families. Gatmaitan (2006) also found that single mother students cut back on study time and homework regularly to spend time with family. They also sacrificed the self-efficacy that comes with completing homework and preparing for class in order to create a greater sense of self-efficacy as a mother. Gatmaitan (2006) explains, “Although the GPA of the SMS was mentioned in this study, I do not believe that their GPA is an accurate measure of their ability as college students or a conclusive measurement of their intelligence.”(p.37) Participants in this current study described a similar understanding of the GPA. Maria explained that she was capable of
earning As in college and that she originally strived to earn As, but the time and effort that it took to earn those As meant that she took too much time away from her daughter. Thus, she made a choice to earn lower grades.

Like the current study of female adult learners in community colleges, Gatmaitan’s (2006) study of single mother students also found that students make several different kinds of sacrifices:

Wanting to do well in both separate spheres of their lives, SMS repeatedly chose to sacrifice their personal needs as well as their educational needs for the sake of their families. Many SMS revealed that they did not have time to study, and some reported that homework did not always get completed.

Gatmaitan (2006) further explains the role of guilt as a motivator for sacrifice. The guilt of feeling that one has abandoned or neglected her family is a greater motivator than the guilt of feeling that one has done less than stellar work academically. Thus, though students make sacrifices in both spheres, women are far less likely to sacrifice in the domestic sphere than in the academic sphere or in one’s personal sphere.

Women may also sacrifice their own time, energy, and peace of mind to avoid conflict. Loeper (2003) found that spouses offered instrumental help through the first year of their wife’s return to college but stopped offering help beyond the first year. This study found similar situations. Participants who were married or living with boyfriends or fiancés mentioned that their partners had good intentions and offered to take on more domestic chores, but either the help waned or the participants found that their partner’s efforts were not sufficient. Thus, participants in this study chose to continue to complete domestic chores to
avoid arguing with the partner about the lack of help or the poor quality of domestic help. These women sacrificed their own time to avoid conflict in the home. Scott and King (1985) also found that men are more satisfied with their wives’ role as students if the wife also continues to serve in her other roles at the same capacity. Although this study did not focus on the male perspective, this could contribute to an understanding of why participants try to avoid conflict with their partners by doing chores themselves.

The notion of sacrifice can be found in other studies where women are asked about the process of sphere navigation. Brown (2010) found in “The Relationship Between Motherhood and Professional Advancement: Perceptions Versus Reality” that when polled, most people believe that women cannot have a career and a family without making sacrifices. This study combined with studies on women in academia show that women choose to make sacrifices as a strategy to maintain their own wellbeing and to maintain some sense of control over their lives. Once these women leave college, they may be required to make more sacrifices to navigate career and home. Understanding how and what they sacrifice is important in understanding how that sacrifice affects women’s domestic, academic, and professional work as well as their personal well-being.

**Separating the Spheres.** Separating spheres may help female adult learners maintain control and set boundaries. As women take on more roles, those roles tend to be indistinguishable at times. Students often take schoolwork home with them, or they may carry the emotional burden of domestic issues to school. While it may be impossible to truly keep the spheres separate, participants in this study describe the strategies that they use to try to keep the spheres as separate as they can. These include doing all of their homework at
school before going home so that they do not have to try to focus on school while also focusing on their families and not thinking about their children while in class so that they can focus more carefully on their schoolwork.

Drago et al (2006) studied Bias Avoidance behaviors (behaviors that help them avoid bias) in academic faculty and categorized them as productive and unproductive. The authors explain that BA are both common and strategic in nature, and they suggest that these behaviors are likely more pervasive than their study shows. Although Drago et al’s study is focused on academic faculty, some of the behaviors mirror the strategies used by female adult learners to separate spheres. One such behavior is missing young children’s events because they do not want to seem uncommitted to their work. Some participants in this study describe the choice to sacrifice going to their child’s school play or doctor appointment because they did not want to seem uncommitted to their classwork. This form of sacrifice is a direct result of the perception that they cannot choose a stand-in for schoolwork and that succeeding in school also means succeeding as a parent.

Drago et al’s (2006) study allows us to view navigation strategies as both productive and unproductive. Though this classification was not the point of this current study, it would be interesting to further examine how these navigation strategies could be classified in this way. For example, if a student sacrifices time studying for time with her children, then she may make a “B” instead of an “A” in her Biology course. If that student is interested in being a nurse, then that “B” will give her fewer points on her nursing application than an “A” would give her. Ultimately, this could affect her ability to be accepted into the nursing program. If earning the “B” keeps her from getting into the nursing program, we may say
that her strategy was unproductive. However, if the student feels that the time she spends with her children is more important than being admitted into the nursing program, then she may feel that the strategy was productive. There is much more that can be gleaned from a closer study of strategy classification in this way. Regardless, research shows that women choose to make sacrifices as a strategy for navigating multiple roles and preventing role contagion, a concept developed by Home (1998) that explains the process of being preoccupied with one role while completing another role.

This study found three strategies that participants used to help them retain control over their lives and roles and to help them set boundaries: Strategic Planning, Sacrificing, and Separating the Spheres. Participants also employed strategies to help them stay positive. These include Support Gathering, Self-Encouragement, and Avoiding Negativity.

**Strategies for Staying Positive: Support Gathering, Self-Encouragement, and Avoidance**

**Support Gathering.** The Paradigm Shift in social perception of women’s return to college shows that society more readily supports a woman’s choice to earn a college degree. Thus, making the decision to return to school may seem easier for women now than it did several generations ago. However, the support to return to college and the support needed during that process are not the same. The support to return to college is more emotional, a type of encouragement. The support needed during the process is more tangible and includes helping with childcare, domestic chores, or with financial burdens. In the current study, participants describe efforts to recruit or gather the support that they needed. Some participants joined campus support groups for female students so that they could gain
emotional and academic support. Some participants asked friends and family to help with childcare and instrumental support or to offer financial support. Support Gathering is a strategy that took on different forms for each participant, but ultimately emerged as a more popular strategy for remaining positive about the challenge of role navigation.

Cox and Ebbers (2010) found that female adult learners create their own support system with other female adult learners who also understand the challenges that women face when they return to school. Some participants in this study said that they simply did not have time for friendships, even ones cultivated at school. Contrary to Cox and Ebbers’s study, they did not seek a support system with other female adult learners. However, several participants from the first site participated in the all-female campus organization and discussed the benefits of spending time with other female adult learners, thus supporting Cox and Ebbers findings. The difference here may be the option of an all-female campus organization. Cohen and Brawer (2003) explain that there is little continuity of resources among community colleges. This was true of the two sites utilized in this study. The participants at the second site for this study did not seek other female adult learner support and had no all-female campus organization. Yet nearly half of the participants at the first site were either members of the all-female group or had considered joining.

Pearish (2006) also found that participants recruited support from family and friends and notes how support can affect student morale:

The majority of the participants praised the support they received from family and friends as they made their return to school and commented on how it did help to lighten the load they were carrying. One participant discussed how this support grew
the longer she was in school. It was as if she had to prove to her friends and family that she was serious about getting a degree. Another called a family meeting in order to illicit the help of her children before she ever enrolled. However one student, who dropped out before getting her degree, described the support from her family as being primarily “lip service.” They were one hundred percent behind her until she needed them for something and then they would just disappear. (p. 85)

The current study supports these findings. Participants shared similar stories and sentiments. Addie also called a family meeting to elicit support from her siblings. Each semester, she shares her class schedule with them and delegates times for them to help take care of her daughter. It should be noted that Addie is the oldest participant in this study and was very direct with her family and determined to finish. Several of the younger participants did complain that their spouses/partners only provided “lip service”. Haley and Alicia both shared that their spouse/fiancé supported their return to college but failed to provide enough instrumental support. Both of these participants turned to other sources of support. Haley recruited support from her mother, and Alicia recruited support from her college counselor and women’s support group.

Previous research on support shows that social support reduces stress and provides greater psychological well-being (Quimby & O’Brien, 2006). Also, support offered by family members reduces family stress, and when family support is met with support by faculty, students, and college services, they become a positive influence on academic success (Kirby, Biever, Martinez, & Gomez, 2004; Van Stone, et al, 1994). Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) and Home (1998) suggest that the perception of support is a greater determinant
of stress relief than the total number of supports. Thus, having constant and unfailing support by one or two people is more helpful to students than less consistent support from many people.

In a study of student parents, Van Rhijn (2012) found:

This research revealed that student parents believe that the support of others is essential to their ability to be successful in their endeavours; goal aspirations are influenced by family members, friends, and the broader social context. This broader influence is referred to as reciprocal determinism (Social Cognitive Theory; Bandura, 1986) in that behavior, personal factors, and environmental events mutually influence each other. Evidence was provided in this study of the importance of broader contextual factors in providing motivation to attend school and in being able to deal with demands while being a student parent. All of these factors influenced the student parents’ ability to actually meet their role demands and their belief that they could persevere in the face of difficulties. (p. 66)

That participants in this study recruited support even when they felt they had little support or when they felt they did not have the appropriate types of support reveals the importance of support in college persistence. Van Rhijn’s findings suggest that support is not a singular concept but is instead just one of many components that affect female adult learner persistence. For this study, “Support Gathering” is characterized as a strategy for staying positive. The participants in this study were strategic about the kinds of support they recruited. They recruited supporters whom they could trust would be available emotionally or who would be available physically to help with domestic chores. This support provided
stability and security for the participants as they navigated the domestic, academic, and professional spheres.

**Self-Encouragement.** Another navigation strategy that participants used to remain positive is “Self-Encouragement”. As participants described the guilt that they would feel when they had to take time away from their families or from their schoolwork, they described a feeling of doubt, wondering if they could persist in college and also continue to be a good parent or family member. To curb this doubt and combat the guilt, participants describe strategies of self-encouragement. Some participants kept journals that reminded them of their goals. Some participants actually talked to themselves and encouraged themselves verbally. Some students rewarded themselves with personal care like a bath or a short trip to the gym. Pearish (2006) explains the importance of self-encouragement, “Simply reminding or making visible the added power that may be found in good self-care practices may lead to better lifestyle choices and increased chances of degree completion” (p. 23). In “Life Issues Leading to Success in Community College Degree Seekers”, Pearish (2006) found that only two participants made a concerted effort to use “good self-care practices”; one worked out at a gym and the other participated in meditation to deal with stress. (p.84). Pearish’s term “self-care” indicates a deliberate choice to care for oneself both physically and mentally. For this study, I chose the term “self-encouragement” because it encompasses those practices of journaling and verbally encouraging oneself that “self-care” may not. Pearish (2006) also found:

> While there was also plenty of discussion of the physical load required of the long hours of running a household and attending school, it was the discussion of the
emotional strain that took precedence. From these descriptions, one might conclude that the major threat to adult student retention may be an inability to carry the mental load. (p. 83)

This recent finding that the mental load of role navigation is the more detrimental aspect, then the strategies of self-encouragement found in this study help to understand how female adult learners try to decrease that load. Self-encouragement serves as a way to build confidence and self-efficacy among participants. Quimby and O’Brien (2006) found that students with higher levels of parental self-efficacy also had lower levels of psychological distress and that students with higher student self-efficacy had higher levels of life satisfaction. Thus, as women return to school and begin to navigate multiple roles, they may use strategies to build self-efficacy in the various spheres. The navigation strategies (coping strategies) mentioned earlier (Strategic Planning, Sacrificing, Separating the Spheres) may aid in that effort and may be used to predict life satisfaction and well-being (Giancola, et al., 2009). Studies have found that self-confidence is factor reported as influencing academic success and that self-efficacy should be an important consideration when analyzing the success of adult learners (Quimby & O’Brien, 2006; Schlossberg et al, 1989; Van Rhijn, 2012; Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005). Van Rhijn (2012) further found that self-efficacy in the navigation of multiple roles is also influential in persistence, not just self-efficacy in each separate role. Van Rhijn explains:

Student parents are most likely to choose to expend their energy and persist in the tasks that they believe they can achieve. Student parents defined their success based on those things they felt they could accomplish. This was evident in their optimistic
attitudes and in their belief that, by working through the difficulties being faced in the present, they would end up in a better place in the future. Student parents who believed in their ability to be successful were therefore able to exercise personal agency to meet their goals. (p. 66)

In this study, participants used strategies of self-encouragement to build that self-confidence despite the other factors (guilt, sacrifice, lack of support) that negatively affected their self-awareness. Although this study did not follow participants to the end of their academic goals and cannot speculate on the persistence rate, it can offer that some participants were at the end of their degree requirements and had persisted several years to that point.

**Avoidance.** As the previous section revealed, staying positive is important to building self-confidence and self-efficacy, which is also tied to persistence. This study found that participants use several strategies to avoid negativity and detach from negative influences. Jessie explained how she ignored family members and friends who told her that she would never finish school or that she did not deserve to be in school. Layla described detaching herself from her father who told her that she could find all that she needed to know on Google and who was constantly being negative about her conversion to Islam. In a recent study titled “Barriers and Supports to Nontraditional-Aged Students’ Success in Community College,” Edwards (2013) organized students by “type”: Well-Supported, Young and Restless, Struggling with Personal Problems, and Ignoring Non-supporters. Edwards characterized each participant using one of these titles. While it may be difficult to characterize any of the participants of this study as either one or the other of these types, it is
important that one of the types involves detaching or avoiding non-supporters. Pearish (2006) also noted detachment as a student strategy, “One participant discussed how she had to separate herself from family and friends that were non-supportive in order to keep them from dragging her back into a dysfunctional lifestyle.” (p. 80).

Pearish offers one specific motivation for detachment. The participants in this study used detachment less as a way to avoid moving back into dysfunctional lifestyles and more as a means of moving forward and a way to remain positive. In addition to avoiding negative people, participants described avoiding negative situations. Some participants who felt that their spouses or partners were not providing sufficient instrumental support opted to do the chores themselves instead of initiating a conversation that could possibly have a negative tone or outcome. This is consistent with Jacobs and King’s (2002) findings that perceived role strain or overload often causes more stress than actual strain or overload, and often, women blame themselves for their inability to focus or attend to responsibilities rather than question social or familial expectations.

Participants also sought to avoid negative situations in the classroom. Waller, Bovill, & Pitt (2011) found that women may have feelings of inferiority and may feel silenced both in the classroom and in efforts to express their needs to college faculty and administration and to their social support network. The participants in this study describe situations when they chose not to tell their instructors about personal situations that may affect their work at school. This choice was a result of perceived lack of flexibility by the instructor. Participants were aware of the power held by the faculty member, did not find the faculty member’s policies to be flexible or the faculty member to be approachable, and ultimately realized that
they could not delegate their duties in the student role; therefore, participants chose to sacrifice elsewhere. Previous research explores identity negotiation and the practice of leveraging power and voice in certain roles to establish identity (Kasworm, 2005; Pizzolato, 2005). Women have different identities for different roles and must negotiate those identities between roles by leveraging power and voice to resolve conflict. However, participants in this study were reticent to use voice to negotiate in the academic institutions. Some participants felt no benefit to negotiation, describing a lack of power to negotiate classroom policy, and silenced themselves. In the home, some participants chose to do chores themselves, even though the added chores would take time and energy, in order to avoid conflicts with spouses and partners. In this instance, participants chose not to leverage power and voice to resolve conflict; they chose silence as a way to avoid it. Avoiding negativity and detaching from negative forces helps participants remain positive in a situation that could easily become negative.

In these cases, participants were negotiating resources to avoid conflict and remain positive. However, though the participants discussed finding a present solution to avoid conflict currently, this study did not determine if those short term solutions caused conflicts later. Earlier research finds that when women return to school, their relationships suffer, particularly relationships with spouses or partners (Suitor, 1997; Wakeford, 1994; Waller, Bovill, & Pitt, 2011). However, in this study, participants felt supported by their spouses and partners, and there was little sign from the participants that their relationships were in danger. Participants who were married longer spoke about their relationships as being secure. Only two participants mentioned dissonance in their relationships. Haley had
married young after an unexpected pregnancy and found her husband’s lack of compassion toward her situation as a student and new mother frustrating. Alicia was also a new mother and described frustration with her fiancé who had different philosophies of family and domestic life. Notably, seven of the nineteen participants were either single or divorced. This study did not seek to determine if prior relationships were affected by the participant’s return to school and cannot know if participants’ current relationships will be negatively affected as the participants finish their degrees. It may be that participants avoid conflict during their experiences as female adult learners and then address those conflicts after they finish college. This study can only show that women do work to avoid conflict in several specific ways in an attempt to stay positive.

The importance of remaining positive has been explored in previous research (Quimby & O’Brien, 2006; Schlossberg et al, 1989; Van Rhijn, 2012; Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005) with regard to adult learners and persistence. This study found that participants utilize several strategies to remain positive including Support Gathering, Self-Encouragement, and Avoiding Negativity. Each of these strategies has been examined in previous research as noted in this chapter, yet the focus on mental well-being and staying positive is fairly new to research on female adult learners and requires a closer examination of the strategies used and the outcomes of those strategies.

**Discussion**

Student mothers face many challenges as they attempt to return to school. The paradigm shift has helped to provide more opportunity and more support for women with regard to decision-making, but it has yet to fully affect the amount of instrumental support
that women receive. Women are still trying to do it all and are reticent to ask for help. In addition, student mothers cite their children as motivation for their return to school but remain adamant that being a mother is their most important role. Though community colleges honor the role of parenting by offering child care on campus and some online courses, the delegation dilemma continues to cause problems for student mothers who find themselves torn between their desire to be a fully committed mother and their desire to be a successful student.

The findings from this study suggest that female adult learners are resilient. Although faced with personal, professional, academic, and financial challenges, female adult learners have fortitude and find ways to complete tasks and fulfill their obligations in the mother and student role. Female adult learners are resourceful. They find the support that they need and avoid distractions and negative forces that may deter them from their goals. In her search for resources, one participant found that her college offered support for minority men but not for women, so she founded the Circle of Sisters club which works to provide a support system for female adult learners at MCC. Clubs like Circle of Sisters are not found in all community colleges, yet the need for them remains. Participants who were members of Circle of Sisters cited it as one of their greatest sources of academic and emotional support. It provided activities to help the students prepare for the workforce and service projects to help them bond in a common goal. Because the advisor of the group was a school counselor, the group members were more likely to utilize counseling services or to seek advice from their advisor. Though still in its infancy as an organization, the club had over 30 members and was creating a buzz around campus. As shown in this study, this kind of all-female support organization
could greatly benefit female adult learners in other community colleges. Female adult learners are less likely to make time to cultivate friendships (some even pull away from friendships to conserve time and energy) and are less likely to seek help from a counselor, but offering these resources in a club that meets on campus during the day at optimal times for female adult learners will not only increase female adult learner support systems, but may also increase persistence.

In addition, interesting dynamics occurred when the participants joined in the focus groups. The initial interviews were private, and in them, participants talked about how they either did not have time for existing friendships or did not have time to cultivate new friendships. Though they realized the importance of a support system, they were also aware of the need for efficiency in their everyday life. Thus, many participants relied on existing relationships with family as their primary support. However, when the women gathered for the focus group, they immediately began to offer compassion for each participant’s challenges and also offered suggestions for ways to meet those challenges and problem-solve. There was a sort of bonding that happened in the hour-long focus groups. Circle of Sister members discussed the importance of that group as a support and invited other focus group members to join. The participants shared child-care information and tips for choosing courses, thus reflecting the importance of the group dynamic as a support for female adult learners and further supporting suggestions to community colleges to create women’s support organizations on campus.

Finally, many of the strategies that participants used to navigate multiple roles involved ignoring emotions like guilt and stress. While these strategies may be beneficial in
the short-term as a way to focus on the parent and student roles and avoid being derailed by emotional breakdowns, the consequences of these behaviors and strategies may affect women long-term. Without counselors or friends to help women mediate their emotions, they may suffer consequences later in life, after they finish school, as these emotions resurface or as they begin to deal with emotions that they had previously repressed. Survival mode is clearly important for these women and may help them to persist, but they and those around them may suffer the consequences much later. As community colleges seek to serve the needs of female adult learners, they may look at ways to help women avoid repressed emotions and manage them effectively during the postsecondary experience.

Note, very little is published in community college literature regarding female adult learner experiences, their perceptions of those experiences, and navigation strategies. Likewise, because community colleges are tasked with serving their unique community, programming for each community college is different. Little is known about the widespread nature of support systems and support organizations for women in community colleges nationally. Thus, the findings here cannot be generalized, but these findings do suggest a need for a broader understanding of how community colleges serve sub-populations.
CHAPTER SIX

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

In this case study, community college female adult learners revealed their perceptions of multiple roles and the strategies they use to navigate those roles. The study focused on the following research questions: a) How do female adult learners in community colleges perceive multiple roles and b) How do female adult learners in community colleges navigate multiple roles? Thus, this study explored perception and navigation of multiple roles.

The findings offer several insights into both perception and navigation. This study found that there has been a paradigm shift in social perception and behavior regarding women’s return to college. The participants in this study felt well supported even encouraged in their decisions to return to school. Thus, the previous paradigm that supported the more traditional domestic woman’s role now seems to have shifted in behavior, but not fully in practice (Spencer & Hahn, 1997). This study also found that women closely connect their role as student to their role as mother, yet they still hold their role as mother as the most esteemed and prioritized role. Finally, this study found that female adult learners perceive that the mother role allows for delegation, but the student role does not. These perceptions inform the navigation strategies that female adult learners use. This study found that participants utilized strategies for staying in control and setting boundaries (strategic planning, sacrificing, and separating the spheres), and strategies for staying positive (support gathering, self-encouragement, and avoiding negativity). These new understandings of female adult learner perception and navigation have implications with regard to both research and practice in higher education.
Implications for Research

The paradigm shift from traditional gender roles that did not support a woman’s return to school and the new paradigm that encourages a woman’s return to college needs further study. This finding was significant in the scope of this study (n=19), but researchers should further study the scope of this paradigm in the context of post-secondary education, specifically, community colleges which serve more working class and first generation college students. Previous research has explored the change in the paradigm of traditional women’s roles in the home and the workforce (Douthitt, 1989; Kaufman, 2000; Mason & Lu, 1988); but future research should continue to isolate the paradigm shift in the context of school, as well as sub-group. The paradigm shift may manifest itself in different ways for the working class, first-generation college students, minority students, veterans, and ESL (English as a Second Language) students, all of which are sub-groups specific to community colleges.

This study reveals that the paradigm shift has changed the way that society views women’s desire to go to college. Yet, the paradigm shift may also affect women beyond that initial decision. How has the paradigm shift affected higher education and community colleges? Has the shift manifested in both beliefs and practices in postsecondary institutions? Future research could explore the paradigm shift in the home and in higher education both as individual institutions and as co-existing institutions. Disparities may exist in the evolution of the paradigms that create conflict for students and families. For example, the value of education for women may have evolved earlier and more quickly from the perspective of postsecondary institutions, encouraging women to return to school and glorifying the postsecondary experience. However, this paradigm may have evolved more
slowly in the domestic sphere where women are expected to tend to children and home. Thus, women may desire to return to school but may fear the consequences of change in the home. If the school and domestic paradigms do not align, women could experience conflict or consequences. Future research could also explore the effects of the paradigm shift on the experiences of male students and female students who are not mothers. Does the paradigm shift change how men perceive and experience college? Do they feel less pressure to return to school or to develop careers and more encouragement to be stay-at-home dads or to quit work to pursue college full-time? Do female students who are not mothers feel pressure to tend to domestic chores, or does the pressure of domestic obligation pertain differentially to mothering? A better understanding of the paradigm shift and its effects on all stakeholders will help academic institutions, family counselors, and the workforce understand the needs and situations of students, families, and employees.

This study also found a gap in beliefs and practice regarding the expectation that women should return to school. Participants feel encouraged to return to school, but they do not receive the instrumental support to facilitate their return and persistence. Studies that focus on women in the workforce may offer insight into the disconnect between beliefs/attitude and practice and may also help to bridge the dimensions of mother, worker, and student. In addition, an understanding of how the paradigm shift affects women in various roles may also reveal implications that affect men, as well.

The paradigm shift found in this study suggests that research should approach studying the issue of adult female student support in new ways. Women’s participation in postsecondary education is now a social norm. Women are encouraged to return to school
and earn a degree. The increase of two-income households and single mother households may explain this new paradigm (Wortman, et al, 1991; Greenstein, 2000). As researchers continue to study support structures for female adult learners, they may recognize that support for a return to college and support during the return to college are different acts. If spouses and family members encourage women to return to school but do not support the sacrifices that must be made in the home and in relationships for women to persist, then women may face conflict or stop out of school to avoid conflict. The participants in this study felt well supported in their decision to return to school, but some felt a lack of instrumental support during their semesters. Their families encouraged them to return to school but did not help with domestic chores and childcare in a consistent way. Future studies may focus on understanding the specific support needs of students or explore perceptions of family members and friends. What specific kinds of support do female adult learners need from family members and friends? What are their needs regarding childcare? What are their needs regarding domestic chores? Indeed, some participants lived in households with spouses, friends, or other family members and had shared responsibilities. These women may have had help readily available, but chose not to articulate their needs. How can women successfully communicate their needs to their family and friends? Participants in this study said that they would rather do the chores themselves than to have to ask for help; thus, researchers should try to understand the social and personal implications of this choice. Do women feel a need to avoid conflict at home? Why do they feel that asking for help would create conflict? Is this a social construct or a personal one? Studies that explore how motherhood affects identity offer that some households view motherhood as
an innate function of the mother, while other households view mothering as a shared responsibility. Future studies could apply the “Becoming a Mother” framework to an understanding of student mothering and support (Mercer, 2004; Rubin, 1967). Further, researchers could explore what happens to the support as it moves from encouragement to return to school to the type of instrumental support needed to sustain the student role for several years.

This study found that the mother and student roles are tightly linked. Participants indicated that they were returning to school to either provide a better life and future for their families or to set a good example for their children. The Institute for Women’s Policy Research started a project to research ways in which institutions can better support student mothers (Schumacher, 2013). They hope to find ways to help institutions collaborate on opportunities to provide crucial services. The IWPR could apply findings from this study to organize their project and create more meaningful programs for women.

In addition, the participants in this study sacrificed in several ways to support both the mother and student role. Further research could focus on women who have persisted and women who have cycled out of school to understand how those types of sacrifices affected the choice to persist or not and their subsequent perceptions of sacrifices. For example, participants in this study said that they were not spending as much time with their children since they had returned to school, yet they felt that finishing school and earning a degree would benefit the family in the long term. Future research could explore female adult learner perceptions of the consequences, both good and bad, of that sacrifice and how to ease the adjustment once a female adult learner graduates. Further, in some cases, participants
forfeited full-time employment to focus on school and took on the debt of school loans. Future research may strive to better understand the effect of that sacrifice on the overall financial, emotional, and psychological wellbeing of female adult learners. The nature of sacrifice means giving up one thing for another; thus, understanding these tradeoffs and their long term effects could help foster effective counseling in the community college and effective decision-making by female adult learners in the future.

The sacrifices that these participants made may not be unique to women. This study focused on female adult learners specifically; however, men are also returning to school and may have similar perceptions and navigation challenges and strategies. The findings from this study could provide a foundation for exploring male adult learner perceptions and the link between the father/student role and the impact that that link has on male student performance and persistence.

The same can be applied to all of the navigation strategies. Castles (2004) studied persistence in adult learners and found support and ability to navigate roles to be the two most important factors affecting persistence. This study aimed at pinpointing specific kinds of navigation strategies which include ways that women gather support and support themselves. Future research can explore their success and perceived success with the navigation strategies discussed in this study for female adult learners as well as for other nontraditional learners.

The finding that the mother and student roles are tightly linked shows a connection between the domestic and academic spheres. However, community colleges cannot ultimately control how the student role is perceived and supported in the privacy of the
domestic sphere. Likewise, the family cannot control what the school requires of its students, yet the two roles and two spheres rely on each other somewhat. Future studies could explore innovative ways to foster support for each domain so that families and schools can work together. The community college, more than universities, looks for ways to support nontraditional students but could do more to bridge the two domains.

This study used Role Theory as a framework that guided the research and data analysis. However, Role Theory is not complex enough to understand the dynamics of multiple roles. Role Theory offers a preliminary language for what happens when roles overlap; however, it does not take into account the bond between roles and the motivation that drives role navigation. It also does not fully address social and political issues (Edwards, 1993). Role Theory lacks the ability to understand roles’ interconnectivity. More useful frameworks for exploring nontraditional students and multiple roles are needed.

Future research could also focus on more group-oriented studies, utilizing focus groups to better understand the dynamic of female support groups and female adult learner needs. In this study, an interesting dynamic occurred in the focus groups which was undetectable in the individual interviews. In the individual interviews, participants talked about the need for support and the lack of time to foster friendships. Some even said that they sacrificed existing friendships because they simply did not have time to maintain them. However, when the women gathered together in the focus group, they bonded quickly over the shared experience of being a student and a mother. They commiserated regarding guilt and challenges of role navigation, and they shared tips for role navigation. The two focus group sessions were small and did not include all of the participants, but they offered an
interesting insight into the possibility for further exploration and better understanding of what happens when female adult learners are given the opportunity to gather together and share experiences.

Finally, little of the literature cited in this study actually comes from research on community colleges because there is little research to be found on community colleges. As previously noted, community colleges have seen rapid growth since the recession of 2008 (Miller, 2012). The unstable economy and less-than-optimistic job market mean that more nontraditional students will return to school as they transition careers or attempt to add another income to the overall family income, and more traditional students will choose to begin their postsecondary career in community colleges because they are more affordable than universities. Thus, more research is needed to understand the student experience in community colleges and the ways that community colleges can meet those needs.

To conclude the Implications for Research, suggestions for further research include:

- Study the ways that traditional gender roles affect the experiences of certain community college demographics, including working class, first-generation college, minority, veteran, and ESL students.
- Explore the shift in gender role expectations in the home and compare that to the shift in gender role expectations in the college.
- Explore the disconnect between beliefs and practices with regard to the paradigm shift.
- Further explore the disparity between family and friends’ encouragement to return to school and family and friends’ active instrumental support to help women persist.
- Work to understand the specific needs of female adult learners in community colleges with regard to both school and home.
- Study the specific sacrifices women make when they return to school and the long term effects of those sacrifices.
- Explore these same perceptions and navigation strategies in male adult learners.
• Explore the success and effects of all of the navigation strategies
• Study innovative ways to bridge school and home for community college students
• Explore faculty and administrator perceptions of female adult learner experiences and strategies for meeting female adult learner needs
• Explore family members’ perceptions and actual behaviors with regard to female adult learner experiences
• Develop more useful framework for exploring multiple roles

More practically, consider these possible studies:

• Action Research to implement one or more of the following:
  • Women’s support organization in a community college. Specifically assign a counselor as the group advisor. How does participation in the group affect the female adult learner experience?
  
  • Family orientation and family activities in the community college. How do the orientation and activities affect the experience of the student?
  
  • Mentoring program, pairing female adult learners who have graduated or who are at the end of their program of study with new female adult learners. How does the mentoring relationship impact the college experience for both the mentor and the mentee?
  
• Qualitative study utilizing focus groups to explore female adult learner perceptions of their experiences in a group setting

• Studies exploring each of these findings as they pertain to specific demographics (SES, minority groups, male adult learners)

• Longitudinal study to explore the entire experience of the female adult learner from the decision to return to school until degree completion with follow-up interviews at scheduled increments AFTER completion.
  • How has the community college experience affected the female adult learner’s relationships with family and friends?
  • How does the female adult learner perceive that college has impacted her lifestyle?
  • If she made trade-offs and sacrifices, does she perceive them to be justified or worth the sacrifice?
Implications for Practice

The findings from this study have implications for practice in postsecondary education, particularly for community colleges. Participants in this study shared stories of conflict between the mother and student roles specifically. Findings suggest that female adult learners will delegate their responsibilities in the mother role because they are not able to delegate their responsibilities in the student role. In Sharon’s case, she chose to go to her Science lab instead of her son’s surgery because her instructor, who knew that Sharon’s son was having surgery, suggested that Sharon needed to be in the lab. The lab was not offered at any other time and would count for a large portion of Sharon’s grade. Community colleges could work to create policies that encourage faculty to be more flexible in course and lab offerings. Another participant, Alice, described missing her young daughter’s school play to take a final exam in her nursing program. She did not even ask if the exam would be offered at another time because she said that the instructors had already said that there would be no exceptions to the original exam time. Flexibility in exam times would allow students to feel less conflicted about sacrificing their family for their school. If we understand that female adult learners connect the student role to the mother role but that the mother role is the most important, we should also understand that allowing students to feel secure in their roles as mothers will increase their feelings of self-efficacy as students. Community colleges can work to better understand the connection between the two roles, provide more flexibility in classroom and college policy, and work to bridge school and home domains so that women feel less conflict and more support.
In addition, colleges could reexamine their existing policies that affect nontraditional learners and provide professional development for faculty to help them meet the needs of nontraditional learners. The participants in this study felt that some faculty members were not sensitive to adult learner needs, evidenced by the instances where participants had to choose between family needs and the expectations of faculty. In some cases, faculty members remain inflexible in an effort to support their own notions of what it means to learn and to be a college student. They may see a student’s need to miss class for personal reasons as a student simply wanting to skip school without losing credibility with the instructor. Faculty may perceive a nontraditional student’s absence in class as a form of apathy or lack of commitment to the learning process, yet nontraditional students are known to earn better grades and be more intrinsically motivated than their traditional counterparts (Cross, 1992; Knowles, 1980; Merriam, 2001). If the ultimate goal is to ensure that nontraditional students, female adult learners in particular, persist in a fluid course of study without cycling out of school, then more adult-friendly campus policies and professional development to reinforce those policies would not only give faculty strategies for understanding nontraditional student needs and for maintaining flexible course expectations and requirements, they would also set a tone that the institution values nontraditional learners and that they expect faculty to do the same.

Further, understanding adult learner characteristics and needs is necessary to creating effective pedagogy and classroom/institutional policies. Yet many community colleges do not require that faculty members have teacher training or courses in education. Thus, some community college faculty may lack the professional development necessary to make
informed decisions regarding class policy. To remedy this, community colleges could reevaluate their requirements for hiring and provide specific professional development to address these issues within their colleges.

Community colleges could also provide more resources on campus to address specific female adult learner needs. Lack of support from social networks, families, and spouses are other reasons women decide to discontinue their education. (Cullen, 1994; Edwards, 1993; McGivney, 2004). In terms of support, community colleges cannot assume that students have a ready-made support system. Some students may need assistance developing a support network that helps them persist. Some participants in this study found support in an all-female support group on campus. These kinds of groups are not present on all campuses and were not an option for the participants from the second site of this study. Those participants who did participate in this group described a feeling of camaraderie and security from the friends that they made and the activities that they participated in. The all-female support group at the first site for this study was advised by a school counselor. The participants who were members of the group also benefited from this type of access to a counselor. They received less formal counseling that they likely would not have sought without the impetus of the group. Included in a the community colleges’ focus on providing childcare and financial aid could be a focus on providing counseling and emotional/psychological support and encouraging that women participate in counseling. A hub like a Women’s Resource Center could provide a “one-stop-shop” kind of place for women to receive all of the information that they need to meet their specific needs. In this study, participants said that they were busy, often too busy to seek out or utilize resources on campus. A Women’s Resource
Center may provide a more appealing resource that requires less time traveling through campus and allows students to address a majority of their needs in one place. A Women’s Resource Center could provide access to on-site health care, female-specific counseling, financial counseling, and information on community programs for women. In addition, some female adult learner issues are gender sensitive and gender specific. A Women’s Resource Center could provide a more private, secure environment for such issues as pregnancy, abuse, or harassment. The Institute for Women’s Policy Research has recently published a working paper titled “Prepping Colleges for Parents: Strategies for Supporting Student Parent Success in Postsecondary Education”. (Shumacher, 2013) This paper offers ways to help student parents enter college, persist in college, and transition in college. The research on student parents in colleges is fairly new and ongoing, but this paper and other resources offered by IWPR would be a helpful resource for community colleges searching for ways to better serve female adult learners.

Community colleges could also provide a mentoring program for female adult learners that pairs current students with former students in their field. Pairing a current female adult learner with a female adult learner who has graduated and who has a job in the same field of study would provide much needed support for the current student. She may find connectedness and comfort at being able to vent and share with someone who has shared her experience, and she may also find inspiration to persist as well as a possible employment connection.

Community colleges may consider re-evaluating program and course requirements that base excellence on models tailored more for traditional students. For example, limited
admissions programs are based on points earned by grades; an “A” earns more points than a “B”. Female adult learners sometimes sacrifice an “A” for a lower grade, not because they aren’t capable of an “A”, but because they choose to spend the extra time needed to earn that “A” with their children. Thus, women may be rejected from a limited admissions program when they may in fact be highly qualified. In another form of sacrifice, some students choose a different major that is more flexible and more manageable even though they may prefer a limited admissions major. These types of programs have firm expectations because they are preparing students for jobs with great responsibility and liability. However, the structure of the program admissions and class policies may marginalize students who are equally as capable and committed to the profession but who have to navigate multiple roles. These programs could find ways to honor the life experience that women bring to the classroom and the profession and find ways to accommodate their needs while upholding the integrity of the program.

Finally, community colleges could find ways to honor the role of the family in the female adult learner’s return to school and help bridge the gap between encouragement to return and offering instrumental help. Community colleges might offer family orientations that not only show family members the campus and give family members a sense of the female adult learner’s school climate, but also talk to families about what to expect when their mom or wife returns to school. These sessions could discuss time commitments, the importance of a quiet place to study, and the need for emotional and instrumental support. Colleges could also provide resources such as counseling services to students and their families to help them navigate stressful situations.
To conclude Implications for Practice, suggestions for community colleges include:

- Educate faculty about adult learner needs and foster a culture of flexibility in college and classroom policy and practice.
- Provide campus resources specific to female adult learner needs, including but not limited to an all-female support group, a Women’s Resource Center, and a mentoring program.
- Reevaluate college and classroom policy and practice to prevent marginalizing adult learners with obligations in multiple roles.
- Bridge the connection between home and school by providing family orientations and events on campus that help families understand the expectations of the student, provide families with navigation strategies, and help faculty see their students as family members.

Finally, in the interviews, participants were asked to give advice to other female adult learners and student mothers who may be thinking about returning to school. This is what they offered:

- Come back. Just do it.
- Stay in contact with your advisor.
- Double check your schedule because advisors sometimes make mistakes.
- Going back to school is a long road. It’s a process. Some days will be much longer than others.
- Use the Academic Skills Center.
- It will be challenging, but it’s worth it.
- You must be “emotionally sound” because going back to school will be an emotional roller coaster.
- Learn to say what you need and ask for help.
- Make time to relieve stress.
- Have conversations with your family and let them know about the challenges and changes they can expect when you return to school.
- Try not to disrupt your current schedule. Squeeze classes in when you can.
- Have at least one good friend that you can vent to.
- Remember that being a student is temporary.
• Have a good support system before returning to school.
• Expect that school will be challenging and time-consuming.
• Prioritize, set goals, and make a schedule.
• Have good time-management.
• Only return to school if you’re 100% committed to earning a degree.
• Take all of your prerequisite courses first.
• Prepare yourself in advance for the times when you will have to miss important family events.
• Apply for Financial Aid.
• Don’t be afraid to visit a counselor or use tutoring services if you feel you need them.
• Online classes are difficult. Only take them if you have a computer and time to devote to online coursework.
• Start small. Just take a course or two to begin with and then increase your credit hours per semester once you know how being in school will affect your lifestyle.

As the nature of the female adult learner experience evolves, so should the practice that affects it. Colleges continue to serve more female adult learners, and while some of these women swirl or cycle out of college because navigating multiple roles is too challenging, others stay in school despite the challenges. Understanding why these women make certain choices to stay or stop out or to leverage resources or use navigation strategies will help community colleges better serve their largest constituency.
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Appendix A

**Interview Protocol**

Participant First Name:
Age:
Relationship Status:
Number/Ages of children:

Which of the following groups would you identify with: Lower class, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, upper class?:

Describe how you decided to attend college. Explain if/how anyone else was involved in that decision-making process.

Once you decided to attend college, how did you go about choosing a school and applying? What are your goals for attending college?

What are your professional goals after college?

Describe a typical day and describe your responsibilities (personal, work, school, or any other that you may have).

How do you navigate these roles? Describe the decision-making process for fulfilling all of these roles.

Who/What would you say are your primary sources of financial, emotional, and instrumental support? Instrumental support is when someone helps you with daily chores, getting children to school, cooking, doing laundry, etc.

Read the following and then tell me how you feel about it. (after reading the scenarios, I ask the following questions)

**Vignette 1: Kendra**
What are your reactions to Kendra’s situation?
What do you believe was the most challenging part of Kendra’s experience?
Do you think that the story of Kendra is realistic? If so, why? If not, why not?
Do you think that Kendra’s instructors or that the college could have done anything to help Kendra either prevent the challenges she faced or address them in any way?
If you were Kendra, is there anything that you would have done differently?
Do you think that Kendra should stop going to college?
Have you or your classmates/friends had similar experiences?
If you have had a similar experience, describe the experience and tell me how you handled it.
Have you ever had to rely on friends/relatives to help you?  
If so, describe a situation in which a friend/relative helped you.  How did that situation make you feel?  
If you could give Kendra advice, what would you tell her?

**Vignette 2: Jamie**
What are your reactions to Jamie’s situation?  
What do you believe was the most challenging part of Jamie’s experience?  
Do you think that Jamie’s story is realistic?  If so, why?  If not, why not?  
If you were Jamie, how would you have handled this situation?  How would you have approached her mother and father?  How would you have handled the conversation with her husband?  
Jamie says that she is frustrated and feels guilty.  Are these realistic feelings?  
Have you had similar experiences?  If so, describe the experience and tell me how you handled it.  
Do you ever feel frustrated or guilty with regard to the roles that you fulfill?  
In what ways could Jamie’s college help with her situation?  In what ways could Jamie’s family help?  
If you could give Jamie advice, what would you tell her?
Appendix B

Vignettes

Vignette 1: Kendra

Kendra has recently returned to school to earn a degree in nursing. She is a single mother of two small children and works full-time at a local retail store. After her first semester back at college, her mother was diagnosed with cancer, and Kendra took on the responsibility of caring for her sick mother. Kendra has taken on another job working part-time as a waitress to make more money to pay her mother’s medical bills.

Today, Kendra’s youngest child, Xavier, has a fever, which means he can’t go to daycare. Kendra has to think fast about who will be able to take care of him because Kendra’s mother has a chemo treatment this morning and will be too sick to care for the children for a few days. Kendra has to get her mother to the Chemo treatment by 7:30 am and then get herself to work by 8:00 am. She knows that if she is late for work or takes the day off, she will be scolded by her manager and will be in jeopardy of losing her job. Kendra calls a neighbor, Pam, who has helped babysit before and asks if she will watch over Xavier. Pam says that she can watch him for the morning, but not in the afternoon. So, Kendra calls another friend, Alicia, who used to attend church with Kendra before Kendra had to stop going to church because she now works on Sundays. Alicia agrees to care for Xavier in the afternoon and evening while Kendra is in class and at her second job. Kendra has thought about taking courses online, but all nursing students have to take the same courses at the same time, and they are primarily offered during the day, so Kendra has to work around her class schedule.
Kendra gets her oldest child on the school bus, drops Xavier off at Pam’s, drops her mother off at the Cancer Clinic, and gets to work just in time. Her shift ends at noon, and Kendra drives to the Cancer Clinic to pick up her mother, takes her mother home, then goes to Pam’s to get Xavier and drops Xavier off at Alicia’s. Now, she heads to the community college for her afternoon of classes. Kendra is already stressed, and feels guilty that she cannot spend the day taking care of her sick son and her weak mother.

While in class, Kendra tries to concentrate on her schoolwork, but she is also thinking of how she will work her night shift, get her schoolwork done, and care for her children and mother tonight. She has a big test coming up in one of her nursing classes, and she knows that if she doesn’t do well, she will be dismissed from the program.

After her classes, Kendra heads to the restaurant where she waits tables as a second job. She knows that she needs to be friendly to the customers to earn better tips, but she has trouble concentrating on her job because she is thinking about her test at school. She uses her mental energy to try to review the information for the test in her head.

Finally, at 8:00 pm, Kendra’s shift is over, and she rushes out of the door to pick up her children and go home. She has called to check on her mother and Xavier several times today, but is desperate to see them both, along with her kindergartner, Jennifer. Kendra picks Jennifer up at the extended daycare center where both children stay during afterschool hours, then drives to Alicia’s to find Xavier already asleep and still with a fever. She knows that she will need to watch him overnight and may have to take him to the doctor in the morning. She is overwhelmed by guilt for not being able to take care of him and is full of gratitude to Alicia and Pam for helping her.
When Kendra gets home, she finds her mother in bed, also. She seems weak and has clearly been sick all day. Kendra leans over and gives her mother a hug and apologizes for not being there to take care of her.

Kendra puts her children to bed and looks around the house. The laundry needs to be done, the dishes need to be washed, the kids’ backpacks and lunches need to be prepared for tomorrow, and she needs to study and do her homework. Kendra is exhausted, but she doesn’t have time to think about that. She does the chores, studies, and falls into bed at 1:00 a.m., thinking about how she will manage tomorrow when she wakes at 5:00 a.m. to start her day again.

Kendra feels torn between her responsibilities as a mother, caretaker for her mother, employee, and student. She struggles to find time to do her schoolwork with so many other responsibilities, and she worries that she may have to stop going to college.

**Vignette 2: Jamie**

Jamie is married, and she and her husband have 2 children. Jamie lives in the same community where she was raised and enjoys the benefits of having her extended family nearby. Though Jamie’s husband has a bachelors degree from a local university and has a successful career, Jamie has never been to college. She married her husband just after high school and became a homemaker. She has been a stay-at-home mother since her children were born. Jamie and her husband have assumed very traditional gender roles in the home, as is customary for her community. She takes care of domestic chores and cares for the children, and her husband works 40-60 hours per week. Jamie has been feeling restless in
her role as a homemaker now that her children are school-age, and she has decided to attend the local community college.

When Jamie tells her father that she wants to go back to school, her father is not as supportive as Jamie had hoped. Jamie’s father tells her, “Well, I don’t see why you need a college degree. You already know everything you need to know to take care of your husband and children. That’ll just be a waste of money. Besides, a woman’s place is in the home. No need for college and books and such.” Jamie’s mother is reluctant to chime in, but she finally says, “Who will take care of your family if you go back to school? Who will do the cooking and the cleaning, and who will tend to the children?”

Jamie is disappointed. She tries to explain to her mother that she just wants to try something new and get out of the house, meet new people, and maybe have a job or a career where she can help others. But her mother insists that she will be putting other things ahead of her family, and so Jamie begins to feel guilty about wanting to return to school.

Jamie’s husband, Greg, is initially supportive, giving her a pat on the back for choosing to return to school. He has a better appreciation for the college experience because he had been to college, too.

Jamie asks Greg for his help in planning her course schedule.

Jamie: “I spoke to my advisors, and they recommend that I take ENG 111 at 3:00 pm because Mrs. Joyner is a really good instructor.”

Greg: “That’s not a good idea because then you won’t be able to get the kids from school, and they’ll have to go to daycare”

Jamie: “Well, I could take ENG 111 two nights a week at 7:00 pm with Mr. Summerlin. I
hear he’s a pretty good instructor, too”

Greg: “Then who will cook and help the kids do their homework and get them into bed? I don’t think evening classes are a good idea either. Maybe you should look for online courses.”

Jamie: “But my advisor said that it’s better to take English in a face-to-face class. I’ll be more engaged that way”

Greg: “I just don’t see how we could make that work. I think online classes are a better choice.”

Jamie: “Greg, couldn’t you help with those chores just two nights a week? You get home at 6:00. Surely you could help the kids eat dinner and get their baths and into bed and do the dishes two nights a week?”

Greg thinks for a minute and can see that his wife really wants to take the evening class, so he agrees. For the first month or so, Greg pitches in and helps out, but then Jamie begins to notice that when she gets home from class, the dishes have not been done, so she has to do them herself, even though she really needs to be studying and doing her homework. Greg also starts putting the kids to bed without getting baths or doing homework, so Jamie has to start waking up earlier in the mornings to help them get baths and do homework before school. She feels frustrated that Greg hasn’t kept his promise to help with the kids and the housework so that she can focus on her schoolwork. She is so frustrated that she doesn’t even talk to him about her schoolwork anymore, and she doesn’t see the point in telling Greg how she feels because everyone else (her mom and dad and others in their community) seem to feel that she shouldn’t be in school anyway. On the one hand, Jamie feels guilty that she
has left her husband with the housework, which is typically a woman’s job, but on the other hand, she feels that she, too, should have the chance to go to school and earn a degree.
Appendix C

Initial Findings

(Submitted to participants in focus group)

Individual Interview Initial Findings: (FAL stands for Female Adult Learners)

1. FAL try to do most of their work at school or when children are asleep to avoid disrupting family time
2. FAL experience guilt about taking time and resources away from children/family, but they rarely deal with that guilt.
3. FAL do not take time to deal with the emotional effects of guilt
4. FAL conveyed that taking time to deal with emotions will take them off course and inhibit their ability to do all that they need to do
5. Many participants were emotional
6. Financial challenges force FAL to take time away from children/families
7. FAL say that some teachers do not understand the challenges they face
8. FAL do not always understand/know their options when faced with challenges (loans, financial aid, help from other services on campus)
9. FAL would like to be involved on campus, but some do not have time
10. FAL try to do as much as they can without asking for help
11. FAL social support systems are limited (i.e., there are only a handful of close friends or relatives to call on for help and to lean on for support)
12. Online courses aren’t always a viable solution because some FAL do not have appropriate computer skills or even like online learning
13. Most FAL feel that if faced with a conflict between family and school, a woman should choose family.
14. Some FAL feel that going to school should not disrupt the home
15. Some FAL feel nervous about not being connected to their children and family while in the classroom
16. Most FAL cited their children as their primary motivator for completing school and doing well in school
Appendix D

Focus Group Questions

- List your roles/obligations (mother, wife, employee, student, member of community/family)
- Complete the pie chart and give percentages for the amount of time you devote to each one on average
- Was that a difficult exercise? Why?
- What, exactly, causes you stress? How do you deal with that?
- If you could change anything about your life to make your situation less stressful, what would you do? If you could wave a magic wand over your situation to make it easier to navigate all of these obligations, what would you change?
- In the interviews, we discussed the following supports: emotional, instrumental, financial. If you could have more of one of these, which would it be and why?
- Many of you got emotional when we discussed guilt. What are things that could alleviate that guilt? Why do you not discuss guilt?
- How might you advise teachers and administrators to deal with FAL?
- How might you advise family and friends of FAL?

Focus Group Activity
Pie Chart: A Pie Chart shows percentages of the whole

Example:

Your Pie Chart: Take your list of obligations/responsibilities and use the pie chart to show how much time/energy you spend attending to each obligation. You don’t have to put percentages if you don’t want to. You can just color in a section that illustrates the amount of time you put toward that obligation.