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The Lived Experiences of Students Who are Single Parents and Attending Community College:
A Phenomenological Study

A dissertation
presented to
the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership,
concentration in Higher Education Leadership

by
Debbie Johnson
December 2022

Dr. Jill Channing, Chair
Dr. James Lampley
Dr. Ginger Christian

Keywords: single-parent student, nontraditional student, parenting, and higher education

ABSTRACT

The Lived Experiences of Students Who are Single Parents and Attending Community College:

A Phenomenological Study

by

Debbie Johnson

This qualitative study used phenomenological research methods to explore the lived experiences of single parents attending community college. The phenomenological research design was used to better understand participant experiences by examining the participant's view of their situation. Thirteen single-parent students in community colleges in the United States were selected using purposeful sampling techniques. The participants included ten female participants and three male participants. Of these participants, nine students attended full-time, and four attended part-time. Each student participated in one-on-one interviews using Zoom technology. The participants provided their perceptions of their experiences as single parents attending community college. These participants described themselves and their experiences through the lenses of motivation, challenges, needs, and support. In these interviews, key themes emerged. These themes included the recognition that single parents struggle emotionally and feel disconnected, the acknowledgment of single-parent strengths such as time management, organization, and hard work, and the need for single-parent aid such as financial, childcare, and academic assistance. Additional themes included the challenge for single parents to juggle conflicting roles, the fundamental role of internal motivation and drive, and the importance of communication, mentorship, and support. The findings of my study can be used to further institutional practice and provide insight into guidance and support for single-parent students.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to single parents who work tirelessly every day to love and support their children. You deserve a great deal of appreciation for all that you do. Your hard work has not gone unnoticed. When you feel unworthy, remember that you are priceless in the eyes of your child. To the single parents who participated in my research, it was a pleasure to tell your story.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This degree would not be possible without the help and support of so many people. First, I must praise my Lord, who makes all things possible and gives me His strength daily. Thank you, Lord, for giving me the courage and ability to make this journey. I also want to thank my family, who have always been a blessing and a great source of inspiration. Thank you to my husband, Jason. You have offered me constant support and encouragement, and you believed in me when I did not believe in myself. Thank you for taking this journey with me. Thank you to my children, Jordan and Taylor. You have always had my heart, and you two are constant sources of motivation and strength. I also want to say thank you to my mother, Frances. You have given me a lifetime of love and support and have shown me what it means to be a strong, independent woman.

Thank you to my Counseling and Testing Department colleagues at Walters State Community College. Particularly I would like to thank Dr. Andy Hall and Roxanne Bowen. I appreciate you for helping me pursue this dream and offering your guidance and support along the way. Thank you to the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis (ELPA) Department at East Tennessee State University. Thank you to my chair, Dr. Jill Channing. I appreciate your knowledge, guidance, and encouragement throughout this process. Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Jim Lampley and Dr. Ginger Christian. Your experience and support were very beneficial. Finally, thank you to the 13 individuals who participated in this study. I am incredibly grateful that you trusted me to share your experiences.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Millions of students attend college in the United States every year, and each of them comes with their own goals and needs. To better understand these student needs, it is important that colleges identify the specific populations that attend their institutions. For example, among the many students attending higher education institutions in the United States is a unique subgroup identifying as single parents. Cruse et al. (2019) documented that there are 3.8 million parenting students attending college each year, and among this group were 1.7 million single mothers. This number increased to approximately 2 million when single fathers were included (Gaffney, 2020).

Single parents attending a higher education program face many obstacles that set them apart from other nontraditional students. Duquaine-Watson (2017) identified the single-parent population on college campuses as an underserved population and suggested that previous research on this subgroup of students is limited because single parents are grouped into studies of either nontraditional students, all parenting students, or low-income students. While single parents often fit into each category, single parents have unique needs that are not characteristic of all nontraditional, parenting, or low-income students. Students who are single parents are often pulled in multiple directions as they struggle to gain financial stability, be accountable for their academic progress, and take responsibility for caring for their children by finding adequate healthcare, housing, and childcare. Swingle (2013) stated that the multiple roles of being a student and a single parent are highly stressful. Unfortunately, students' attempts to cope with these multi-layered stressors have often produced adverse outcomes (Swingle, 2013). Because of the complex nature of being a single parent and a student, single parents should be studied as an exclusive group to identify their unique needs.

The Institution for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) provided statistics indicating that many single women live in or near poverty levels. They specified that 89% of single mothers in college are considered low-income (IWRP, 2017). Maggio (2019) discussed the costly endeavor of raising children and reported that the average family would spend over \$233,000 to raise one child from birth to age 18; this is an average of around \$14,000 a year to raise one child. This financial struggle was even more challenging for single parents and created many disadvantages for those attending a higher education institution; for example, they often worked full-time and struggled to find affordable, high-quality childcare for their children (Carson, 2015). Single parents also deal with emotional distress as they spend many hours away from their children (Shenoy et al., 2016). These factors negatively impact the opportunity for many single parents to begin a college program or create barriers for those who do (Kruvelis et al., 2017). These obstacles significantly reduced the odds that single parents would complete a degree. According to Kruvelis et al. (2017), only 31% of single mothers in the United States held a bachelor's degree in 2015.

The Michigan Partners Project (MPP) researched this population of students and found that single parents have many challenges, such as experiencing financial hardship and working full-time. This population was also less prepared to attend college, less supported, and had less time to develop connections on college campuses (MPP, 2016). Research has also shown that higher education institutions have failed to identify and support this population of students. Dodson and Deprez (2019) criticized colleges for their lack of support as they recognized the basic structure of higher education as support for the traditional student. They described the traditional student as a single male, housed on campus, financially supported by parents, entering straight out of high school, free from childcare responsibilities, and free to make self-serving

choices (Dodson & Deprez, 2019). Pearson (2019) also called out institutions of higher education for their lack of support for single parents, and he identified single parents as the "invisible, unacknowledged population" (p. 43).

While the challenges are many, so can be the rewards of attaining a higher education credential. Kruevelis et al. (2017) identified higher education credentials as a steppingstone toward higher earnings, better opportunities, better health, a pathway out of poverty, and a more significant opportunity for improved educational outcomes for children of single parents. Therefore, as more and more single parents attend a higher education institution, it is vital to identify the challenges they face and to recognize how higher education institutions can better support them.

Statement of the Problem

In this dissertation, I will use a phenomenological, qualitative research design to explore the experiences of single parents attending community college. Community colleges have been chosen as a focal point for this study because research has shown that single parents were more likely to attend community colleges. Community colleges are often seen as institutions that serve students who are underserved, disadvantaged, and often unready for higher education. Usually, single parents fall into these categories of students. Gault et al. (2014) identified over 3 million single parents pursuing a college degree, and over 2 million attended community colleges. Cox and Ebbers (2010) stated that single parents chose community colleges because they are more easily accessed and more affordable. Shenoy et al. (2016) also confirmed this statistic by documenting that nearly 10 million students attend community colleges, and one of every six are single parents. Additionally, Shenoy et al. noted that many single parents reported that practicality and cost-effectiveness guided their decision to attend a community college.

Traditionally, single-parent students were grouped into research with other nontraditional students. However, researching all nontraditional students is too broad, as Muniz (2021) estimated that almost three of every four students identify themselves as nontraditional students. To narrow the research focus on nontraditional students, this study aims to study only the single-parent population of nontraditional students. While single parents attending a community college has been increasing for several years, research describing their educational experiences is still lacking. More research is needed to identify attributes or motivational factors that help single community college students persist. In addition, more research is required to identify areas where community colleges can better assist this population. Data on undergraduate students have shown that one in every five has at least one child, and over one-half of those students are single parents (Gaffney, 2020). Research has indicated that single parents face many barriers, with money and time being substantial hurdles to earning post-secondary education. To have the opportunity to attend a higher education institution, many single parents will also have to work a full-time job, which means they are juggling parenting responsibilities, work responsibilities, and educational responsibilities. The Institution for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) (2017) showed that only 28% of single mothers graduate within six years compared to 57% of female students who are not parenting. However, IWRP (2017) also indicated that college graduates are more likely to have retirement plans and health benefits, higher earnings over their lifetime, and children who attend college. Further, higher education contributes to better overall health and well-being (IWPR, 2017).

Higher education has been identified as a steppingstone toward financial stability and better opportunities, yet many single parents believe higher education is out of their reach (Kruvelis et al., 2017). As a result, many single parents attempt to earn a credential but never

complete it because financial and family matters take priority. Students, who are single parents, face multiple barriers and need various levels of support. Higher education institutions should offer critical services to support this population of students to increase successful outcomes (Kruvelis et al., 2017). Knowing the importance of higher education and the increasing number of single parents seeking the opportunity to obtain a post-secondary credential, I aim to understand better the experiences of single parents attending higher education programs.

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of single parents who are pursuing a higher education credential at a community college. Cornell Law School (2016) defined a single parent as an individual who is unmarried or legally separated from their spouse and has legal custodial responsibility for their minor child or children. Additionally, Usakli (2018) described a single parent as someone with a child or children but no husband, wife, or partner who lives with them. For this study, single parents will be considered students who are parenting in a household comprised of one parent or guardian responsible for at least one child under the age of 18. In this situation, the other parent is absent from the household due to death, divorce, separation, or because the choice was made that they would not be present to support the child or children. Separation may include legal and temporary separation where the other parent is temporarily unavailable to help care for the child or children. Single parenting is not living in a household where partners (married or not) are present and helping support the child or children. Exploring this phenomenon by examining the student's perspective will provide a deeper understanding of the essence of being a community college student and a single parent.

Research Questions

To better understand the experiences of this population of students, my phenomenological study will examine students' experiences of being single parents while attending community colleges. The central question that will drive this research is:

Research Question 1. What are the lived experiences of single parents attending community college?

Further questions that can assist in answering this central question may include:

Research Question 2. What are the participants' perceptions of being single parents and college students?

Research Question 3. How do participants describe their motivation to succeed in college?

Research Question 4. What are the participants' perceptions of any challenges they may have encountered?

Research Question 5. How do the participants describe their needs as college students?

Research Question 6. What are the participants' perceptions of their support systems, both personal and institutional?

Significance of the Study

This qualitative study has several implications for single parents, institutions of higher education, and contributions to the literature. First, studies have shown that the number of single mothers attending college has doubled in the past 20 years, and these parenting students have many unique needs (Kruvelis et al., 2017). This large number of students deserve the opportunity for more in-depth studies. Additional research can provide a better understanding of their challenges, discover contributions to their success, and identify areas where support can be

improved. This study is significant because it focuses on the lived experiences of single mothers and single fathers. While much of the past research has focused on only single mothers, this study will examine the experiences of single mothers and fathers who juggle multiple roles and responsibilities. This study is significant because single-parent students have often been grouped into the research of all nontraditional students, which has not considered the multifaceted needs of single parents. Further still, this study focuses on non-residential, commuter students who struggle with barriers on and off-campus. Therefore, this study will draw attention to the experiences of community college students, which can help community colleges identify areas where they can better recruit and serve this population. This study also will contribute to existing literature that can help close the gap in previous research on single parents attending a higher education institution. Expanding upon the existing body of knowledge will provide greater credibility to the research on this population of students.

Definition of Terms

The following terms will be defined as seen below:

Lived experiences – According to Adams and van Manen (2018), lived experiences are identified as experiences as we live through them and recognize them as a particular type of experience. Additionally, Given (2008) identified lived experiences as the understanding of experiences, decisions, and opportunities and how these factors influence our perception of knowledge.

Nontraditional student – Students who meet at least one of the following criteria: delayed college enrollment; employed full-time; financially independent; has children; is a single parent; or is age 25 years or older (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017).

Single parent – Cornell Law School (2016) defined a single parent as an individual who is unmarried or legally separated from their spouse and has legal custodial responsibility for their minor child or children. Additionally, Usakli (2018) described a single parent as someone with a child or children but no husband, wife, or partner who lives with them.

Single parent student – Students who are parenting in a household comprised of one parent or guardian responsible for at least one child under 18. In this situation, the other parent is absent from the home due to death, divorce, separation, or because the choice was made that they would not be present to support the child or children. Separation may include legal and temporary separation where the other parent is temporarily unavailable to help care for the child or children. Single parenting is not living in a household where partners (married or not) are present and helping support the child or children.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations are inherent in all research. Limitations are areas where the researcher cannot control the process, including assumptions made by the researcher. For this study, the research is limited by the suitability of the theoretical framework. The theoretical framework chosen for this study is not specifically designed to study single parents attending community college; therefore, it may not appropriately determine the point of view of each study participant. Next, this research is limited as it assumes the data-collecting method used to study participants is consistent with other research. This research is limited as it assumes the phenomenon explored is clearly defined. It assumes the definition of single parents attending community colleges is understood. Also, it assumes the participants understand the concepts of support, motivation, and challenges related to their lived experiences.

This study is limited by its participants as it assumes they are open and willing to share their ideas, opinions, and personal experiences. Participant responses will be perceptions voiced by the participants; however, the researcher cannot control if participants share all their experiences. Additionally, the study is limited by the participant's ability to understand the interview questions and their ability to articulate thorough responses. Further, the study results are limited because the data collected may not represent the entire single-parent population. The opinions of those participants willing to share their experiences may not be the same as those who do not participate. The data collected from a small group of community college students cannot be generalized to an entire population of single parents; instead, the data may be transferrable as readers may find similarities between their own experiences and the experiences of these participants. Finally, within this study are limitations regarding data analysis. Therefore, the biases and experiences of the researcher may affect the study results, and the same data analyzed by a different researcher might yield different results.

Delimitations are used to control the study and to define study margins. My study includes several delimitations. First, the number of participants was set. The participants of this study are delimited to higher education students who are 18 years old or older, single parents with custodial responsibility to their child or children, single parents who have recently attended a community college, and single parents living within the United States. The participants' self-reporting of their perspectives and the meaning they have given to their experiences delimits this study. The theoretical perspective that will guide the research process also delimits the study.

Additionally, the interview protocol and the research questions asked of each participant delimit the study. Finally, delimitations include the ability for the study results to be generalizable. The study results cannot be generalized to the entire population of single parents.

However, it can be transferable to those who fall within the margins of higher education students 18 years old or older, single parents with custodial responsibility to their child or children, single parents who are attending or recently attended a community college, and single parents living within the United States.

Statement of the Researcher's Perspective

As the researcher of this project, I have firsthand knowledge of being a single parent while pursuing a higher education credential. I spent seven years as a single parent, and during this time, I worked full-time and took classes part-time as my schedule allowed it. As I reflect upon my experience, I recall both money and time being scarce commodities and college classes were hard to fit into my work schedule as I often worked 12-hour days. While I knew obtaining a higher education credential would be a massive step for my son and me, my other responsibilities always took priority at that time. Because of my own experiences, I believe I have a better understanding of the responsibilities surrounding this student population.

However, I also understand that my experience was 20 years ago and that many things have changed. For example, the cost of attending college has increased tremendously. However, financial opportunities and support systems have also improved since that time. Therefore, I acknowledge my understanding that lived experiences of single parents today may or may not parallel my own. Furthermore, I understand that my experience as a single mother may not parallel the experiences of a single father. Therefore, while my point of view and past experiences will likely guide the design of this project, the intent of this project is not to compare my own experiences but rather to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of today's single parents attending community college.

Overview of the Study

This study contains five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the study topic. It also includes a statement of the problem being examined, highlights the purpose statement, describes the significance of the study, addresses the research questions which guide the study, provides definitions of key terms, acknowledges the study's limitations and delimitations, and provides a statement of the researcher's perspective. Chapter 2 presents a collection of previous literature relevant to the study, including pertinent information about single parents. Chapter 3 explains the design of the study. It includes the research method, an overview of the research questions, a description of the researcher's role, and a review of the sample population, data collection method, and data analysis method. Chapter 3 also includes specific details regarding the trustworthiness of the research and the ethical considerations. Chapter 4 provides the research results, and Chapter 5 discusses the research findings, identifies implications for higher education practices, and recommends ideas for future research.

Chapter 2. Review of Literature

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative, phenomenological study was designed to explore the lived experiences of single parents earning a higher education credential at a community college. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), phenomenological research is designed to study multiple individuals who have all experienced a specific phenomenon to describe the essence of these lived experiences. This approach allows phenomenologists to explore experiences from the subject's point of view. The structure of this research will rely upon the theoretical assumptions of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow's work is known as the self-actualization theory and stems from a motivational framework that evaluates human needs and motivational factors (Cherry, 2020).

Maslow identified five categories of needs that transcend upward and follow a hierarchical pattern, with the lower-level needs being the most critical (Maslow, 1954). At the bottom of the hierarchical pyramid are physiological needs such as food, shelter, and other survival needs. This is followed by a second layer called safety needs. In discussing lower-level needs, Maslow (1954) suggested that people do not have the desire to decorate their homes or dress well when they are dying of thirst or are threatened by a disaster.

The third level of need is social needs, which include the need for love and affection. Maslow (1954) described this need as a desire for belonging, where hunger pangs are replaced by a longing for friendships and family, and individuals suffering to fill this need have feelings of loneliness, rejection, and isolation. The fourth level is the need for esteem and approval. Maslow (1954) identified esteem as a desire for achievement, competence, confidence, recognition, and appreciation. The top level of the pyramid is a need for self-actualization. Self-

actualization refers to someone reaching their fullest potential and is considered the highest peak of the hierarchical pyramid (Maslow, 1954). According to Maslow (1954), self-actualization refers to being true to nature; therefore, a musician must make music, and an artist must paint. McLeod (2020) asserted that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory emphasizes that higher-level needs, such as esteem and self-actualization, cannot be reached until lower-level needs are first met. Maslow (1954) acknowledged that a starving individual would consider unlimited food an ideal state of being. However, when there is unlimited bread, and the stomach is full, higher-order needs will emerge; when these are satisfied, even higher levels of need will develop (Maslow, 1954).

A review of previous literature illustrated some of these assumptions of need and motivation, as many researchers documented how single parents prioritized their basic needs and the safety of their children over their personal goals and aspirations. For example, Miller (2012) recognized how single-parent students prioritized essential needs such as food and shelter over higher education goals. Stack and Meredith (2017) found that single parents were willing to sacrifice their higher-order needs to ensure the needs of their children were met. Kruevelis et al. (2017) associated lower-level physiological and safety needs as reasons why students delayed their educational endeavors or dropped out of school.

In discussing esteem, Maslow (1954) spoke of esteem as achievement and self-worth. This can be evidenced by previous research that pointed out single parents as goal-setters who seek achievement and better opportunities after first assuring their basic needs and financial concerns are met. Past research also named esteem a significant motivational factor and documented single parents' acknowledgments that they needed to prove that they could be successful for themselves and their children. Lindsay and Gillum (2018) reported that single

parents believed they needed to model the values and work ethic they wanted to see in their children. Additionally, these study participants believed that all their hard work would provide a better future. Further still, as students gained confidence in their abilities to succeed, their resiliency improved, and Lovell (2011) communicated a significant difference in the persistence levels of parenting students versus non-parenting students.

Maslow's humanistic approach to psychology highlights growth and self-actualization and points out an individual's ability to be effective, add value to their life, and reach their fullest potential (Maslow, 1954). Maslow (1954) discussed the need for growth and suggested that growth did not come from seeking out something someone did not have but rather from an internal desire to grow as a person. Growth and adding value are also evidenced in previous literature as researchers documented single parents who reported their need to seek higher levels of accomplishment. It is also evidenced within this population of students as studies revealed their desire to set goals to attain better opportunities, discover personal fulfillment, and achieve life-long goals (Wahl, 2018).

Zaky (2018) explained that Maslow's Humanistic Learning Theory focuses on expectations such as autonomy, dignity, virtue, and responsibility. He described this approach as a theory that focuses on personal experiences and self-awareness while also showing concern for potential growth (Zaky, 2018). In discussing self-awareness, Maslow (1954) stated, "...insight rather than gratification...is the important medicine (p. 242). This knowledge aligns well with the phenomenological approach to research, which is also attentive to personal insight and the essence of personal experiences. Therefore, using this theoretical framework to explore the lived experiences of single parents will help explain what motivates single parents to attend college and will highlight why physiological and safety needs may take priority or hinder persistence.

Examining single parents through this motivational lens respects the participants by providing the opportunity for them to tell their own stories. It also aids in identifying obstacles to their growth and opportunities to advance toward their highest level of potential (self-actualization).

Introduction to Parenting Students

Statistics from the 2016 census identified 11 million single parents living in the United States (Whyte, 2020). Four years later, the U. S. Census (2021) disclosed that over 19 million children live with either their mother only (15.3 million) or their father only (4.5 million). Approximately 3.8 million students attending college each year are parents, and among this group are 1.7 million single mothers (Cruse et al., 2019). This number increased to approximately 2 million when single fathers were included (Gaffney, 2020). National University (2022) documented that the median age of single-parent students is 30 years old, that 44% of these parents were also working full-time jobs, and that over half of this population were people of color, with 33% being African American, 21 % Hispanic, and 13% Asian.

While being a single parent can be an overwhelming, burdensome responsibility, Weissman (2021) suggested that a higher education credential can help alleviate some of this burden. Weissman (2021) indicated that for every level of education a single parent completes, their chances of living in poverty decline by 32 %. Earning a higher education diploma has been recognized as a steppingstone toward receiving higher earnings, better benefits, increased opportunities, and an overall sense of accomplishment. Duquaine-Watson (2017) called a higher education degree a ticket to success. However, many single parents believe that higher education is out of their reach, while others have attempted to earn a credential but did not complete it because financial and family responsibilities took priority. Kruevelis et al. (2017) admitted that the burden can be significant but also acknowledged that so can be the benefits; therefore, this

qualitative study examined the lived experiences of single parents pursuing a higher education credential at a community college.

Review of Previous Literature

The purpose of this literature review was to examine the existing knowledge of single parents attending higher education institutions. My investigation into previous research revealed that single parents are often grouped into the analysis of nontraditional students. According to Muniz (2021), it is estimated that almost three of every four students identify themselves as nontraditional students. Much of the research considered nontraditional students as students who attend part-time, students who are employed full-time, students who are not financially reliant on their parents, students who have dependent children, students who are single, students who did not graduate high school but instead earned a GED equivalency certificate, and students who have delayed their attendance to a college or university. Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2017) supported this research by describing the characteristics of nontraditional learners as students who delay enrollment, are financially independent, are single parents, have dependents, or work full-time jobs. While single parents fit into the nontraditional student category, not all nontraditional students will have the exact needs of single parents. Typically, single parents can be described using several characteristics identified by Muniz. For this reason, single parents are likely to have more intense struggles than other nontraditional students.

The following review of previous literature will reveal many commonalities within the experiences reported by students who were single parents. Multiple sources highlighted factors that contributed to student success and hindered the student's achievement of a higher education credential. These sources revealed significant hindrances to attaining a higher education credential, including financial hardship, childcare needs, family responsibilities, academic

adversity, and emotional distress. Additionally, these sources highlighted contributions to success, including factors that inspired students to attend and persist through a higher education program, services that supported single-parent students' needs on and off-campus, and resources that have proved beneficial for this population of students.

Adversity that Hindered Success

The Michigan Partners Project (MPP) (2016) showed that parenting students face many unique challenges beyond the demanding responsibility of caring for children. Results suggested that this population is more likely to experience financial hardship, which means they will struggle to find adequate housing, childcare, and insurance. In addition, this population is more likely to work full-time, which means they will have less time for school responsibilities. This population will also be less prepared, less supported, and less connected to their college campus (MPP, 2016). Brown and Nichols (2013) reported similar themes associated with the difficulties of single parents attending college. This study disclosed personal stress areas for the participants, including the availability of resources, childcare, financial aid, class schedules, and transportation. In another study, Miller (2012) stated that one in every four students enrolled in higher education is a parent, and he recognized the following challenges that hinder their success: affordable childcare; balancing work, home, and academic responsibilities; and financial limitations.

Previous research also determined areas where campus culture and policy created adversity for single parents. Many researchers disapproved of how higher education institutions handled nontraditional students, such as single parents. Single parents have unique needs, and many college campuses across the country have failed to provide this population of students with the access and equity needed to better their educational and economic status (Sabates et al.,

2011). Dodson and Deprez (2019) criticized higher education institutions for their lack of support for single parents by stating that higher education aims to support the standard student. They described the typical student as a single male, housed on campus, financially supported by parents, entering straight out of high school, and free to make self-serving choices. Pearson (2019) also called out higher education institutions for their lack of support for student parents. Pearson (2019) described the culture of higher education as a culture that revolved around the traditional student and used the college's vocabulary to prove this point. For example, colleges and universities use terms such as nontraditional and adult learners to describe student parents, highlighting the belief that student parents are not considered regular students. Pearson (2019) also suggested that many colleges are utterly unaware of the parental status of their students and identified this group as the "invisible, unacknowledged population" (p. 43).

Lewis (2021) noted that higher education systems are not set up to support the success of students who are single parents. Lewis (2021) suggested that classes and campus life are designed to help the traditional student who is neither working nor parenting. Unfortunately, many single-parent students do both while earning their higher education credentials. Additionally, in a study of single mothers, Kruvelis et al. (2017) revealed that this population of students faces significant obstacles that make it very hard to persevere. They called on higher education institutions to invest in support and specific programs detailed to the needs of single mothers to help improve graduation rates, increase earnings, and raise long-term multigenerational benefits (Kruvelis et al., 2017). Graham and Bassett (2012) suggested that campus policies create obstacles for single parents. For example, a campus attendance policy may not consider the number of days a parent may be late or need off because of sickness or injuries in their children (Graham & Bassett, 2012). Colleges often get stuck in tradition and

focus on what has worked in the past. However, the demographic landscape looks nothing like the traditional college, and this review of the literature reveals a need for significant change and increased support for students who are single parents.

Financial Adversity. Financial concerns have been identified as crucial reasons many single parents enter a higher education program. However, it has also been recognized as why many will struggle to complete their degrees (Stack & Meredith, 2017). This financial hardship can be a continuous cycle that hinders some from starting a higher education program and stops others from finishing a program. It also follows many single parents even after they complete. Gunn-Wright (2012) communicated that some single parents never find adequate funding to begin a higher education program. Stack and Meredith (2017) discovered that single parents would sacrifice their own needs, including attending college, to ensure the needs of their children are met. Additionally, Pendleton and Atella (2020) explained that financial struggles could continue even after graduation as many single parents borrow more money than non-parenting students. Their study acknowledged that single-parent loan amounts are two to three times greater than those of students without children (Pendleton & Atella, 2020).

According to research by Kruevelis et al. (2017), only two out of ten single-parent women completed their higher education program. Students reported that financial and family responsibilities were their main reasons for not finishing. Poindexter (2017) also recognized financial concerns as a significant reason many student parents could not complete college degrees. According to this research, four out of ten participants named economic issues as the leading cause of their inability to complete (Poindexter, 2017). The Institution for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) supported the findings of Kruevelis et al. and Poindexter by providing statistics that further paint a grim financial picture for single mothers. The IWPR statistics

showed that 89% of single mothers in college are considered low income, 63% are considered at or below the federal poverty level, and 81% have an expected family contribution of zero (IWPR, 2017).

Koh et al. (2017) also discerned financial hardships as an emerging theme among single parents attending college. They researched children of single parents and provided insights into the child's view of their single parent attending higher education. Most of the participants voiced a significant theme of financial adversity. These children knew their parents had to work but work only paid the bills and never pulled them out of poverty. The participants in this study agreed that obtaining a higher education credential was an opportunity for their single parents; however, they also acknowledged that financial struggles often hindered this process (Koh et al., 2017). According to Campbell et al. (2016), single parents and their children struggle with physical and emotional distress. This research revealed that the leading cause of this distress was often financial issues, as single parents had higher poverty rates than two-parenting households (Carpenter et al., 2016).

Stack and Meredith (2017) interviewed 15 single parents who described financial hardship. These hardships included food and fuel deficiencies, sacrifices of their own needs to ensure the needs of their children, and emotional distress that included feelings of isolation, anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts. Chandler (2010) discovered similar results when exploring the experiences of single mothers attending graduate school. In this study, approximately one-half of the participants described their experience as one that included financial strain. This strain was considered a significant barrier for one-third of the participants. One participant indicated that she would be homeless if it were not for the help she received from her family (Chandler, 2010).

Childcare Difficulties. Many single parents must work while they are attending their higher education programs. They must balance school, work, and home responsibilities and maintain reliable and safe childcare for their children while juggling these responsibilities. According to Carlson (2015), childcare was one of the most essential services for parenting students, and obtaining affordable and safe childcare has been a massive hurdle that created challenges for single parents attending a higher education program. However, acquiring and maintaining quality childcare has positively impacted student retention and success. Miller et al. (2011) found that almost 90% of the study respondents acknowledged that access to childcare was a leading influencer in their decision to attend college. A separate study on public universities in Georgia reported that students with quality childcare assistance improved both their progress and completion of a degree program. These students also reported a reduction in parental and financial stress, an improvement in staying focused on their coursework, and an increase in the amount of time they could spend on parenting (Quality Care for Children, 2020).

Previous research identified childcare as a priority topic of discussion about college retention. Boressoff (2012) indicated that quality childcare substantially impacts academic success. He determined childcare assistance to be an essential component for maintaining a college's mission, student enrollment, retention, and graduation, not to mention the effects quality childcare has on the lives of the children. Boressoff (2012) also suggested that quality childcare assistance should extend beyond a student's time in the classroom. In another study, Hartman (2012) documented the top colleges for single parents and showed that 11 of the 20 colleges had childcare services on campus or helped subsidize childcare costs.

Lovell (2014) observed that childcare services offered on campus could provide an additional layer of support to students who are also single parents. This research recognized that

single parents who utilize on-campus childcare facilities had more confidence in their ability to attend regularly and continue through to graduation. The students also had a stronger connection to their campus. Graham and Bassett (2012) also discussed on-campus childcare programs indicating that single parents should get priority. In addition, they recognized emergency care as a great way to reduce economic barriers for single parents while also improving retention rates. Graham and Bassett (2012) discussed Richland College as an example of a college meeting students' needs. At Richland College, single parents utilize the on-campus childcare center as an emergency drop-off center without a scheduled appointment when babysitters are sick, or emergencies arise (Graham & Bassett, 2012).

Family Responsibilities. Students who are single parents often have role conflicts as they try to balance the responsibilities of being a parent, a student, and usually an employee (Lovell & Scott, 2020). Previous research often branded these struggles as conflicting roles and described this as a competition of demanding responsibilities vying for attention. Unfortunately, single parents often have to choose between fulfilling the needs of one role while feeling guilty and inept in the others. Poindexter (2017) revealed that family responsibility is a significant reason many student parents cannot complete college degrees. According to this research, 60% of his participants named family obligations as the main prohibitor to their success (Poindexter, 2017).

A significant finding in the previous research exposed that many parenting students struggle with managing the time they need to commit to their conflicting roles. Lovell and Scott (2020) provided data recognizing the responsibilities of being a parent and pointed to time management as a tremendous challenge. Participants explained the balancing act of completing daily activities. A typical day consisted of getting the kids up, getting them fed and ready, getting

yourself fed and ready, getting them to school on time, getting yourself to class on time, picking them up on time, doing your homework, and assuring the children get their homework completed (Lovell & Scott, 2020). In this study, participants described the exhausting nature of balancing time for children, homework, self, and somewhere in between, trying to find a window of time to sleep. Overall, the participants agreed that there was just not enough time. Lovell and Scott (2020) also talked about the importance of self-care. In their research, participants admitted they had no time for themselves and described this experience as a feeling of defeat. They acknowledged giving in to the reality of their situation, which meant there was no time for relaxation or fun and no time to prioritize self-care.

Brooks (2012) found that time management was a vital issue for students who are working full-time, caring for children, and attending a higher education program. Unfortunately, the study also revealed that these students often make up time by sleeping fewer hours, which the participants admitted affected their ability to function and be productive. Additionally, in a study of approximately 500 nontraditional students, students were asked what factors most impacted their decision to remain or withdraw from higher education. The two most prevalent answers were the struggles between work and school responsibilities and the overwhelming struggle between conflicting roles such as parenting, work, and school (Markle, 2015).

Academic Struggles. Previous research suggested that single parents attending a college or university may struggle as they are often less prepared to begin the rigor of an academic program (MPP, 2016). Previous research showed several reasons why single parents may struggle academically. One reason was the lack of knowledge and access to computers and technology. Henson (2014) provided three technological barriers for single-parent students: a lack of access to computers and technology, a lack of skills related to using technology, and a

lack of confidence to learn new skills. Another reason single parents struggle academically is that they are not academically prepared to start a higher education program. Landgraf (2015) reported that student parents are more likely to have lower ACT or SAT scores and lag in basic literacy skills than non-parenting students. Moreover, those who lack basic math and writing skills often find it hard to carry a typical load of classes (Landgraf, 2015). However, it is important to note that previous research has also discovered a positive relationship between improving parents' literacy and increasing the developmental intellect of their children (Sabates et al., 2011).

An additional reason single-parenting students struggle academically is that they lack self-esteem and underestimate their ability to succeed. Quimby and O'Brien (2006) found that nontraditional female students have lower self-esteem than traditional students. Arshad et al. (2015) found a positive relationship between self-esteem and academic performance. They also recognized that students with low anxiety had higher GPAs than students with high anxiety (Arshad et al., 2015).

Previous research discovered that single-parenting students struggled because they had problems with the traditional class schedule and were overwhelmed by the time commitment needed to succeed. Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2010) pointed out that most schools offer academic support services, such as tutoring services and computer labs, that can be utilized by single-parenting students. However, this support is often poorly coordinated, not easily accessed, and not always available during times that meet the single parent's schedule. Yakaboski (2010) also pointed out disparities in college schedules. She called single-parenting students an underserved population with many barriers that can influence their admission and retention. One of these discrepancies is how college schedules and holidays do not parallel K-12 calendars and

days off. Another is that college semesters do not start or end at the same time as K-12 schools. Additionally, weather-related closings and breaks rarely match up, and single-parenting students are significantly disadvantaged when taking summer classes (Yakaboski, 2010). Finally, classes and schedules change each semester. For example, a student will need to attain childcare and take time away from work two days a week one semester; however, the next semester may require three or even four days to take the same number of classes. Time requirements are much greater than the time needed to attend class. Students must also allow time for homework and study groups.

Social detachment or isolation is another struggle for single parents on college campuses. Duquaine-Watson (2007) presented findings that showed disengagement, and students revealed their feelings of being left out of the social side of college life. These students also admitted that this separated them from the younger, non-parenting students. This disconnect was also found between students and faculty. One student explained a conversation with her teacher about having childcare issues, and the teacher's only response was, "not my problem" (Duquaine-Watson, 2007, p. 236).

Emotional Struggles. According to Campbell et al. (2016), children of single parents and the custodial parent had higher risks for physical, mental, and emotional issues, including higher risks of suicide attempts, drug and alcohol issues, and depression. Individual stories I have heard in my profession have shown single parents' emotional challenges as they earn their college degrees. These stories have included feelings of frustration generated by unsupportive teachers or disorganized classes and feelings of anxiety that come from being overwhelmed by the volume of obligations.

A review of previous research showed many other emotional challenges that have hindered this population of students as they attend college and maintain the responsibilities of being single parents. Shenoy et al. (2016) collected data on the mental health of single mothers attending community college. In their study, students were asked if they experienced negative moods or suicidal thoughts, and the results indicated high patterns in both. The participants reported hopelessness, exhaustion, loneliness, and anger (Shenoy et al., 2016). Vyskocil (2018) provided several emotional themes from single parents attending higher education. A significant word that surfaced during these interviews was guilt. Often these feelings of guilt emerged when educational performance was lacking or when students missed their children's events (Vyskocil, 2018). Another word that surfaced in this research was pressure. Pressure came from conflicting responsibilities within school, work, and caring for children. Many believed there was a struggle between being a good parent and a good student (Vyskocil, 2018). Polakow et al. (2014) also reported guilt as an added stressor for single parents. These study participants called out guilt and other emotions as products of time taken away from their children. Additionally, Brooks (2014) explored the emotional experiences of student parents and named guilt as both an emotional challenge and a motivator.

Lovell and Scott (2020) also observed several emotional struggles associated with the dual role of parenting and being a college student. In their study, participants reported stress, guilt, and isolation as their top emotional struggles (Lovell & Scott, 2020). When talking about stress, students used words like anger, tears, lack of sleep, feeling overwhelmed, a sense of panic, and a feeling that one can never relax. The students revealed that their feeling of guilt stemmed from not paying enough attention to their children. One student talked about the guilt that engulfed her when she saw other families together and saw other kids getting the attention

they deserved. The students often stated they had no social life when talking about isolation. They felt like they had neither friends to hang out with nor the time to hang with them, which also led to guilt because they failed to make their friends a priority (Lovell & Scott, 2020). Additionally, this study identified a need for more social support services on college campuses geared toward parents and families. In another study, Vowels (2019) identified some of the same challenges, including struggling with time management, conflicts of dual roles, guilt, stress, and lack of self-care. Vowels (2019) also noted areas where institutional support could improve, such as scheduling family-friendly events, offering family healthcare plans, and providing childcare on campus.

Contributions to Success

The Institution for Women's Policy Research (2017) showed that 28% of single mothers graduate within six years compared to 57% of female students who are not parenting. While these numbers are less than promising, it is important to examine the characteristics of successful people to help identify what aided their success. Factors contributing to college success include being strongly skilled in time and organizational management, communication, and work ethics. As previously mentioned, past research recognized time management as a barrier to success; however, those students who could effectively organize their day and manage their time more efficiently were often less stressed and better prepared to face their daily challenges. Cyril (2015) called time management, self-management, recognizing it as a valuable tool for single-parent students with very hectic schedules. Prioritizing and managing daily activities helped single-parent students prepare and organize their day. Effective time management begins with identifying the actions that need to be prioritized and organized, and it requires a great deal of discipline to be effective (Cyril, 2015). Chambers (2020) discussed organization, and her

participants recognized their ability to organize and prioritize as a critical strategy and skill contributing to their success.

Regarding communication skills, students who can communicate their needs to their teachers and support systems will better find the resources they need to succeed. However, communication should not stop with the student's ability to communicate. Teachers and student support personnel need to better communicate their role in student success by clarifying what services are offered and what services are required by students. Additionally, Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2017) suggested that nontraditional students, such as single parents, prefer straightforward communication where the professor or the syllabi lays out specific expectations, homework assignments, and classroom policies.

Research has also shown that a student's work ethic can influence their success. Regarding work ethic, Lindsay and Gillum (2018) explored the college experiences of single mothers. They determined that these parents believed they needed to model the values and work ethic they wanted to see in their children, and they believed all their hard work would provide a better future for them and their children. The resiliency of single parents has also been a solid contribution to success. Lovell (2011) researched persistence among parenting and non-parenting students. She studied over 300 students and concluded that age, marital status, and gender were factors that affected persistence. She also encountered a significant difference in the persistence levels of parenting students versus non-parenting students and identified parenting students as being more persistent (Lovell, 2011). Additionally, Cruse et al. (2019) reported that while parenting students took longer to earn a degree, they often achieved a higher GPA than non-parenting students.

Further evaluation of previous research exposed motivational factors, support systems, and campus resources as key benefactors to student success. This research revealed that students were motivated by a sense of belonging, their ability to pursue their dream, and their desire to seek better opportunities. Bondar (2020) found that recognizing the things that motivate can hugely contribute to success. In addition, previous research disclosed a positive relationship between student success and having a support network. Carpenter et al. (2018) specified several support networks that influenced success, including family support, help from employers, and academic support from classmates, faculty, and staff. Additionally, the literature review discovered many valuable resources that contributed to student success. A few of these resources included single-parent scholarships, free counseling services, and extended hours for tutoring and library services.

Motivational Factors. Previous research has named many motivational factors that have inspired single parents to seek a post-secondary educational credential and have pushed students to continue their programs through graduation. Bondar (2020) specified several themes that contributed to student success, including maintaining balance through time management, personal support, finding campus connections, feeling a sense of belonging, and discovering internal motivation and commitment. In addition, previous research showed that personal fulfillment was a motivational factor.

Wahl (2018) revealed many motivational factors, including personal fulfillment and pursuing a dream career, a better job, and a better income. Other motivational factors from Wahl (2018) included increasing knowledge, achieving a life-long goal, and proving to yourself and your children that you can overcome obstacles. Additionally, Goodman and Ready (2019) found that single parents want to be role models for their children and instill the importance of

education in their children. Duquaine-Watson (2017) documented similar motivational thoughts and contended that a college degree would "...bring an escape from the American welfare trap and the ability to create a stable future" (p. 37).

Cawthon (2014) did not study single parents specifically but studied low-income higher education students, which encompassed many single-parent students, and uncovered the following intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors. Intrinsic motivation included ambition, determination to grow, and an internal belief in their ability to advance. Outside motivational factors included support systems, including friends, family, peers, faculty, and institutions (Cawthon, 2014). Additionally, van Rhijn et al. (2016) identified motivational factors, including obtaining a valued career, improving income, and gaining inspiration from relationships outside the family. Furthermore, Augustine and Crosnoe (2010) found that educated mothers showed more interest in their children's education.

Previous research also recognized these single parents' children as one of the top motivators that pushed single-parent students to persist and earn a college degree. A student once told me a story of how their child would say every morning, "I am proud of you, mommy," and this student acknowledged how this one statement kept her going. These few words were her motivation to keep pressing on, and they reminded her that the struggles would all be worth it once she completed her degree. Bondar (2020) recognized children as great motivators as he interviewed single parents, and they reflected upon their desire to break the economic chains that held them back and multiplied their struggles. Many parents in Bondar's study revealed that their children were the main reason they went to school. Cerven (2013) also highlighted children as a significant influencer on single-parenting students' motivation to persist and earn their degrees.

Stenquist (2020) noted an additional motivational factor: parents who earn a degree are more likely to have children who earn a degree.

Support Services. Previous research has shown that single-parent students greatly need other support systems. These support systems can take many forms, including parental, work, and academic support. The research described these as a positive reinforcer of single-parent student success. Palbusa and Gauvain (2017) evaluated parental support of first-generation and non-first-generation students. They recognized how support varied between these groups but realized it was crucial for both groups. For non-first-generation students, parental support was a resource to navigate the higher education process from entry to exit. Parents could not help guide the process for first-generation students, but these parents offered emotional support, which gave them encouragement and motivation (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). Wainwright and Watts (2018) experienced a similar reaction to parental support where parental relationships, particularly mothers, provided emotional support that greatly benefitted their child's college experience. Additionally, Carpenter et al. (2018) determined family and friends as great support systems as they offer emotional support, financial support, and childcare assistance.

Sallee (2015) discussed work-related support, as many student parents juggle multiple roles such as student, parent, and employee. In this research, the participants acknowledged that workplace support contributed to their success. For example, supportive employers were flexible and allowed students to adjust their schedules to attend classes, and some employers permitted the students to do homework during their work hours (Sallee, 2015). Carpenter et al. (2018) also recognized employers as supportive of academic success as they offer flexibility, understanding, and often promises of full-time employment or advancement after students complete their degrees.

Academic support was another form of support presented by the research. Miller (2012) suggested that this population of students were more likely to drop out of school than traditional students, and they were more likely to possess student debt. For this reason, Miller (2012) suggested single-parent scholarships, which could help with tuition, books, and transportation cost. According to Carpenter et al. (2018), building relationships with faculty, staff, and peers builds support networks and connections and creates a sense of belonging that motivates and pushes students toward success. Allen-Drewry (2017) explored single-parent experiences within the classroom and detected many areas where students wished for additional classroom support, including desiring academic and emotional support from faculty, wanting further assistance and clarity regarding assignments, and hoping for greater phone and email access to their professors. Vyskocil (2018) also determined a need for more family-friendly events in her study of parenting students. Lindsay and Gillum (2018) showed several areas where higher education institutions could offer increased support services. These included extended hours for computer and writing labs, college breaks that align with children's school breaks, additional tutoring services, student-parent organizations, unlimited free counseling sessions, mother-centered resource fairs, and family-friendly campuses. Vowels (2019) also identified a need for stronger on-campus support systems, additional campus resources, health services and childcare, and family-friendly events on campus.

Chambers (2020) reported that students expressed a need for increased guidance and tools to navigate the higher education process, better mental health resources, and peer support groups specific to single parenting. Chambers (2020) also discussed the benefits of classmate support. One participant described these supportive relationships by saying she gained a family when she started the program. The participant called her classmates, sisters, and life-long friends

(Chambers, 2020). Another common suggestion was to provide nontraditional students, which includes single parents, a peer mentor that can help them navigate the admissions and retention processes. Standlee (2019) talked about mentorships and the role they provide students, and she uncovered areas where mentors can offer support. These areas included navigating the college process, such as where to find academic and support resources, where to get involved in social activities, or how to drop a class. She described mentors as guides introducing students to college life, helping new students make connections, and providing answers to questions students do not know they need to ask (Standlee, 2019).

Helpful Resources. Previous research also revealed campus resources and services that contributed to student success. According to Kelley (2017), some valuable resources have included family housing options, campus childcare centers, single-parent scholarships, children's libraries, free summer camps, family field trips to historical locations, parenting skills workshops, counseling services, and assistance finding community resources. Additionally, Lovell and Scott (2020) called structure a necessity. Many participants in this study described situations where structure and daily routines improved their situation. This structured routine reduced chaos that led to stress. Developing a daily routine helped students feel organized and produced stronger feelings of control. One student described structure as a critical component of time management (Lovell & Scott, 2020).

Graham (2021) suggested that family-friendly policies were a helpful resource for single parents. She recommended flexibility in class policies to include multiple options for attending class and completing assignments. She suggested that syllabi include information about campus connections, such as student clubs and activities, and campus resources, such as counseling and tutoring services. She also proposed that instructors allow parents to bring students to class if that

was their only option (Graham, 2021). According to Graham (2021), schools should also offer a variety of course schedules that include nights and weeks, which can allow single parents to balance their many responsibilities. Finally, Graham (2021) suggested that peer networks were a great resource that provided significant benefits for learning, peer mentorship, and an opportunity to build relationships that contribute to success. Solomon's (2020) study produced similar findings related to classroom policies. She discussed social media evidence that showed some movement toward professors' willingness to allow students to bring children to class. While she acknowledged that she was not suggesting that professors agree to be babysitters, she recognized an opportunity for professors to be more supportive and better in tune with these parenting students' needs (Solomon, 2020). Additionally, Chambers (2020) interviewed single mothers who pursued a bachelor's degree, and these participants reported three main areas where higher education institutions could provide better resources. These included better financial assistance, more flexible class schedules, and increased childcare options (Chambers, 2020).

Cerven (2013) evaluated 60 low-income single mothers and documented supportive resources that the study participants described. Her results exposed a need for counseling and advising services, and she suggested that consistent, reliable guidance helped her participants stay on track. However, she also identified that some advice the students received was confusing; therefore, she highlighted the importance of meaningful and applicable counseling and advising services. Cerven (2013) also recommended a need for professional development and training that helped college faculty and staff better understand the intricacies of the single-parent life to offer personalized services to this population of students. Cerven (2013) suggested that college professors and support staff should not operate under the assumption that students understand how to schedule classes, complete FAFSA forms, or navigate any other college experience.

Cerven (2013) also proposed that student support services include exposure to community resources.

Campus support services can overlook community programs as a source of support for single moms, yet community programs can often provide tremendous benefits. One example of such a resource is the New Moms program in Chicago (Carrasco, 2022). This program serves single moms under 24 who seek a college degree in the inner-city Chicago area. The New Moms program provides these students a \$500 monthly stipend to use however they see fit and provide transportation and childcare support. Additionally, they offer parenting and career workshops and assist the students with writing resumes and cover letters (Carrasco, 2022).

Kruvelis (2017) named several college-specific resources already created to support parenting students. Some included Endicott College in Massachusetts, which offers a Keys to Degree program that provides tailored tutoring services to student parents. The University of California, San Diego, allows student parents to apply for priority enrollment to register early and get the classes that will meet their family and work needs. The University of Michigan assists low-income students with childcare assistance through the CCAMPIS Childcare Grant program, and Lane Community College in Oregon helps student parents find childcare services. The University of Alabama has parenting support programs that have developed an online forum for student parents to connect and discuss issues related to their dual roles and responsibilities. At the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities, the Student Parent Help Center provides group lunches for parenting students. Niagara County Community College in New York has created a Mapping Opportunities for Moms program offering children counseling services and toys. Additionally, at the Los Angeles Valley Community College, the Family Resource Center

has created a space for parenting students to have playgroups, baby clothes exchanges, and book exchanges (Kruvelis, 2017).

Impact of COVID-19

Over the past couple of years, COVID-19 has pushed many classes online, which has increased the frustration and anxiety levels of many single-parent students. Research has shown that online learning can be overwhelming and demanding, and often students feel unmotivated and easily distracted during virtual learning (Lawrence, 2015). Almeida et al. (2020) indicated that 1.2 billion students were affected by the pandemic, and their research identified increased feelings of anxiety, fear, and depression. Their research also showed feelings of unpredictability, loss of control, and limited resources (Almeida et al., 2020). Febrianto (2021) discussed the emotional and financial toll of being a single parent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Febrianto (2021) revealed that many single-mom students had to take on another job to meet financial needs, were forced to buy only necessities, started a side business to earn extra income, or relied on their older children to work and help support the family. Clery et al. (2021) interviewed 40 single parents during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that these single parents felt less financially secure. These participants described their situation of homeschooling and working from home as a juggling act in which it was impossible to get everything done. They described this time as uncertain and worrisome (Clery et al., 2021). Ajayi et al. (2021) deduced that single mothers experienced a more significant negative effect than two-parent families. Their research indicated numerous concerns, such as homeschooling, job loss, parental stress, housing insecurities, and grief associated with losing a loved one (Ajayi et al., 2021).

Gaps in the Research

This literature review provided a thorough review of previous research. It highlighted rich data supporting single-parent students and offered several commonalities among single parents attending a higher education institution. However, it also generated an understanding that gaps in the research remain, and more research needs to be conducted on this population of students. For example, previous researchers have often grouped single parents with all parenting students or grouped them with other nontraditional students. Thus, concluding that single parents and married parents have the exact needs or that all nontraditional students have similar struggles. However, single-parents experience challenges that are not relevant to other nontraditional students or married parents, and they often experience multiple challenges simultaneously. For this reason, additional studies specific to single-parent college students need to be conducted.

Additionally, much of the previous research has involved single mothers only and has not included the experiences of single fathers. While single mothers make up a large percentage of single-parent students, it is also essential to incorporate the challenges and needs of single fathers. It is important to determine if experiences and challenges differ when comparing single mother experiences to single father experiences. Previous research has provided little to no research on this comparison. Additionally, past literature predominantly focused on services and resources offered through the student affairs division within a college or university. It did not reveal much data on how faculty can better support students in the classroom.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic sent single parents and their children home to work and learn remotely, which inevitably placed them in the same physical classroom (Bhamani et al., 2020). With this being a recent issue, there has been little research into how this pandemic has

affected their experiences. These students were attending community colleges one day, and the next day, they were quickly forced into remote learning. Many also had children in school who were also forced into remote learning. Therefore, this research will invite participants to share their stories of how COVID -19 affected their learning experience.

Summary

This review of the previous literature has illustrated that the population of single parents attending a college or university has been continuously growing for several years. It has also shown that single parents have multiple roles as many attend school and care for their home and family while working at least part-time; many work full-time. Being a student who is also a single parent is a rewarding yet overwhelming job that brings about many struggles; however, the research showed that 2 million students were attempting this feat in 2020. My review of the research found many reported commonalities among students who are single parents. The study highlighted factors that hindered student success, including financial adversity, childcare needs, family responsibilities, academic adversity, and emotional distress. It also revealed inspiring contributions to success that helped students persist and earn their degrees. These included motivational factors such as finding a sense of belonging, fulfilling their lifelong dream, or gaining a sense of purpose. It included the benefits of having a support system, including family support, work support, and academic support. It included supportive relationships with faculty, staff, peers, and mentors. It also included supportive institutional and classroom policies. Finally, contributions to success included campus resources such as free counseling and tutoring services, extended service hours, family-friendly events, flexible schedules, and on-campus childcare services.

My qualitative research examined the lived experiences of single parents pursuing a higher education credential at a community college. Conducting this study on single parents

extended the current body of knowledge and aimed to close the gaps in existing research. For example, previous researchers grouped single parents with all parenting students or grouped them with other nontraditional students. Also, previous research involved studying single mothers only and excluded single fathers. My study also provided greater credibility and trustworthiness to the research on this population of students. Additionally, continuing the research on single parents supplied more current data to inform future policies and practices associated with single-parenting students.

Chapter 3. Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of single parents who are pursuing a higher education credential at a community college. This phenomenological study was designed to understand the essence of the experience of being single parents and students. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), phenomenological researchers describe the essence of lived experiences within a particular phenomenon presented through interviews or observations of several individual participants. This chapter contains the phenomenological method used to research the perceptions of single parents attending community colleges. Also included in this chapter are the research questions and a statement of the researcher's role in the study. Chapter 3 detailed the study participants and their selection, explained the data collection method, and described the data analysis method. Additionally, Chapter 3 provides an explanation of credibility and trustworthiness as it applies to this study and discusses ethical considerations. The chapter will close with a summary of the research methodology.

Phenomenological Qualitative Method

Creswell and Creswell (2018) described the qualitative research method as a method that provides emerging research where participants are interviewed using open-ended questions, and data is analyzed to find patterns and themes that help the researcher establish meaning. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described the qualitative research process as the researcher's intention to provide an understanding of experiences. The purpose of this research study was to establish meaning and gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of single parents attending community college. There are several qualitative research methods, and I utilized the phenomenological research design for this study.

Phenomenological research is best used when researchers want to understand an experience as it is understood by those who have experienced it (Cohen et al., 2000). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described the phenomenology research method as an approach that helps the researcher better understand how individuals view their situation and how they make meaning of it. Additionally, Peoples (2021) described the idea behind phenomenology as a method in which individuals strictly understand experiences as they are lived. Meaning is found by studying only experiences as they are seen by the individual who lived them. Researchers interview multiple participants and seek commonalities amongst the study participants to clarify their understanding of the phenomenon (Peoples, 2021). A phenomenological research design will include identifying an experience to explore, collecting data from those who have experienced the phenomenon to determine what those experiences were like, identifying commonalities of what individuals experienced and how they experienced it, and finally culminating the results into a general description of what it means to be (Peoples, 2021).

Phenomenological research is guided by a phenomenological philosophy. To answer the central question of this research study, what are the lived experiences of single parents attending community colleges, I selected the interpretive, hermeneutic approach to phenomenology created by Heidegger. Heidegger wrote that researchers could not bracket their knowledge or separate themselves from being in the world (Peoples, 2021). Heidegger (1953) called this concept *Dasein*, which means to be present or "...being in the world" (p. 37). Heidegger called the process of understanding the hermeneutic circle, which involves revisions of understanding. Using the hermeneutic approach, researchers acknowledge preunderstanding or foresight as parts of a whole, and as researchers increase their understanding, their foresight is revised (Peoples, 2018).

Heidegger was a student of Edmund Husserl, who was considered the father of phenomenology (El-Sherif, 2017). From Heidegger's perspective, hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with meaning or the sense of being (Heidegger, 1953). Peoples (2021) added that Hermeneutics involves interpreting how people make sense of the world. The word hermeneutic means to interpret, and from a philosophical stance, hermeneutic research intends to combine science and thought through language. Fuster-Guillen (2019) stated that "...language is the house of being" (p. 220). Being a follower of the philosophical tenets of Heidegger, van Manen (2011) stated that all methods of awareness and all descriptions are interpretive. Adams and van Manen (2018) also suggested that phenomenology is hermeneutic when the research method is both descriptive and interpretive rather than just descriptive. Therefore, this study aims to interpret what it means to be a single parent attending community college.

Research Questions

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the central research question is a broad question that encompasses the central concept of the study; however, researchers ask subsequent questions to narrow the focus. Kross and Giust (2019) stated that research questions provide structure and clearly express the studied phenomenon. The central question guiding this study was,

Research Question 1. What are the lived experiences of single parents attending community college?

Further questions that assisted in answering this central question and narrowed the focus included:

Research Question 2. What are the participants' perceptions of being single parents and college students?

Research Question 3. How do participants describe their motivation to succeed in college?

Research Question 4. What are the participants' perceptions of any challenges they may have encountered?

Research Question 5. How do the participants describe their needs as college students?

Research Question 6. What are the participants' perceptions of their support systems, both personal and institutional?

Reflexivity and the Researcher's Role

As the primary researcher performing this study, I took on several roles. I was a data observer, data collector, interviewer, data analyzer, and interpreter, all of which made me a primary instrument of the research process. One essential role of the researcher was to mitigate internal bias, as my thoughts, experiences, and knowledge had the potential to influence the research process. To monitor this bias, qualitative researchers use the process of reflexivity to assure the integrity of both themselves and their study.

Reflexivity is a process of self-reflection where the researcher can examine their thoughts, feelings, and reactions to their research. Creswell and Creswell (2018) called reflexivity an essential characteristic of qualitative research and explained that it clarifies researcher bias by examining the influence these biased actions have on their research. Reflection includes exploring your role as a researcher, background, culture, and past experiences, which can shape the researcher's interpretations. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described the reflexivity process as "... rigorous self-scrutiny by the researcher throughout the entire process" (p. 332).

My personal experiences have shaped my perceptions of single parents attending a higher education institution. I was a single mother for seven years, and I attempted to take college-level classes on various occasions during this time in my life. I believe this experience enhanced my understanding and sensitivity toward single parents and helped me to better relate to the issues facing single parents attending community colleges. However, I also acknowledge that my bias toward this population of students could have influenced or shaped the research questions, processes, and data analysis. I have also worked as a student services professional at a community college for 20 years; therefore, I must also acknowledge that my experiences could have influenced my thoughts regarding student support.

Reflexivity helps researchers keep track of their decision-making processes and encourages them to document their thoughts during the interviewing process. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) suggested reflexive journaling to explore your role, background, and experiences. Throughout the research process, I utilized reflexive journaling techniques using textual and reflective memos. According to Birks et al. (2008), writing memos aids the research project by expounding upon the researcher's thoughts and understanding, and it helps the researcher answer questions and pulls out the meaning. Textual memos were notes documented as data findings were recorded and examined. These textual notes started as thoughts or observations but led to specific codes and themes. Reflective memos identified my thoughts and feelings during the interview process. Writing reflective memos allowed me to reflect on what had been completed, examine my influence on the research, identify my feelings toward gathering the data, and detect mistakes I made during the interviewing process.

Additionally, researchers use member checking to reduce bias. Member checking involves asking participants to review the researcher's transcriptions to assure data accuracy

(Peoples, 2021). Birt et al. (2016) called this process the participant's validation process, which can act as a check and balance for eliminating bias. For this research, member checking involved asking participants to review their transcripts and provide feedback to ensure accuracy.

Participants

The participants for this qualitative study were college students who were single parents and attended or recently attended a community college. This population of single parents was 18 years old or older and residing within the United States. In my study, data were collected from 13 participants. The participants included both female and male single parents. I interviewed ten female participants and three male participants. The study also included both full-time and part-time enrolled students. I interviewed nine students who attended full-time and four who attended part-time.

The participants were selected using purposeful sampling techniques. Purposeful sampling techniques are often used in qualitative research to help identify and select participants with specific experiences and ample information regarding the studied phenomenon (Schreier, 2018). I sent out study information and recruiting flyers via email to my higher education contacts within the state, and I asked them to share the information with single-parent students. I also utilized the snowball sampling approach as participants recommended other students who were single parents. Palinkus et al. (2015) described snowball sampling as a common sampling practice in qualitative research where identified people with specific characteristics know others with these same characteristics.

Data Collection Method

For this research, I collected data using in-depth, semi-structured interviews. According to Ihde (1971), hermeneutic phenomenology is structured to safeguard a comprehensive

investigation. Interviewing was an appropriate method because it provided an opportunity for rich dialogue between the participant and the researcher and gave participants time and space to share their perceptions of their lived experiences. According to Patton (2002), qualitative interviewing is a method of discovering what cannot be seen. For this study, what cannot be seen was the perspectives and lived experiences of single parents attending community college. Open-ended interview questions were created and used to guide the interview discussion. These questions prompted the participant to describe their experiences thoroughly and share as much information as necessary. I also asked follow-up questions to gain clarity. Patton (2002) described this open-ended questioning technique as an opportunity for participants to share their experiences and for researchers to standardize the questions asked of each interviewee.

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) identified five phases of qualitative data collection. Phase one, planning, included the researcher getting permission to do the study. My data collection process began by obtaining ETSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for my research. Next, study information was shared with higher education contacts across the state to solicit interest in the study. After identifying the participants, each was asked to provide their consent to participate. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), phase two is collecting data. For this research study, data collection began as I established relationships and interviewed study participants. I conducted interviews virtually using Zoom technology, which captured both audio and video of each participant. Also, the Zoom software program recorded and transcribed each interview session. I chose virtual technology because it is a more convenient method that can easily reach a wider pool of participants. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) called phase three primary data collection, and they described it as a process where the researcher begins to process the data and document descriptions of the collected data. Each interview was recorded

and transcribed for this study, and each transcription was reviewed to assure accuracy. Additionally, copies of interview transcripts were sent to participants, and each was asked to review their statements and clarify any unclear or confusing comments. In this phase, transcripts were coded, and notes were made indicating the researcher's thoughts and questions. Also, as commonalities emerged across interviews, these patterns were documented.

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) identified phase four as closing data collection, which included finishing interviews as data saturation becomes evident and giving more attention to data analysis, theme identification, and interpretations. Phase four of my study included interviewing 13 participants. As interviews finished, more time was given to coding and identifying common themes among interviewees. Further analysis confirmed data saturation, provided rich descriptions of the phenomenon, and allowed me to document the essence of the experiences of single parents attending community college. Finally, phase five is completion. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) identified this phase as the completion of the data collection process with a transition toward "...construction of meaningful way to present the data" (p. 330). In this final stage, I transitioned to the data analysis function of this research, which is discussed in detail in the following section.

Data Analysis Method

I used the inductive analysis method to analyze the data for this phenomenological, qualitative study. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), the inductive analysis process helps "...synthesize and make meaning from the data" (p. 511). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) identified this process as a methodical process that includes coding, categorizing, and interpretation. Peoples (2021) called this process emergent and described phenomenological data analysis as an explication or an investigation of the whole. According to Peoples (2021), the

steps included reviewing the data, finding preliminary meaning, determining final meaning, generating situational narratives, determining general narratives, and documenting general descriptions of the phenomenon. Creswell (2014) also described the steps of this qualitative data analysis process. These steps included reading the data transcripts thoroughly, coding the data collected, identifying themes and outliers, assessing common descriptions across interviews, interpreting meaning, and re-examining the data and the analysis to ensure accuracy (Creswell, 2014).

To assure the validity of each interview, each participant interview was recorded, transcribed, and listened to multiple times to ensure accurate wording and to capture the participant's thorough descriptions. I utilized Microsoft Excel software to document the transcribed narratives in a line-by-line fashion. As I reviewed the transcripts, I identified line-by-line codes by highlighting key phrases and making notes about my thoughts and observations (preliminary meaning units) in the margins. Next, I compared individual transcripts and the first-order codes identified for each, looking for similarities and differences. These patterns were categorized into second-order codes (final meaning units). Next, these codes were categorized into common themes (general narratives). Finally, these common themes were evaluated further to interpret meaning (general descriptions). Throughout the data analysis process, great care was taken to provide detailed descriptions of each conversation, and data was continuously examined and reexamined to avoid mistakes and ensure accuracy. I also included member-checking feedback from interview participants to ensure further accuracy. Creswell and Creswell (2018) defined member checking as a verification strategy that confirms the validity of research by asking participants to review the researcher's transcriptions to ensure an accurate representation of their experiences.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

According to Anfara et al. (2002), trustworthiness is established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is evidenced by including prolonged engagements, continuous observations, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking as part of your research design (Anfara et al., 2002). Prolonged engagement and persistent observation can be found in this research project as I conducted interviews until data reached saturation and no new themes emerged. I also included member checking and asked participants to review the data and provide feedback to ensure accuracy. Anfara et al. (2002) listed transferability as another criterion that proves trustworthiness. They stated that transferability could be evidenced through purposeful sampling and by providing thick descriptions (Anfara et al., 2002). My research utilized purposeful sampling techniques to identify and select participants who had experiences of being single parents while attending community college. Thick descriptions were also used to provide detailed accounts of the participant's background and experiences to help readers discern the applicable insights to their situation.

Anfara et al. (2002) stated that the third component of trustworthiness was dependability, which is proven through audit trails, coding strategies, triangulation, and peer examinations. I thoroughly documented the study procedures and coding processes within this research and sought peer examination to ensure my personal bias did not influence research questions or data analysis. According to Anfara et al. (2002), the last criterion that supports trustworthiness is confirmability. Confirmability is evidenced in research by the triangulation process and the process of reflexivity (Anfara et al., 2002). Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that reflexivity clarifies researcher biases by examining the influence these biased actions have on the

research. Reflection includes exploring the researcher's role, personal background, culture, and experiences, then identifying how this has influenced their research. Throughout this research process, I acknowledged my role in the research project by documenting reflexive memos, identifying researcher errors or thought processes. I also recognized how my own experiences as a single parent might influence or shape the research questions or strategies.

Patton (2002) described triangulation as a tool for strengthening research and a way to test the consistency of analysis. Creswell and Creswell (2018) identified triangulation as a process in which various data sources are examined to add validity to the research. I used data triangulation in this study by analyzing previous research and comparing it to my findings. I also analyzed college website data to identify supportive services offered to single parents and nontraditional students and compared this data to study results.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical consideration was given throughout the data collection process. According to Sanjari et al. (2014), three crucial ethical concerns for qualitative research are anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent. Prior to beginning this study, permission was given through the East Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board to conduct the research. I chose participants over 18 who were not a member of a vulnerable population. All participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of the interview processes and procedures. All participants were given informed consent forms to review and discuss, and all gave verbal consent before their interview began. Participants were also given time to ask any questions before the interviewing began.

All care was given regarding anonymity and confidentiality to ensure all personal, identifiable information was kept separate from individual participant data. Demographic and

descriptive details only described the whole and not any individual. Additionally, the research publication omitted all participant names. Instead, vague identifiers or pseudonyms were created for each participant to help assure their privacy. Each interview was conducted online via Zoom technology; therefore, the interviewees and researcher were not together in the exact location, and I isolated myself when interviewing to maintain privacy. Overall, the risk of harm was minimal.

Summary

My research utilized a phenomenological, qualitative research methodology to explore the lived experiences of single parents attending community colleges. Using this method provided an opportunity to understand better what it means to be a single parent seeking a higher education credential. I included an overview of the methodology in this chapter, an introduction to the central research questions, and an analysis of the researcher's role. I also provided descriptions of the participant selection, data collection, and data analysis processes. Finally, the study's credibility, trustworthiness, and ethical consideration were documented. The following chapter contains the research findings.

Chapter 4. Findings

Introduction

This phenomenological study aimed to explore the perceptions of single parents attending community college. I used the central question, what are the experiences of single parents attending community college, and five other research questions to guide the study to determine what it means to be a single parent attending a community college. Data were collected by interviewing 13 single parents who recently attended a community college. Each interview was transcribed, and member checking was used to ensure accuracy and safeguard the study's credibility. The transcripts were analyzed, and themes were identified. The participant responses informed the following analysis.

Data Collection

For this study, I collected data using in-depth, one-on-one interviews. Each interview took place remotely using Zoom virtual meeting technology. I interviewed 13 single parents attending or recently attended a community college. The interviews were conducted over six weeks, starting in July and concluding in August 2022. Interviews were semi-structured as each participant was asked questions from the interview protocol. Follow-up questions were also asked to clarify responses or to identify further information. The Zoom software program transcribed each interview, and I reviewed each transcription and edited it for accuracy. I also asked each participant to review the edited transcript to clarify the information and approve the responses. Once the participants approved the transcripts, I began the data analysis and identified themes.

Participant Profiles

Data for this study were collected from 13 participants who were single parents and community college students. Nine of the participants were first-generation students. Ten of the

participants were female, and three were male students. Eleven of the participants were employed, and eight of those were employed full-time. Also, of the 13 participants, nine were attending college full-time. All of the participants were between the ages of 24-33. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and aliases were used throughout the study to protect participant identity. The remainder of this report will identify the study participants by these assumed names: Doug, Sam, Lucy, Melanie, Luke, Brenda, Becca, Michelle, Candace, Lily, Brook, Emily, and Matty.

Doug was divorced with one child (age 6). He was finishing up his second year of community college and planned to transfer to a 4-year school for an engineering degree. Doug attended college full-time, worked full-time, and was a first-generation student.

Sam was divorced with one child (age 10). He had already completed one degree, returned to school, and started his first semester of the RN program. Sam attended college full-time and was also employed full-time.

Lucy was single, never married, with one child (age 10). She was finishing a Health Information Technology degree and was expected to graduate in August. Lucy attended college full-time and also worked full-time.

Melanie was divorced with one child (age 13). She was attending part-time and earning a degree in Health Information Technology. Melanie was also employed full-time.

Luke was divorced with two children (ages 10 and 11). He returned to school after earning an EMT certificate to earn an associate degree in Paramedics. Luke was attending full-time, working full-time, and was a first-generation student.

Brenda was single, never married, and had three children (ages 13, 7, and 4). Brenda was finishing all her pre-requisitions for the nursing program and planned to start in the fall. Brenda attended school full-time, and she was unemployed. Brenda was also a first-generation student.

Becca was single, never married, and had one child (age 9). She was attending the LPN to RN bridge program and planned to graduate next year. Brenda was attending school full-time, and she also worked two jobs. One job was full-time, and the other was part-time. Brenda was also a first-generation student.

Michelle was legally separated from her spouse and had one child (10 months old). Michelle was working to earn a criminal justice degree and was attending full-time. She also worked part-time and was a first-generation student.

Candace was a single parent, never married, with two children (ages 4 and 10). Candace was seeking a business degree at her community college and attended part-time. Candace worked part-time, and she was considered a first-generation student.

Lily was divorced with two children (ages 5 and 8). She was in her last year of the nursing program and planned to graduate in May 2023. She attended school full-time, worked full-time, and was a first-generation student.

Brook was a single parent, never married, with two children (ages 3 and 4). Brook recently graduated in May and earned an associate degree. Brook worked two jobs. One job was full-time, and the other job was part-time. Brooke was also a first-generation student.

Emily was a single parent, never married, and had one child (age 18 months). Emily recently graduated in May with a degree in Surgical Technology. She worked part-time while in school but has since moved to full-time employment. Emily was also a first-generation student.

Matty was a single mother who never married and had two children (ages 4 and 10). Matty was in her fourth semester of community college, was attending part-time, and was unemployed.

Interview Results

The data collected from this phenomenological study was coded and categorized into common themes that emerged from each interview question. The following section will provide direct quotes and detailed descriptions from the participant interviews. This data is supporting evidence of what it means to be a single parent attending community college. The research questions focused on student perceptions of their experiences as a single parent attending community college; student descriptions of being a single parent; student understanding of how single parent students are motivated; student perceptions of the challenges single parents encounter; student descriptions of single parent needs; and student descriptions of single parent support systems. Chapter 5 will provide further data analysis and recommendations for practice and future research.

Research Question 1

What are the lived experiences of single parents attending community college?

The first research question was centered on each participant's perception of their experiences as single parents attending community college. Most participants spoke highly of their school, program of study, and experience; however, they also described the difficulty of taking on the student role while working and being responsible for a home and children. The major themes that emerged from this question were the mental and emotional toll of being a single parent and a student, the hardships they encountered, and the areas they found helpful.

Mental and Emotional Toll. While discussing their experiences as single parents attending community college, the participants were not short on words to describe their emotional and mental states. These included stressful, frustrating, overwhelming, mentally exhausting, emotionally exhausting, guilt-ridden, challenging, and confusing. These feelings are aligned with previous research that also showed emotional distress. Shenoy et al. (2016) reported hopelessness, exhaustion, loneliness, and anger as emotional states of single parents attending college. Additionally, Vyskocil (2018) identified guilt as a shared emotional state of single parenting college students. While discussing her college experiences, Brenda characterized her experience as very stressful and called it one of the hardest things she has ever done. She also admitted that it would likely get harder before she completed her program. She said:

I thought that waiting until my son was in grade school would make this process easier...going back to school at that time was going to be the easier thing to do, but it has proved to be a lot harder... probably the hardest thing I have ever done.

Becca called her experience challenging as she discussed the financial challenges of being in a one-income household and not having a support system to rely on. She stated:

When you are a single parent, you have one income, and some people are fortunate enough to have parents that can help them...my parents are always working, so they are not much help to me regarding childcare. This is one of the most frustrating things about it...finding reliable childcare.... Financially it is tough, and it is not just the cost of attending. The books and extra costs are incredibly high.

Melanie revealed a great deal of frustration associated with disorganized classes, teachers and advisors who were not helpful. She believed online and nontraditional students were not given

the same level of customer service as on-ground and traditional students. Melanie's described her experience as frustrating and reported:

Class XX is very disorganized, which frustrates an organized person. My teacher is an adjunct and not very helpful. There is a huge disconnect between what is taught and what shows up on tests. It is also a struggle because it is an online class. Many of my online courses require in-person meetings, which creates a great deal of anxiety when you sign up for a class to be held virtually. It is also frustrating because teachers do not give enough time to do homework on the weekend. I believe nontraditional, working students are penalized for taking online classes and do not receive good support.

Candace talked about enrolling in college and called the experience overwhelming and confusing. She also spoke about the toll it takes on self-confidence. She said:

There were just so many steps to enroll. Since I was new to the whole process, it sometimes felt confusing. Sometimes I struggled to get someone to answer my questions. Truthfully, I thought about quitting several times before I ever started. It has been better since I began, but scheduling classes around my work schedule can be overwhelming. I also struggle with whether I am smart enough to be in school again...I look around and see these 18 to 20-year-olds and think - I am old, I do not belong... None of them has children, so I never feel like I fit in... it just feels overwhelming.

Emily also talked about the experience of being a single parent attending college. She discussed the exhausting nature of juggling the many responsibilities that rest on one person's shoulders.

She stated:

Being a single parent is already hard, but attending college also takes it to a whole other level of complicated. I enjoyed my experience and was very thankful for great teachers,

but it was demanding, mentally tough, physically tough, financially tough, and emotionally tough... I did not know a person could be that exhausted.

Finally, Matty discussed the guilt associated with leaving her children and missing their sporting events because she was at school, doing a project, or studying for a test. She reported:

I love the school and know I am making the best decision for my family, but this does not make it easier. It does not stop the guilt from building up. I miss a lot of my son's practices and games. So, when I have extra time, I spoil them. I spoil them in ways I never thought I would, just, so I do not feel so guilty for my choices, but then I feel guilty for that too.

According to Campbell et al. (2016), single parents have a higher risk for mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. These study participants also indicated that their experiences had emotionally affected their mental health. These participant narratives painted an image of fatigue that I described as physically and mentally exhausted. These descriptions indicated that single parents have a great need for balance.

Struggling Experiences. While discussing their experiences as single parents attending community college, the participants identified several areas where they struggled. These struggles included juggling multiple responsibilities, time management, childcare, financial burdens, scheduling classes, loss of social life, and no time for self. Previous research identified similar struggles as obstacles to single-parent college success, including balancing responsibilities, childcare, and financial hardships (Miller, 2012). Lovell and Scott (2020) discussed the importance of self-care, describing the exhausting nature of balancing time for children, homework, and self. Additionally, Chambers (2020) identified areas where colleges

could improve services for single parents, which included better financial assistance, more flexible class schedules, and increased childcare options.

Brenda talked about the struggle of juggling responsibilities and discussed her inability to focus on school and homework. She said:

It is challenging when you have a child with a disability, and he is always there. He always wants to be in the same room as me and never leaves my side. Sitting down and focusing on assignments is difficult when he is always there. Sometimes, I would drive to school to find a quiet room to study and focus.

Several students were in a healthcare program at their college, and all of them talked about the additional financial burden of being in these classes. Many of them discussed the challenge of scheduling clinical hours. They also discussed how these classes had more books than most, which were also more expensive. These classes also have extra costs associated with traveling to their clinical facilities. In discussing this, Becca said, “books and gas have been my biggest struggles.”

Candace also mentioned the burden of scheduling classes and clinical hours. She described her situation by saying:

It is hard enough to work out a schedule that does not interfere with your job. However, with the nursing program, you must schedule many clinical hours, and you do not get the luxury of choosing the location or the hours you work. This is an extra burden on single parents who have one income and has to find someone to care for their children during these hours.

Lily discussed her struggles with time management and juggling responsibilities. She said:

...it [college] is a little more difficult for single parents, especially parents with young children. I am juggling my homework, and I have to balance their homework too. I must get them to and from school, and me also, to and from school and work... Time management is difficult. I cannot just devote all my time to studying. You have to study after the kids go to bed, you know when you are already exhausted... and then the next day, you do it all over again.

Doug also talked about conflicting roles and called his life a whirlwind. He stated:

I often go in several directions, and I do not know which way is up most days. Time management is working hard, studying the best I can, and finding time to do my home responsibilities... Since my ex-wife passed away, everything has turned upside down... Adding school to my plate sometimes seems like the craziest thing I have ever done, but I need this to support my son.

Finally, Brooke talked about the struggle of feeling socially isolated. She reported:

I always heard that you make lifelong friends in college, and socialization is a big part of the college experience. This is nowhere near true for single moms. I am so overwhelmed with my daily responsibilities that I have no time for myself, much less time to socialize and make new friends. I feel like I have lost my friends... or maybe a better way to say it is you find out who your friends are when you take on this much responsibility.

The descriptions provided by these study participants shined a light on many of their struggles. These students were overwhelmed by their conflicting responsibilities and consumed by their lack of time, financial burdens, scheduling conflicts, and isolation.

Helpful Experiences. A third theme that evolved from the question, what are the experiences of single parents attending community college, was the identification of positive and

beneficial experiences. The participants identified vital personnel that made their experience a more positive experience. These personnel included advisors, teachers, and mentors. According to Carpenter et al. (2018), building relationships with faculty, staff, and peers builds support networks and connections and creates a sense of belonging that motivates and pushes students toward success. Becca discussed her experiences with her teachers and stated, “All nursing instructors are wonderful and want to see us succeed...they do this by making themselves available to us.” Candace also talked about the help she received from her teachers and her advisor. She explained:

Thus far, I have enjoyed my college experience. All my teachers have been very helpful... Also, my advisor was very helpful. She worked hard to get me the classes I needed at times that did not interfere with my work schedule.

Melanie had praise for both her teachers and her classmates. She stated:

I think my English teacher is one of the most supportive teachers I have had. She has gone above and beyond to help me get through the class. Classmates too. I have classmates who have come together and formed a study group...we all help each other, which has been very helpful.

Lucy spoke very highly of her college experience, and she was able to name several individuals who have been helpful resources. She said:

I love the school atmosphere. The professors are friendly and helpful. I love the tutoring program. It has really, really, really been helpful. It was great for science and math classes. My advisor is always there when I need her. The atmosphere is just amazing. Once, my son fell and hurt his arm, and I had to be out for a few days. The teachers were supportive and gave me time to make things up. The school has so many resources to

support the students...tutoring, math lab, counseling services, and mentors. I also found friendships with my classmates. We built strong relationships, and we always tried to help each other.

Overall, the participants identified their experiences as single parents as emotionally challenging, indicating a great deal of frustration and stress. They were able to highlight many of their struggles, which included conflicting responsibilities and financial hardship. However, they could also identify people who made their experience easier, such as teachers, staff, and classmates. The participants seemed to need a supportive, friendly atmosphere where teachers were available and eager to help them succeed. The descriptions provided in research question one also indicated that single parents have a great need to balance out their struggles with positive experiences. The challenges these study participants experienced paralleled the statements of Maslow, who proposed that difficult patterns are explained as unmet needs (Maslow, 1954).

Research Question 2

What are the participants' perceptions of being single parents and college students?

This research question was centered on each participant's perception of themselves as a single parent attending community college. This research question generated great discussion that revealed personal characteristics that helped the participants remain focused and personal feelings that often consumed their experiences. Throughout the interviews, participants acknowledged feeling stressed, overwhelmed, and challenged. They described their life using words such as complex, chaotic, and whirlwind. However, they also expressed their situation as rewarding, satisfying, motivational, and optimistic. The major themes that emerged from this

question were mastering time management and organization, working hard, and knowing the rewards outweigh the sacrifice.

Mastering Time-management and Organization. Students who are single parents often have role conflicts as they try to balance the responsibilities of being a parent, a student, and usually an employee (Lovell & Scott, 2020). In discussing his management of conflicting responsibilities, Sam described his last semester as the most challenging semester thus far. He said, “There was not a single day that I did not look at my calendar to figure out how to manage responsibilities and complete everything on time.” Melanie, Doug, and Lucy also talked about their busy schedules and how they scheduled their own study time during their child’s homework time or their child’s playtime. Many of the participants wished there were more hours in the day. The unfortunate truth about time management is that students will often make up time by sleeping fewer hours, affecting their ability to function and be productive (Brooke, 2012). In discussing the need to manage her time, Candace talked about how time-consuming school was for her and her children. She said:

I go to class, do homework, take tests, and write papers...I feel like I am never caught up. I then help my children do the same things. I know things will eventually get better once I earn my degree, but for now, I just feel like a machine that never sleeps and keeps repeating the same vicious cycle.

As I listened to these interviews, I also deemed good organizational skills necessary. Many of these participants described their day-to-day lives and responsibilities with pride, and they labeled almost every hour of every day and explained how schedules must be followed to make their lives work. Sam’s calendar was discussed multiple times as a way for him to organize his responsibilities. Lucy spoke of finding places to squeeze in more time and how she had to

plan time for fun. Lucy recognized organization as a must-have for single parents going to school. Melanie also identified the need for good organizational skills and named this one of her strengths. She stated in her interview, “I am a naturally organized person...I feel like it is a superpower.” Vyskocil (2018) indicated that students struggle with the pressures associated with conflicts between school, work, home, and children, and He identified time management as a vital tool for success.

Hard Work. The participants revealed in their interviews the importance of having a good work ethic and being willing to do the work needed to succeed. Of the 13 study participants, 11 of them were employed, and nine were employed full-time. Additionally, four of them were working two jobs while attending community college. In addition to work hours, each participant talked about attending classes regularly and working hard to maintain good grades. Lindsay and Gillum (2018) explored the college experiences of single mothers. They determined that single parents believe they need to model the values and work ethic they want in their children, and they think all their hard work will provide a better future for their children. While telling a story about a particular dean that helped him, Sam stated, “I believe it was my work ethic that the teacher remembered when she decided to permit me to enter the class.” Emily talked about the challenges of being a single parent and attending school, and she reported:

It is very challenging but worth all the hard work. Someone depends on you 24/7, which is a lot of responsibility, but I want to work hard... it is worth it. You must do your assignments, study, dedicate time to class, and save time for your child. There is never enough time or energy, but I am determined to prove I can do it... I want to show myself that having a good work ethic is rewarding and leads to a better life.

Doug also discussed work ethic, stating, “I want my son to see what hard work looks like, and I want him to know that hard work pays off.”

Rewards Outweigh the Sacrifice. Kruevelis et al. (2017) believed there were great rewards in earning a higher education credential, as they identified these credentials as a steppingstone toward higher earnings, better opportunities, better health, a pathway out of poverty, and a more significant opportunity for improved educational outcomes for children of single parents. While discussing the attributes of single parents, the interviewees revealed a sense of pride. These participants described their life as blessed and rewarding. One of them called it “responsible living.” Melanie and Lucy hoped their children one day recognize how hard they worked. They wanted their children to witness their ability to accomplish their goals, maintain their household, be good mothers, and be great providers. When talking about the rewards, Lucy explained:

It is rewarding because my son gets to watch me raise him by myself while accomplishing many goals that I have for myself and him as well... I want him to look back when he gets older and say mom did it when she was a single mom, so I can do it too.

Becca described her situation as stressful but acknowledged that she was reaching a crucial goal in her life. She stated:

It is not fun, but I know I am working toward reaching a goal I have had since I was young. That is motivational...giving my son a better life is rewarding. The odds are stacked against me being a single mom, so it is gratifying to know that I will do what others believe I cannot do. Plus, I do not want to work two jobs for the rest of my life.

Matty called her life worthwhile. She said:

It is gratifying knowing that I put so much effort into my studies... then you see feedback from your instructors, who praised my knowledge and understanding. This reaffirms that I made the right choice to start a higher education program.

Overall, research question two revealed more balance as the participants identified the difficulty of managing their days while also recognizing their satisfaction. The participants described their situation as complex yet rewarding, chaotic yet optimistic. Poindexter (2017) indicated that 60% of his study participants could not complete their program because of family obligations. Additionally, Lovell and Scott (2020) discussed single-parent feelings of defeat. However, the narratives of research question two identified the participants' strengths. These discussions also recognized a belief that the participants had every intention of beating the odds and would not be defeated. These descriptions compare to self-actualization as Maslow (1954) suggested that self-actualization indicates someone's ability to be effective.

Research Question 3

How do participants describe their motivation to succeed in college in college?

This research question was centered on each participant's description of their motivation to go to college and their motivation to continue through to graduation. This research question generated similar discussions among the participants. Almost every participant named their child or children as a significant motivational factor in their life. Most of the discussions revolved around two major themes. First, the participants were motivated by the desire to see personal growth. Discussions of personal growth included reaching long-term goals, finding a better job, being promoted to a higher position, and gaining pay increases that would lead to financial stability. Next, they were motivated by the desire to provide a better future for their children.

Discussions of a better future included maintaining a more financially secure life and providing a better life for their children.

Personal Growth. Maslow's self-actualization theory evaluates human needs and motivational factors. This approach highlights growth and self-actualization and points out an individual's ability to be effective, add value to their life, and reach their fullest potential (Maslow, 1954). Maslow (1954) discussed the need for growth and suggested that growth did not come from seeking out something one did not have but rather from an internal desire to grow as a person. Growth and adding value are also evidenced in previous literature as researchers documented single parents who reported their need to seek higher levels of accomplishment, set goals, attain better opportunities, discover personal fulfillment, and achieve life-long goals (Wahl, 2018). Regarding achieving a life-long dream, Melanie said:

I knew my whole life that I wanted to go into health care, but I decided to take a year off from college to earn some money to pay for it. Then life happened, and one year turned into multiple years. Other needs got in the way, but I made it back, and I will get that college degree and reach that goal.

Brenda also stated that healthcare, especially nursing, was a childhood dream. However, her family history and past often made her think it would never happen. She stated:

I am going into nursing, which has been a dream of mine since childhood...when I was a kid, I wanted to be a pediatric oncologist, well, at 31, I do not see that being realistic, but I still want to be a nurse and reach my goal of working in healthcare.

Candace, Lily, Sam, Brooke, Luke, and Doug named growth through employment opportunities as their motivation. Some were looking for job security and internal promotions, some for better pay and financial security, and others for new careers. In discussing this, Lily explained:

I went back to school after getting laid off. I wanted to find something that I felt would be more stable and bring stability to my family and me. I also wanted something that would provide better opportunities for my family. So, I always thought I would be good at nursing... I am passionate about doing that kind of work, and I know there is always a demand for nurses.

Doug also talked about growth as an individual and career growth. In explaining this, he spoke about losing his ex-wife in a car accident and how that put significant pressure on him to step up and provide for his son. He declared:

Pressure... is a great word to describe my situation. I feel like there is a huge weight on me that both pulls me down and also pushes me to keep going. I guess this pressure is my motivation. The truth is I never really was motivated before... it is probably why my marriage was unsuccessful. If I am being honest, my marriage ending was my fault. I had no drive, and she got tired of pulling me along. But then she died, and I had a child who only had me to support him. I realized I needed to grow up. I needed to be a better father. I needed a career that would support my family. This motivated me to go to school... Now that I have proven I can do this, I have a sense of pride that keeps pushing me to make it to the end... I also want to prove to everyone that I am no longer the flunky they think I am.

Better Future. Previous research has pointed out that single parents are goal-setters seeking achievement and better opportunities. Lindsay and Gillum (2018) reported that single parents believe their hard work will provide a better future. Many of my study participants echoed this sentiment as they identified their desire to create a better life for themselves and their

children as an essential motivator. One of the participants called it “hope for a better tomorrow.” Lucy discussed this and reported:

I want to have a career in something that sets up a future...a financially stable future for us. I have worked my whole life, but I want to work in a job that provides benefits, like insurance and 401K. That will help us move beyond just survival.

Becca talked about her childhood and financial struggles, and she said she wanted her child to have “a better life than she had growing up.” Michelle, Candace, and Emily had similar responses. They said they wanted their children to have a better life and believed earning a college degree would likely make that happen. Candace stressed that she was tired of a lifestyle that was “...living paycheck to paycheck,” and Emily said she did not want to struggle forever. Lily also talked about providing a better life for her children, which included financial stability. In this discussion, she pointed out that she wanted to prove to herself and her children that they could do anything.

Maslow (1954) theorized that growth came from an internal desire to add value to someone’s life. The discussions on research question three showed that these study participants also wanted to add value. These participants were goal-setters seeking promotion, security, and achievement. Whether it was a personal aspiration, a desire to prove their ability, or a longing to create a better life for their family, the participants desired growth. This internal desire was a major motivational factor pushing them to succeed.

Research Question 4

What are the participants’ perceptions of any challenges they may have encountered?

This research question focused on each participant’s perception of the challenges they had experienced while attending community college. Previous research found that single parents

have many challenges, including financial hardship, childcare needs, family responsibilities, academic adversity, and emotional distress. This study identified some of these same challenges. The significant themes generated from discussions of this research question were financial struggles, childcare needs, academic and scheduling issues, and struggles with virtual learning, especially during COVID.

Financial Struggles. According to Poindexter (2017), financial concerns are a major reason many student parents cannot complete college degrees. Many of my study participants named financial struggles one of their top challenges. Becca summed it up by calling colleges a financial strain and saying she understood why so many dropped out. Lily too had much to say about the financial burden that attending college placed on a single parent. She said:

They talk about free education at community colleges, but you only get so much money. This does not cover all the expenses...my program's books are a little more expensive. So, you get money, but then it is gone, and you still need to figure out how to pay for x, y, and z.

Candace, Brenda, Sam, and Michelle also acknowledged that affording college was a struggle. Candace stated:

The biggest challenge is just having the money to go. I get assistance to cover my tuition and some of my books, but not all of them. Also, gas is expensive. Driving to campus several days a week can be very expensive, and the truth is, I have skipped a class or two because I did not have the money to drive to campus.

Brenda agreed that finances were a big concern, but she also named several outside agencies that helped her succeed. She reported:

The biggest challenge is financially affording to go to school. I did not get many grants or scholarships. I got some Pell grant money, but that was all the school offered. So, I sought help through other agencies. I received Families First and SNAP...food stamps. I get state insurance, and the Job Center, WIOA at the American Job Center, has helped me buy my scrubs, stethoscope, and stuff. Without this help, I would never be able to attend. Sam also struggled with financial issues. He was in the nursing program, and the costs associated with this program are often overwhelming. Further still, Sam believed this program would have more financial support than other programs. He explained,

The biggest challenge I have found is money. It was not an issue before, but nursing is a specialized program, and the costs are much higher than expected. You almost think there would be people out there bending over to give to students in this type of program, but that is not the case.

Michelle only works part-time, and she admitted that money was very scarce. She also mentioned that she might have to drop out for a semester or two. She said:

Just getting my books will be a challenge because I am paying for baby formula and making a car payment. I made it through last semester, but this next semester, I cannot tell you where the money will come from. If I do not figure it out, my baby and her needs will have to go first so I may drop out, hopefully just for a semester or two.

The financial discussions generated from this question aligned with Maslow's thoughts that higher-level needs cannot be met until lower, basic-level needs are secured. Maslow described this by suggesting that people do not have the desire to decorate their homes when they are dying of thirst (Maslow, 1954).

Childcare Needs. According to Carlson (2015), childcare is one of the most essential services for parenting students. Miller et al. (2011) found that almost 90% of their study respondents acknowledged that access to childcare was a leading influencer in their decision to attend college. Several participants in this study agreed that they would not be attending had they not found reliable childcare. However, even with quality childcare, some students struggled to find childcare that coincided with their school or work schedule. Also, many stated that they could not do this without help from family or friends. Becca is getting CCAMPIS grant assistance to subsidize the cost of her childcare, which she called a “game changer.”

Emily provided a similar childcare discussion as she talked about finding childcare for a newborn. Emily had her child while attending community college, and it was also during a time when COVID shut down many childcare facilities. She stated:

As a single parent, finding childcare to attend in-person classes can be very difficult, especially for a newborn baby. It took me a while to find something. Then, when you finally do, you find out you cannot afford it because it is so expensive.

Lily discussed childcare concerns as well. Her biggest challenge was finding after-school care and people to pick up her children during clinical hours. Lily reported:

I am in the nursing program. We have clinical days, and we have to get there at 6 am most days. So, I have to find someone to take the kids to school, pick them up, and care for them until I get off because clinical hours are 12-hour shifts. When they are not in school, I have the same issues finding someone to pick them up from daycare.

Doug also discussed childcare and talked about needing childcare on campus:

Having a childcare center on campus would be awesome. I have heard that bigger schools have these centers on campus. That would be so helpful to have the center right where

you were. It would also help when you have evening classes and childcare facilities are closed. It would be nice to give my mom a break because she currently picks up the slack when I cannot.

Regarding childcare, the study participants identified it as a substantial need. Attending college without it would be near impossible. However, it was still a challenge as participants struggled to find childcare during the hours they needed it and struggled financially to afford childcare. This discussion also aligned with Maslow's judgment that higher-level needs cannot be met until lower, basic-level needs are secured. Additionally, Zaky (2018) proposed that Maslow's theory focused on expectations and responsibility. This research also suggested that single parents understand their responsibility to find quality childcare for their children and prioritize it over their personal achievement.

Academic Struggles and Issues with Scheduling Classes. Another theme the study participants discovered was that single parents encounter academic struggles and scheduling issues. Previous research suggested that single parents attending a college or university may struggle as they are often less prepared to begin the rigor of an academic program (MPP, 2016). While my study may not have confirmed that this is why all students struggle, many of my participants discussed academic struggles. Some participants acknowledged that they did not feel prepared to enter higher education and admitted they needed extra help, such as tutoring. However, tutoring was not always available when they needed it. Many wished for tutoring services on nights and weekends. Also, tutoring did not always offer tutors for specific classes, such as nursing. Candace was one of the participants who talked about her unpreparedness. She described her situation by admitting:

I admit I have struggled in some of my classes. Math is not my strength. Right now, accounting is kicking my butt. In my first math class, I worked through it on my own. Then I heard about the Math lab and tutoring. I have used them ever since, and I am doing much better. However, I cannot find an accounting tutor this summer, and the tutoring lab has had weird summer hours.

Other participants suggested that poorly planned teachers were the blame. Melanie was unhappy with her teachers during her first semester. She failed one of her classes and had this to say.

I feel like the A&P class was so disorganized. It was so frustrating...it was so disappointing that I considered changing colleges. I did not, but I did fail the class. I hate to admit that, but I did. In my whole life, I have never dropped a course or failed a class until this one. I felt like there was a disconnect between what was taught and what was on the exam. When you tried to talk to the teacher, they would only say, well, I got these questions from the testing bank. We would be studying muscles, and we would get bone questions. It was such a struggle. I was so disappointed with that class. You know this was such poor customer service. I feel like I am a customer who has paid for a service, and it is very disheartening when no one gives you this service or corrects the problem.

Research has also shown that single-parenting students struggled because they had problems with the traditional class schedule (Yakaboski, 2010). My study results also indicated that this is a problem. Emily was one participant that discussed the difficulty of scheduling classes. She stated:

One of my biggest challenges was scheduling classes around my other responsibilities. It was tough to work it all out, but then you get it all worked out, and every few months, you have a new schedule and have to figure it out all over again.

Doug also shared his frustration with scheduling classes as it was challenging to schedule classes around work. He also shared his desire for additional night classes and classes that could be taught on weekends.

Issues with Virtual Learning, Especially During COVID. A final theme generated from this research question was that participants were challenged by virtual learning, especially during the COVID pandemic. Lawrence (2015) documented that online learning can be overwhelming and demanding, and often students feel unmotivated and easily distracted during virtual learning. Brooke had online classes before and during COVID, and she had mixed responses. She explained that some of her classes went well because she had teachers that took the time to communicate their expectations and gave thorough instructions. These teachers were also available when they were needed. However, she also spoke of the challenges of online learning. Speaking of this, she explained:

The challenging classes were the classes where the teachers did not communicate well. It was like, here is your class material, good luck. Now, go do it. I pretty much went through the whole class by myself, teaching myself.

Melanie also had issues with her online learning, and when she tried to talk to her advisor about it, she found that the advisor was less supportive than the teacher. Here is what she shared about her struggles with the unsupportive advisor.

My advisor told me that this is what you get when you sign up for online classes. She told me online courses are more challenging, and I must deal with them. Why am I getting

punished for being online? Why should my experience be any different from those who attend on-campus classes? I do not want to put the college in a negative light because I am blessed to attend, but I think professors and advisors should not be so quick to judge students because they are not traditional students taking classes on campus.

Sam mimicked Melanie's dislike for virtual learning and shared his challenges with online classes.

My daughter and I were both learning from home, and we had to have class meetings using Zoom. Oh, my goodness, when you asked if we could do this interview using zoom, I cringed. I hope to get away from this soon. Having 20 people scattered across my screen is very distracting. I want to pay attention to the teacher, but the other people distract me. Plus, I do not care about this technology.

Some of the students provided thoughts about their experiences with moving to online learning during the pandemic. A few of the students were in online classes already, but for those who were not, the experience seemed overwhelming. Becca talked about her experiences of moving to online learning during COVID. She reported:

It went okay for most of my classes, but I was stressed and a little disappointed in my microbiology class. I felt like I did not get my full payment. It felt like we got cheated out of learning. I mean, you cannot look under a microscope virtually. This was a hands-on learning class, and we missed a lot of learning through zoom.

Candance also had a strong reaction to virtual learning during the pandemic.

Truthfully, I did not like it very well. While I did ok, and in different circumstances, I might prefer online classes but not with a 4-year-old and a 10-year-old who also had to be taught at home. I had to learn the online platform and the rules associated with online

learning for my son and me. I was working part-time and was constantly getting called into work because people were sick and not allowed to work. That time felt very overwhelming. Also, I had a close friend pass of COVID, which sent me into a place of fear. I did not want to leave my house for a while because I was scared I would get COVID and die or my children would. I finished that semester but did not return in the fall because of that fear. However, I did start back part-time in Spring of 2021, and I am glad I did.

Additionally, Doug shared his experience as a single parent attending college during COVID. He described the overwhelming nature of his experience.

It was an overwhelming time...I was taking classes part-time at night, working during the day, and my mother was keeping my child. I was struggling before COVID even hit. Then COVID happened, and they told us we had to do our classes remotely. During this time, I lost my job because the restaurant shut down for a while. Plus, my mom has health issues and was scared of COVID. She did not leave her house for a time and worried about watching my son and getting COVID. So, I watched my child, took classes, and tried to find work simultaneously. Luckily, I had saved up a little money. I do not know what I would have done if I had not. As for online learning, I did not like it. I am a people person. I hated being at home all the time; I felt like I lost a lot of the support I received from teachers and classmates.

This research question revealed many hardships for single parents. The most discussed hardship was financial concerns. Similar to my study participants, Stack and Meredith (2017) described financial troubles and named food and fuel as two significant deficiencies. Another concern for my participants was childcare. Stack and Meredith (2017) also indicated that single

parents often sacrifice their own needs to ensure the needs of their children. Additionally, these narratives revealed academic needs and virtual learning needs. These needs could be associated with an inability to focus. According to Zoya (2018), if students struggle with basic needs, they cannot be entirely focused; therefore, the higher up Maslow's hierarchy of needs a student is, the more motivated and prepared they become.

Research Question 5

How do the participants describe their needs as college students?

This research question was centered on each participant's descriptions of their needs during this time of being a single parent attending community college. Discussions from this research question found several areas where single parents believed college could have made their learning experience a little easier. One theme generated from this discussion included areas where their college experience could have been improved, such as receiving more support and better communication from teachers, having more flexibility in scheduling and attending classes, and creating study groups for both in-person and online learning communities. A second theme generated from this discussion was specific needs that participants identified as additional support that the school could offer, which included financial aid or scholarships to help with tuition, books, gas, and computers, childcare support, and single-parent clubs or activities that incorporate their children.

Additional Institutional Support. When these single-parent participants described their needs, they touched on several topics for how the college could improve their experience. College professors were discussed often, and the participants believed these professors could improve by being more approachable, more helpful, and better communicators. According to Carpenter et al. (2018), building relationships with faculty and staff builds support networks and

connections and creates a sense of belonging that motivates and pushes students toward success. Flexibility was also discussed, and the participants suggested that the college should be more flexible in scheduling class times, attendance policies, and assignment due dates. Finally, this research question generated conversations about the benefits of classmate support, and the participants talked about the need for more structured study groups in both on-ground and online classes. Chambers (2020) discussed the benefits of classmate support as one of his study participants described her classmates and their supportive relationships by saying she gained a family when she started the program.

As already stated, Melanie struggled with the support she has received from her college, and she believed the school should communicate better with the students. She also thought there was a great need to create more support systems and activities focused on nontraditional students. She named working parents, low-income, single parents, and nontraditional ages as specific groups that need added support. Sam also mentioned better communication as an essential need. He stated:

I think communication could be improved. We were sent an email saying you are in the program; you know the acceptance letter. It said that on such and such day, we would receive more information. Well, here we are a month and three days later, and this information is still unavailable to us... Yes, honesty and better communication. Having this information will help me be better prepared for the program.

Regarding the need for helpful, approachable teachers, Brenda said:

It is sad, but I have had classes where I had instructors who never spoke to me one-on-one. They gave their lecture but did not speak to individuals. These teachers made the classroom awkward, and many of us felt we could not approach the teacher.

Candance described a supportive teacher as a teacher who listens to your concerns, helps you develop solutions, and provides extra resources when needed. Lily also addressed the need for helpful teachers. She compared her classes with willing teachers to those whose teachers were out of pocket. She admitted that all her favorite classes were the classes that had helpful teachers that went out of their way to help the student learn the material. She also added that she gained so much more knowledge in these classrooms. Brooke shared similar remarks about caring teachers, stating, “I need teachers that can answer emails after 6 pm.”

Another topic of this research question was the need for flexibility in scheduling. Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2010) pointed out that most schools offer academic support services; however, this support lacks flexibility as it is poorly coordinated, not easily accessed, and is often unavailable during times that meet the single parent’s schedule. Emily talked about flexibility and called this one of her biggest desires. She reported:

When you enter a program like surgical tech, you go through as a cohort, and there are few class options. Either everyone takes it online, or everyone goes in person. Everyone is going on the same days at the same time. Usually, class time does not work well with those trying to work. So, it would be great if the school offered more options that worked better with the schedules of working people and single moms.

Michelle also talked about this flexibility. She explained:

I do not understand why all assignments are due on Sunday. Some people work on weekends. I do not know why I got an attendance grade. If I do the work and pass my homework assignments and tests, why does it matter that I missed a few days? I think the school should show a little more understanding of adult needs and be more flexible.

Finally, dialogue on needs generated discussions of how the institution should build study groups into their classes. The participants believed this should also be included in online learning. Several participants discussed forming study groups and the benefits they received from being a part of them. They also discussed the need to make this a part of every class.

Regarding study groups, Lily said:

Studying is so much easier when you do it in a group. I am sure student tutoring and the writing lab are helpful programs, but they are not class-specific. They also have bankers' hours. They are only there to help during the day, and most of my study groups take place late in the evening. That is the time when all the students can get together. Every class should build a structure for group study and group mentorship.

Brooke talked about online learning and how many students felt they were teaching themselves in these classes. She suggested the need for study groups in virtual courses. She stated:

Study groups provide double benefits. First, it helps struggling students work on assignments and prepare for tests. It also provides a social network, which is good because many single parents, working students, and online learners feel left out; they feel disconnected.

This discussion of disconnection described level three of Maslow's hierarchical triangle, which is social needs. Social needs are a need for acceptance and friendship (Maslow, 1954). Maslow (1954) described this need as a desire for belonging, where a longing for friendships replaces hunger pangs. This study described it as a need for relationship and connection. Social detachment and isolation were also seen in previous research. Duquaine-Watson (2007) revealed that single parents felt disengaged and left out of the social side of college life. In their study, disconnection was also seen between students and faculty.

Specific Needs. A second theme generated from this discussion was the specific needs participants desired from their college. These included financial support or scholarships to help with tuition, books, gas, computers, childcare support, and single-parent clubs or activities involving their children. According to Miller (2012), student parents are more likely to possess student debt and drop out of school than traditional students. For this reason, scholarships that address the needs of student parents could increase their chances of success. In discussing this, Melanie reported:

I got a cultural diversity scholarship, and I think there should be something similar geared toward people of my age or people with certain situations, like single parenting. These students... do not always have gas money to go to college or do not have the funds to buy books. A scholarship could assist these students.

Brenda, Becca, Michelle, Candance, Lily, and Doug all mentioned college support as they discussed their needs. Some of these named a specific desire for book assistance, others talked about the cost of gas commuting to school, and others spoke about the need for assistance with laptops and Wi-Fi. Further still, many participants mentioned the need for childcare assistance. Brenda said she would not have been able to do online learning without the college's help with a laptop and Wi-Fi. Becca thought a single-parent scholarship could help single parents with many things, such as books, gas, and childcare. Candace also talked about these needs and said the following:

More financial aid for books would be great. Gas money would also go a long way. Also, I wish the school had a daycare center on campus. That would be very helpful instead of running home from school to get my child before the daycare closes.

Doug also talked about financial resources and explained:

All single parents should have access to grant money that covers books and gas because they need it. The school should also have a book loan program...where the school has a system lined up where students could borrow books for free.

Another financial need identified by the students was childcare. Carlson (2015) called childcare an essential service for parenting students, and Boressoff (2012) indicated that quality childcare has a substantial, positive impact on academic success. In discussing this need, several of my participants addressed the need for childcare assistance. Some talked about financial aid to help with the cost of childcare, and others spoke about the need to have a childcare center on campus. Melanie suggested that a daycare center on campus would help financially struggling students. Doug also talked about it and said, "Childcare assistance would be so helpful and would allow me more flexibility to schedule classes. I hear the bigger schools have childcare centers on campus." Additionally, Lily mentioned the CCAMPIS childcare grant and called it a lifesaver. She said, "This grant has lifted much of my financial burden."

A third specific need from this discussion was incorporating family-friendly clubs and activities on campus. According to Kelley (2017), services that support a family lifestyle will encourage success in parenting students. These services might include family-friendly activities, family housing options, on-campus childcare centers, a children's library, family field trips, parenting skills workshops, and parenting clubs (Kelly, 2017). Several study participants mentioned wanting to incorporate family time into their college experience. Some of the participants wanted parenting classes for single parents with small children; some talked about their desire to have a single parents club where students could build connections with other single parents and build peer support; others talked about having family fun activities on campus that would allow children to come to campus with their parent and feel connected to their

parent's college experience. Additionally, one participant thought the colleges should better prepare or educate the instructors on supporting single parents with needs beyond academics.

Lucy, Candace, and Brooke described the need for single-parent clubs or peer support groups for parents. Brooke stated:

A support system for just single parents would have been excellent... getting together with other single moms and learning how they managed their time, or we could have given each other tips, easy recipe meals, or favorite books to read. It would have been a great support system...single moms supporting single moms.

Doug wrapped it up nicely by saying,

Single parents have many needs as we are carrying a heavy load. What we need the most is more time. If the schools were more family-friendly, we could take our children to class, library, or study group, and we would not feel so guilty for always leaving our children behind. Also, having a single-parent group that meets regularly could be excellent peer support. I imagine a place on campus where we could bring our kids, and they could play together while we studied.

Research Question 6

What are the participants' perceptions of their support systems, both personal and institutional?

The final research question focused on participants' perceptions of their support system. Carpenter et al. (2017) showed that support from family, friends, employers, and institutions improves academic success. My study revealed many of these same support systems. One common theme was personal support. Regarding personal support, the participants identified family members such as their parents, grandparents, and children. They also identified

employers, coworkers, and friends as excellent support. A second theme was institutional support, which included teachers, college staff, advisors, counseling services, tutoring, math and writing labs, library, and classmates. A final theme discussed was the need for a mentor to help them navigate the college experience.

Personal Support. Several of the study participants identified personal support in their life. Brenda and Michelle named their mom and their child as supporters. Candace and Emily identified their parents and best friends as unsolicited support they could not live without. Also, Lily, Doug, Matty, and Brooks talked about family members that made their college experience more manageable. Wainwright and Watts (2018) suggested that parental relationships, particularly mothers, provided emotional support that greatly benefitted their child's college experience.

Regarding personal support, Melanie identified family, friends, and work as a great support system. She described her support as:

My parents are such a great support system. They recently sold their house to move closer to us. They did this because I took a second hospital, so they could help me get things done. They are so loving and devoted to both of us. I also have an aunt that will pick my son up and keep him...I have a friend who is a classmate; she is a great help; we help each other. We are like study buddies.... Work is supportive too. They allow me to work my schedule around my school and my son's activities.

Sam also described his support system. He works as a security officer at a hospital, and he identified many people at the hospital that support him. He also acknowledged the support he gets from his daughter.

At work, I have a good support system with these folks. Whenever I have a medical or an anatomy question, I can find several people who will take the time to explain it to me.

There are also two other employees of the hospital that are in the same nursing class as I am. Our schedules will soon be identical, and we will be a great support team for each other. Also, one of my biggest supporters is my daughter. She is always my little motivator. She can just look at me, reminding me that she is the reason I am doing all of this.

Lily talked about her family support and named her mom, sister, and best friend. She said, “I agree with whoever said it takes a village to raise a child, and I love that I have a village.” Doug identified his mom as the rock that holds them all together. He also explained:

I have a good friend that helps me care for my son. I have a cousin that helps me with homework... also, my employer is great at scheduling me around my school hours, and he will let me use work Wi-Fi and do assignments at work when it is not busy.

When talking about her support, Matty discussed the emotional support she received from her family:

My personal support would be my family, first and foremost. Without them, I do not believe I would have made it this far in college. On many days, I have cried and expressed how I was overwhelmed with stress and fear that I would fail... But my family would say or do the right thing to help lift me back up and remind me why I am doing this.

Emily also talked about the emotional support that she received from her best friend. She said:

My best friend is a big supporter, especially regarding emotional support. She has always been the person to motivate me to continue and to remind me not to give up on my dream. She was there for me through it all and still is.

In discussing personal support, the participants realized the help and encouragement they received. Support took on the form of study partners, babysitters, and counselors who offered encouragement and motivation. This discussion related to the theoretical framework as personal support helped the participants meet lower-level needs and pushed them toward achieving higher-level needs.

Institutional Support. When discussing the support the participants received from the school, they identified several areas of institutional support. These included the counseling office, advisors, tutoring services, math and writing labs, teachers, staff, classmates, library, and study groups. According to Carpenter et al. (2018), building relationships with faculty, staff, and peers builds support networks and connections and creates a sense of belonging that motivates and pushes students toward success. Sam talked about support at his college and said, “there are a few people at the school, admissions personnel, advisors, and deans who have definitely helped me get from point A to point B.” Lucy loved her higher education experience and stated:

I love the school atmosphere. I could be a lifelong student at my college. The professors are friendly and helpful. I love the tutoring program...it was great for science and math classes. My advisor is always there when I need her. The atmosphere is just amazing. Once, my son fell and hurt his arm, and I had to be out for a few days. The teachers were supportive and gave me time to make things up. The school has so many resources to support the students. Also, I have great friends I have met in class, and we have built

strong relationships and always try to help each other. My study buddy system is fantastic.

Brenda named several instructors that had been helpful during her experience. In talking about one of them, she reported:

This teacher has gone above and beyond to help me. She found several audio and visual supplements to help me better study because she understood how difficult learning could be for those with ADD. Reading for understanding can be difficult, and we do better when it is read to us or told to us as far as retaining goes.

Michelle talked about the support she received from her advisor.

My advisor has been great. She helped me enroll, schedule classes, and later change my classes. She has also contacted me a few times to see if I need anything and helped me find resources like cheaper books.

Lily also talked about the support she received from her advisor. She said her advisor was the first to discuss that she was a single parent going back to school and working full time. Lily explained:

She would come to me and be my cheerleader. She would be so encouraging, and when I passed a class that I thought I might fail, she shouted out loud with me in her office. She realized I was a single mom and constantly asked if I needed extra resources.

Candace discussed the support she received from the math lab, tutoring services, and her teachers. She said all the personnel in these offices were so helpful, and she described her teachers as caring people who listened to her concerns and helped her come up with solutions to problems. Matty had very high remarks for one of her instructors. She discussed how she responded quickly to emails, offered praise on her assignments, and helped her schedule an off-

campus project around her schedule. Finally, Doug also had high remarks about the institutional support he received. He said:

All my teachers have been helpful and concerned about my progress. I do not know if I could make it without tutoring and the math and writing labs. The office staff are patient and helpful and want me to succeed.

In discussing institutional support, the participants again realized the help and encouragement they received. Institutional support involved supportive faculty and staff who created a positive atmosphere and offered emotional support that encouraged them and built up their image of the school and themselves. Previous research has shown that this positive image supports college success, as Arshad et al. (2015) document a positive association between self-esteem and academic performance.

Mentors. Additionally, many of the study participants named an individual at their college that went above and beyond to help them be successful. Some of them called the person their mentor. Others did not give the person the mentor title, but they described them as someone who helped navigate the school. Standlee (2019) talked about mentorships and the role they provide students. She defined a mentor as someone who helped navigate the college process, such as where to find academic and support resources, where to get involved in social activities, or how to drop a class. She also described mentors as guides that introduce students to college life, help new students make connections, and offers answers to questions students do not know they need to ask (Standlee, 2019). Brooke referenced mentorship when she talked about helpful personnel in financial aid. She thought it would be good if the school had one central office or specific people who could guide new students, especially nontraditional students like single parents. She thought these guides could "...direct students with all things college."

Melanie talked about the need for all nontraditional students to have extra support. She acknowledged the difficulty of being a single parent, and she warned:

Many single parents will never attend college because they are scared to add higher education to their hectic schedule. If only the school could give students their own person to help them navigate the school. This would make more people want to go. I met a lady, by chance, during my enrollment process. She was so nice and helpful, so I called her whenever I needed something. She helped me every time and told me about resources that I would have never known about. Eventually, I called her my mentor, believing everyone needed one.

Lucy discussed mentoring when she talked about her advisor; she explained:

The school calls them advisors, but mine was more like a mentor. Whenever I needed to talk, she was ready and available to me. She called and checked in on me each semester, asked if I needed anything, told me about school resources, and encouraged me when I was discouraged. One time I was so stressed over a class that she did deep-breathing exercises with me and reminded me to relax, breathe, and take it a step at a time.

Candace talked about the college staff and named a lady whom she said was like a mentor who helped her navigate everything.

She talked to me because I was a first-generation and single-parent student. She was the first person at school to ask if I had children. She helped me find resources at the school and suggested some community resources. She also called me occasionally to check on me and always asked if I needed anything.

Finally, Doug suggested mentors for all incoming freshmen. He said, “We could use someone to help us learn all we need to know about college life and the services offered.”

In discussing mentorship, the study participants recognized a need for direction, resources, encouragement, and follow-up. These participant narratives revealed a need for building relationships and having partnerships to help them grow in their college experience. Mentorship is related to the theoretical assumptions of Maslow, who suggested that individuals are motivated to seek achievement and self-actualization (Maslow, 1954). Mentorship can develop students and help them grow their skills to reach their highest potential; therefore, mentorship provides the potential for self-actualization.

Chapter Summary

The data presented in this chapter conveyed how the 13 study participants perceived their experiences as single parents attending a community college. The semi-structured research questions were established before the interviews, and participants were asked to share their perceptions on each question. After all the interviews were conducted, I began coding the interview statements. Chapter 4 provided the participant's reactions to each of the interview questions. In Chapter 5, I further discussed the data and documented implications for practice and future research.

Chapter 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of single parents who are pursuing a higher education credential at a community college. In the first three chapters of this study, I introduced the problem I wanted to explore, I reviewed previous literature on the study topic and provided a theoretical framework to guide the research, and I discussed the qualitative methodology used in the study. I presented the research findings in chapter 4. In this final chapter, I provided further discussion of the research findings for each research question. I also offered implications for higher education practice and recommendations for further research.

Statement of Problem

The phenomenon of this qualitative, phenomenological study was single parents pursuing college credentials at community colleges. Community colleges were chosen as a focal point for this study because previous research has shown that single parents were more likely to attend community colleges. Gault et al. (2014) identified over 3 million single parents pursuing a college degree, and over 2 million attended community colleges. Traditionally, research on single-parent students was grouped with other nontraditional students. However, researching all nontraditional students seems too broad, as Muniz (2021) estimated that almost three of every four students identify themselves as nontraditional students. Therefore, this research intended to narrow the focus to include only the single-parent population of nontraditional students. While single parents attending a community college has been increasing for several years, research describing their educational experiences is still lacking. Additionally, research has shown that higher education can be a steppingstone toward financial stability and better opportunities, yet

many single parents believe higher education is out of their reach (Kruvelis et al., 2017).

Knowing the importance of higher education and the increasing number of single parents seeking the opportunity to obtain a post-secondary credential, this study intended to understand better the experiences of single parents attending higher education programs.

Discussion

This phenomenological study was completed through one-on-one interviews with 13 single-parent students attending community college. Common themes within the data were discovered through interview analysis and reflexive journaling. These themes provided significant answers to the research questions that guided the study. The study findings contributed to the existing body of research on single parents. The study findings could also inform future practice for higher education institutions to better understand and serve single-parent students. Additionally, the study findings could lead to future research on the experiences of single parents seeking a college degree.

Research Question 1

What are the lived experiences of single parents attending community college?

In response to question one, most participants did not provide details about their experiences. Instead, they focused on how their experiences affected them. Many of the participants described their experiences as both challenging and rewarding. They spoke highly of their school, program of study, and decision to enter higher education; however, they also described the difficulty of taking on the student role while working and being responsible for a home and children. The major themes that emerged from this question were the mental and emotional toll of being a single parent and a student, the hardships the participants encountered, and the positive experiences they had also received.

In discussing their mental and emotional toll, Brenda, Becca, Melanie, Candace, Emily, and Matty all admitted the overwhelming nature of seeking a higher education credential while having many other responsibilities. These participants admitted feeling stressed, frustrated, overwhelmed, exhausted, challenged, confused, and guilt-ridden. Emotional distress was found in previous research that indicated that single parents struggle with exhaustion, depression, loneliness, anger, negativity, hopelessness, guilt, panic, and pressure (Brooks, 2014; Campbell et al., 2016; Lovell & Scott, 2020; Polakow et al., 2014; Shenoy et al., 2016; Vyskocil, 2018).

In discussing hardships, the participants were able to identify many challenges. Brenda, Becca, Candace, Lily, Doug, and Brook all described their experiences as single parents attending a higher education program as a struggling experience. They found their experience to be a constant battle with juggling responsibilities, managing their time, obtaining affordable childcare, combating financial hardship, scheduling classes, losing their social life, and losing their time for themselves. Previous research identified many of these struggles as hindrances to single-parent student success. Miller (2012) recalled the battle of balancing responsibilities, childcare, and financial hardships. Carlson (2015) called childcare a massive hurdle for parenting students. Lovell and Scott (2020) pointed out time management as an enormous challenge and branded conflicting roles as demanding responsibilities vying for attention. Lovel and Scott (2020) also reported social isolation and no time for themselves as a challenge for single parents. Additionally, Yakaboski (2010) pointed out disparities in college schedules as a significant hindrance to college success for single parents.

In discussing positive college experiences, the participants identified vital personnel that made their experience a more encouraging experience. Becca, Candace, Emily, Melanie, and Lucy discussed these individuals, which included advisors, teachers, and mentors. Previous

research also identified a positive relationship between institutional support and college success. According to Carpenter et al. (2018), building relationships with faculty, staff, and peers builds support networks and connections and creates a sense of belonging that motivates and pushes students toward success. Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2017) suggested that nontraditional students, such as single parents, prefer straightforward communication where the professor or the syllabi lays out specific expectations, homework assignments, and classroom policies. Additionally, Carpenter et al. (2018) identified support from faculty and staff as an influencer of student success.

Overall, the results of question one, what are the lived experiences of single parents attending community college, revealed conflicting ideas that the participants used to stay balanced. The students seemed to have loved the idea of higher education and their decision to start this journey. However, they were compelled to admit that this decision had taken an emotional toll on them. The students were also pulled in separate directions when discussing the balance between weighing their positive and negative experiences. It appeared that the participants wanted to provide balanced statements by admitting they had many challenges, yet, rewarding experiences had come from these challenges. I think Candace framed it well when she said:

It is not easy, but it is not supposed to be. If it were easy, everyone I know would have a degree. I just appreciate that a few people are willing to help me make it doable.

From this discussion, I learned that the single-parent students took pride in realizing their need to grow but also struggled to maintain their stance. The emotional stressors and hardships revealed by the study participants were created by the participant's attempts to meet their needs. This revelation was related to the theoretical framework. Maslow suggested that difficult patterns

are due to unmet needs and that basic needs are cyclical and often need attention when they become scarce (Maslow, 1954).

This question generated a few unique discussions that did not parallel finding from the literature review. Some participants found their experience isolating, as they did not make connections on campus and were too consumed with their life to maintain their existing friendships. Additionally, a couple of the participants felt judged by their teachers. They believed their teachers thought they had too much on their plate to be successful; therefore, the teachers did not see a need to give them additional time. While these statements were outliers, they were also reminders that single parents need more support because they have a great deal of responsibility.

Research Question 2

What are the participants' perceptions of being single parents and college students?

In response to question two, the participants identified personal characteristics and specific feelings that had consumed their experiences. Similar to question one, the reactions were balanced by complexity and pride. Throughout the interviews, participants acknowledged feeling stressed, overwhelmed, and challenged and described their situation as complex, chaotic, a whirlwind, or a roller coaster. However, they also communicated their situation as rewarding, satisfying, motivational, and optimistic. The major themes that emerged from these discussions were pain and satisfaction with mastering time management and organization, working hard, and knowing the rewards outweigh the sacrifice.

In discussing time management and organization, the participants acknowledged their conflicting roles. Sam, Melanie, Doug, Lucy, and Candace described the challenges of juggling many responsibilities and feeling stressed or completely overwhelmed. However, they also

realized the strength of being organized and managing their time effectively. These participants indicated that this experience would not have been possible without learning good organizational skills. These discussions paralleled previous research that showed single-parent students have many role conflicts as they try to balance the responsibilities of being a parent, a student, and usually an employee (Lovell & Scott, 2020). Vyskocil (2018) identified time management as a vital tool for success. Additionally, Bondar (2020) suggested that maintaining balance through time management contributed to student success.

In describing themselves, many of the discussions led to work ethics. Many participants identified the importance of working hard and being willing to do the work needed to succeed. While they acknowledged their struggles, they also recognized their determination or resiliency to overcome these challenges. Ten of the 13 study participants were attending college full-time. On top of this, 11 of them were employed, and nine of them worked full-time. Four of the participants worked two jobs. Many participants discussed the number of hours single parents needed daily, and all agreed that 24 was not enough. Sam, Emily, and Doug specifically discussed the rewards of hard work and believed their hard work would pay off and lead to a better life. Previous research indicated similar beliefs. Lindsay and Gillum (2018) determined that single parents believed they needed to model the values and work ethic they wanted to see in their children. Furthermore, Lovell (2011) discovered the persistence of single parents and their ability to work hard to succeed.

Finally, in describing themselves as single parents, most participants had a sense of pride. They discussed their belief that all their sacrifices would pay off and that there would be rewards at the end of their educational journey. Melanie, Lucy, Becca, and Matty talked about single parenting being a blessing, and they spoke of their hope for their future and their children. In

previous literature, Kruevelis et al. (2017) stated that there were great rewards in earning a higher education credential, as they identified these credentials as a steppingstone toward higher earnings, better opportunities, better health, a pathway out of poverty, and a more significant opportunity for improved educational outcomes for children of single parents. Goodman and Ready (2019) spoke of the hope that single parents believed in, and they suggested that single parents wanted to be role models for their children and instill the importance of education in their children. Duquaine-Watson (2017) identified it as a motivational factor and documented that single parents believed college would bring financial hope. Stenquist (2020) also called it a motivational factor when stating that parents who earn a degree are more likely to have children who earn a degree. Finally, Lindsay and Gillum (2018) determined that single parents believe all their hard work will provide a better future for their children.

Overall, the responses to question two, how do students describe themselves as single parents, identified personal strengths. This discussion generated conversations about what these participants believed to be true about themselves. The study participants felt they could reach their goal of earning a higher education credential, but it would not be an easy path. They believed they would have to battle conflicting roles and manage their time effectively. They also thought they would have to work hard and be persistent to overcome their many challenges. These conversations included discussions of resiliency, sacrifice, hard work, and pride. In the end, the study participants believed they had a challenging journey, but it was worth it because it would greatly benefit them and their children. Maslow (1954) believed that all people desire to grow, and this study evidenced this desire by showing that the participants wanted higher achievement and thought they were capable. Maslow described the need for esteem as a need for

belonging, appreciation, and respect (Maslow, 1954). These participants described in question two, an appreciation and respect for themselves.

This question also generated a statement unique to the study of single parents. One of the participants discussed single parents as positive self-talkers. He suggested that single parents returning to school lacked confidence and needed to motivate themselves through positive self-talk. The participant admitted that he had sticky notes everywhere, such as “I can do this, ...I am good enough... or mistakes help me to do better next time.”

Research Question 3

How do participants describe their motivation to succeed in college?

In response to question three, almost every participant named their child or children as a significant motivational factor in their life. In addition to discussing their children, two other significant themes emerged from the conversation. The participants were motivated by the desire to see personal growth that led to financial security, such as reaching long-term goals, acquiring a better career, or improving their wages. The participants were also motivated by their desire to provide a better future for their children.

In discussing personal growth, the participants suggested that their growth needed to provide financial security for their families. Melanie, Brenda, Candace, Lily, Sam, Brooke, Luke, and Doug talked about their motivation to succeed, add value to their life, and achieve lifelong dreams. Their discussions paralleled Maslow’s self-actualization theory which emphasizes personal growth and accomplishment. Maslow (1954) believed that self-actualization points out someone’s ability to be effective. Maslow (1954) theorized that growth came from an internal desire to add value. Personal growth is also evidenced in previous literature that reported that

single parents have the desire to seek out higher levels of accomplishment, set goals, attain better opportunities, and achieve life-long goals (Wahl, 2018).

In discussing a better future, many participants named their most significant motivational factor as their desire to create a better life for their children. Lucy, Becca, Lily, Michelle, Candace, and Emily talked of better lives. They wanted their children to have better lives than their parents. They wanted security for their children and a positive future for their children. Previous research pointed out that single parents are goal-setters seeking better opportunities. Wahl (2018) identified a better life as a motivational factor for single parents and stated that single parents wanted to prove to themselves and their children that a better life was possible. Lindsay and Gillum (2018) reported that single parents believe their hard work will provide a better future. Cawthon (2014) also identified someone's belief in their ability to advance as a motivational factor. For these participants, motivation had been driven by their past or unmet needs from their past. According to Maslow (1954), the self-actualization theory indicates that behavior and motivation are resolved through many of our basic needs.

The responses to question three, how participants describe their motivation to succeed, revolved around future development and moving beyond their current situation. The participants talked about setting goals that would lead to future accomplishments. Those who were nearing graduation, or had recently graduated, discussed feelings of pride and joy as they realized they were actually going to earn their degree. The participants also spoke of an overwhelming desire to provide a stable life for their children. A life that would allow their children to dream big and would allow them the opportunity to attend college straight out of high school. Doug summed it up by saying, "I hope I can provide a life for my son that gives him confidence and opportunity that I never had." Overall, I described these narratives as proof that these single parents are

seeking higher-level growth and hoping to reach their fullest potential. This relates to Maslow's theory that self-actualization is a desire to be the most one can be.

Research Question 4

What are the participants' perceptions of any challenges they may have encountered?

In response to question four, the study participants were not short on words to identify their specific challenges. These discussions generated many commonalities among the participants. The themes identified in this discussion included financial struggles, childcare needs, academic and scheduling issues, and struggles with virtual learning.

Regarding financial struggles, the participants discussed the challenge of being able to afford college. Candace, Brenda, Sam, Becca, Lily, and Michelle discussed the financial strain it puts on single parents. The participants recognized that several grants pay college tuition, but the cost to attend is much greater than tuition and fees. The participants named other financial concerns, such as the cost of books and supplies. They also discussed how much money it takes to travel to classes and clinical settings. Michelle and Brenda admitted they skipped classes when they could not afford the gas to attend. Michelle also revealed that she was considering dropping out for a semester until she could get to a more stable financial place. Previous studies have also shown that financial struggles are a significant hindrance to college success, and financial struggles have been named one of the top reasons parenting students drop out of school (Poindexter, 2017; Stack & Meredith, 2017). These discussions supported Maslow's thoughts that higher-level needs cannot be met until lower, basic-level needs are secured (Maslow, 1954). McLeod (2020) explained that deficiency needs such as basic needs, safety, and belonging come from a place of deprivation and push us toward growth; however, growth is impossible until unmet needs are met.

In discussing childcare, many students suggested that they could not have started their higher education experience without reliable childcare assistance. Some participants used family members to care for their children while attending school and working. Others had their children in afterschool programs. Still, others identified grant assistance from CCAMPIS as a way to afford childcare. However, some participants still struggled with finding childcare that coincided with school, clinical, or work hours. Becca, Emily, Lily, and Doug recognized childcare hours and costs as one of their biggest struggles. Many study participants also mentioned a need for childcare services on campus. Previous research has shown that childcare is one of the most essential services for parenting students, and it drastically influences parents' decisions to enroll and continue through to graduation (Boressoff, 2012; Carlson, 2015; Miller et al., 2011). Additionally, previous research suggested that childcare services offered on campus could provide an additional layer of support to students who are also single parents (Lovell, 2014).

A third theme generated from this question was academic struggles and scheduling issues. Reasons why the participants struggled varied. Some admitted they were not academically prepared and needed services such as tutoring or math and writing labs. However, they felt slighted because the school did not offer these services during the hours needed, such as nights and weekends. Other participants were quick to blame their academic struggles on the teacher. These participants felt that their instructors were unorganized and did not communicate effectively. Previous research suggested that single parents are often less prepared to begin the rigor of an academic program (MPP, 2016). Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2010) also pointed out that services such as tutoring are not easily accessed and not always available during times that meet the single parent's schedule. Additionally, during question four discussions, participants shared their struggles with class offerings. They talked about a lack of class offerings that would

work around their other responsibilities. They also admitted they wished their schools would offer more classes at night or on the weekends. The literature review also showed that single-parenting students struggled because they had problems with the traditional class schedule (Yakaboski, 2010).

A final theme generated from this research question was that participants were challenged by virtual learning, especially during the COVID pandemic. Brooke, Melanie, Sam, Becca, Doug, and Candace shared their struggles with online learning. Some of these challenges included unsupportive instructors who did not communicate well and were disorganized, unsympathetic advisors who were unhelpful, and participants who disliked technology and found online learning classrooms distracting. Lawrence (2015) documented that online learning can be overwhelming and demanding, and often students feel unmotivated and easily distracted during virtual learning. Also, a few participants believed online classes expected students to learn independently and did not provide the support that could be found in an on-campus classroom.

Becca, Candace, and Doug were moved to online classes during the pandemic, and they had strong opinions about the move. The move was overwhelming for the participants as their children were also learning from home. The move was disappointing, and they felt as if they were cheated out of hands-on lab experiences. Additionally, the move created an atmosphere where participants lost support – teacher support and classmate support. One participant talked about losing a friend to the pandemic and becoming so overwhelmed by the COVID experience that she took a semester off before returning. Research on the pandemic has already shown that students described their experience as worrisome and uncertain (Clery et al., 2021). Ajayi et al. (2021) also determined that single mothers experienced a more significant negative effect than

two-parent families. Their research indicated concerns about virtual learning, homeschooling, stress, insecurity, and grief (Ajayi et al., 2021).

This question also generated a unique discussion that did not parallel finding from the literature review. Two participants discussed the challenges of not fitting in and having a generation gap. While they called it a generational gap, I might suggest it was more closely described as a situational gap. These students struggled with fitting in with students whose situations differed significantly from theirs. According to my study participants, these students were not parenting, were not working, and had very little responsibility. The study participants felt left out of conversations, misunderstood, and unwanted as outsiders in the class.

The responses to question four, what are the participants' perceptions of any challenges they may have encountered, revealed an overarching theme that single parents are overwhelmed by multiple competing struggles. For many study participants, attending college further complicated their financial battle. Many of them found it difficult to find affordable, quality childcare to cover hours spent at both work and school. Further still, many of these study participants felt they had less support than traditional students because student support services failed to meet their needs. Finally, some study participants felt they received less communication, less support, and more responsibility in their online learning. Overall, this question revealed a need for additional student support for single parents. Similar to previous questions, this discussion aligned with the theoretical framework as the self-actualization theory suggested that needs are cyclical and that complex patterns are due to unmet needs (Maslow, 1954).

Research Question 5

How do the participants describe their needs as college students?

In response to question five, the study participants suggested how their lived experiences could have been made easier. Two major themes arose from this question. First, the participants identified areas where their college could have offered more support that could have improved their experience. These services included improved support and communication with instructors, greater flexibility in scheduling and attending classes, and establishing study groups for in-person and online courses. The second theme was specific needs named by the participants that they believed could have been better supported. These needs included financial support or scholarships to help with tuition, books, gas, and computers, childcare support, and single-parent clubs or activities that incorporate their children.

Regarding the need for additional institutional support, Sam, Brenda, Candace, and Melanie suggested that single parents need improved communication and greater support from their professors. They indicated that their professors could improve by being more approachable, more helpful, and better communicators. According to Carpenter et al. (2018), building relationships with faculty and staff builds support networks and connections and creates a sense of belonging that motivates and pushes students toward success. The participant also suggested they needed more flexibility. Many students suggested that the institution needed more accommodating class schedule options. Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2010) pointed out that most schools offer academic support services; however, this support lacks flexibility as it is poorly coordinated, not easily accessed, and is often unavailable during times that meet the single parent's schedule. Emily and Michelle also believed their instructors should be less rigid in their attendance policies and assignment due dates.

The study participants also discussed the need for more structured study groups in both on-ground and online classes. Several study participants discussed the benefits of having a study

group, and Lily and Brooke suggested that teachers build study groups into all their courses. The benefits of study groups were twofold. It allowed students to study together to learn the class material; however, it also provided a social network, and many single parents felt left out on college campuses. This aligned with previous research as Duquaine-Watson (2007) revealed that single parents felt disengaged and left out of college life's social side. Chambers (2020) acknowledged the benefits of classmate support as one of his study participants described the supportive relationships of classmates as gaining a family when she started the program. Additionally, Maslow identified social needs as the third level of his hierarchal triangle. Maslow (1954) described this need as a desire for belonging, where a longing for friendships replaces hunger pangs.

Regarding the specific needs of single parents attending community college, the study participants named many of the exact needs addressed in research question four. Melanie, Brenda, Becca, Michelle, Candance, Lily, and Doug discussed the need for single-parent scholarships to provide additional support, such as financial support to help with tuition, books, gas, computers, and childcare. According to Miller (2012), student parents are more likely to possess student debt and drop out of school than traditional students.

The participants also identified a need for single-parent clubs or activities involving their children. This need appeared to be an attempt to connect better to their college and experience the social side of college life. Lucy, Candace, Doug, and Brooke talked in detail about these specific needs as they wanted to incorporate family time into their college experience and believed a single parents club would provide connections with other single parents and build peer support. Previous research has shown that student parents felt left out of the college experience and that colleges often cater to the traditional college student (Dodson & Deprez, 2019; Lewis,

2021; Pearson, 2019). However, Kelley (2017) suggested that services supporting a family lifestyle encourage student success in parenting.

This question also generated a unique finding. Multiple participants discussed a need for parenting classes. They talked about networking with other single parents and sharing helpful tips. They also discussed taking parenting classes on campus that taught them how to adapt and be successful, set their children up for success, and help them develop problem-solving skills. Additionally, they believed these classes should be free to single parents.

Research question five, how do the participants describe their needs, showed that single parents need more support, financial assistance, and connections to the campus and their classmates. Support options varied as some wanted better classroom support, others wanted institutional support, and others just needed more help from classmates. Financial options also varied as students named tuition, book, gas, and computers as financial needs. Additionally, single parents described a need for campus connections and desired a network where single parents could come together and support each other. Again, this discussion aligned with the theoretical framework as the self-actualization theory suggested that difficult patterns are due to unmet needs (Maslow, 1954).

Research Question 6

What are the participants' perceptions of their support systems, both personal and institutional?

Three themes were recognized in the question six responses. The study participants identified personal support that had made their experiences easier and institutional support that had positively affected their experiences. Personal support came from individuals that included family members such as parents, grandparents, and children. It also included support from

employers, coworkers, and friends. Institutional support included teachers, college staff, advisors, tutoring services, counseling services, the library, math and writing labs, and classmates. A third theme that came from this research question was mentor support. The participants discussed the importance of having a mentor to help navigate the college experience. Carpenter et al. (2017) indicated that support from family, friends, employers, and institutions improves academic success.

In discussing personal support, Brenda, Michelle, Candace, Emily, Doug, Lily, Brook, and Matty discussed the importance of single parents having people surrounding them to help in times of need. These study participants talked about friends and family who assisted with childcare, took their children to ball practices, and picked them up after school. They spoke of employers who scheduled work hours around school hours and allowed them to use work Wi-Fi to do homework when things were slow. Carpenter et al. (2018) recognized employers as supportive of academic success as they often offer flexibility and understanding. Participants also talked about coworkers who had previously completed the same higher education program. These coworkers were a great asset and helped participants study for tests and do homework and school projects. They also believed that emotional support and motivation from friends and family kept them going during stressful times. Wainwright and Watts (2018) suggested that parental relationships, particularly mothers, provided emotional support that greatly benefitted their child's college experience.

In discussing institutional support, the study participants acknowledged their need for additional institutional support. Chambers (2020) suggested that single parents need increased guidance and tools to navigate the higher education process. In their discussions, the participants recognized areas where the institution supported them but also admitted that these areas could

have done more. These areas included the counseling office, advisors, tutoring services, math and writing labs, teachers, staff, classmates, library, and study groups. Sam, Lucy, and Brenda suggested that single parents need additional connections on campus, and campus staff should work to build better relationships with students. Previous research has shown that single parents desire greater teacher access (Allen-Drewry, (2017). Lily, Candace, and Doug suggested that single parents needed help finding resources and someone who would push them to succeed. Most participants believed institutional support should include encouraging, patient, caring instructors and individuals who will listen to their concerns.

A final theme generated by question six conversations was the desire to have mentor support. Many of the study participants named an individual at their college that went above and beyond to help them be successful. Some called this person their mentor and described them as someone who helped them navigate the system. Doug, Lucy, Melanie, Brook, and Candace discussed how a mentor could make their experience easier. These participants believed new students, primarily nontraditional and first-generational, should have someone to guide them. The participants suggested that these mentors could show students around campus and answer questions. They could introduce students to support services, clubs, and additional resources. They could also provide answers to the questions the new students may be hesitant to ask. Standlee (2019) described a mentor as someone who helps navigate the college process. She also described mentors as guides that introduce students to college life, help new students make connections, and offers answers to questions students do not know they need to ask (Standlee, 2019).

Overall, research question six, the participants' perceptions of their support systems, generated in-depth discussions on the support they have had up to this point and the support they

would like to obtain. The study participants could name specific people and offices that had provided them with additional support, such as teachers, tutoring services, and advisors. They also could recall areas where help could be improved, such as extending tutoring hours or providing greater access to instructors. Additionally, the participants identified a need for single parents to have a navigator or mentor to offer guidance, motivation, and support and to identify and share resources. Overall, this question revealed a need for single parents to have greater emotional support, better connections on campus, easier access to their instructors, and a navigation system that helps students stay on course. The question six narratives again revealed that single-parent students have unmet needs, which were access to services and connection. Maslow (1954) suggested that belongingness was an emotional need for relationships, and he also proposed that building relationships led to a need for esteem and respect. Therefore, as students receive the needed services and connections, they have a greater chance of seeing student success and reaching their full potential.

Study Summary

This phenomenological study aimed to learn, from the student's perspective, what it means to be a single parent attending a community college. The participant interviews generated in-depth discussions about their experiences. The results indicated many struggles and revealed that single parents worry about financial matters, childcare, and academic success. The findings also suggested that single-parent student needs are significant and desire more engagement, a sense of connection, and support. The participants admitted the emotional toll this journey had taken on them, yet they also seemed to know there would be great benefits on the other end. After these interviews, I would describe these single-parent students as organized, balanced, persistent, optimistic, goal-setters, achievement-oriented, hardworking, and proud. Overall, I

would suggest that single-parent students know their situation is not ideal, but they also know they are carving out a path toward a greater, more valuable achievement.

Implications for Practice

Based on the research findings, I recommend several areas of improvement for future practice.

- Offer single-parent students additional financial resources to alleviate some of their financial burdens
- Offer single-parent students childcare scholarships to alleviate the cost of childcare or create a childcare center on campus that will lessen financial concerns and lighten scheduling conflicts
- Offer faculty and staff training to provide greater knowledge on the needs of single-parent students and train them in effective communication and supportive techniques.
- Target resources and services to meet the specific needs of single-parent students
- Improve current student support service offerings to single-parent students
- Provide single parents and their families the opportunity to connect and build networks and connections

First, there is a need for additional financial support for single parents attending community colleges. In many states, people believe they can go to school tuition free at community colleges. While many attend community colleges and technical schools without paying tuition, the participation cost goes far beyond that. Attending community college is less expensive than attending a four-year school; however, book and supply costs are not. Also, community college students commute and spend a great deal of money on gas and car maintenance. Further still, many single parents incur childcare costs while attending classes. Therefore, it should be a

priority for higher education administrators to close the financial gap for these single-income parents by offering a broader range of financial resources to help meet these needs.

Second, there is a need for additional childcare support for single parents attending community college. Among the 13 study participants I interviewed, there were 20 children, and almost all were in childcare or an after-school program. The ages of these children ranged from 10 months to 14 years old. Many of these participants discussed the challenge of affording quality care for their children. Therefore, higher education institutions could provide an essential service to single parents by offering childcare scholarships or providing childcare services on campus.

Next, single parents are a growing population on college campuses, and like other nontraditional students, they often feel unsupported or unseen. My student participants stated they wanted their professors to understand their challenges and offer better communication and support. However, many higher education institutions still cater to the traditional college student. For this reason, institutions could offer training to their faculty and staff to provide greater knowledge on the needs of single-parent students and to train them in effective communication and supportive techniques. This training can also offer suggestions for best practices for improving teacher practices.

Next, institutions need to target resources and services to meet the specific needs of single-parent students. Over 70% of my study participants were first-generation students. Therefore, many single parents attend college for the first time without experiential guidance from their parents. Institutional leaders could identify these students early and help them with enrollment. Then, following them throughout their education journey to offer targeted services and resources to help the student meet their academic goals. Institutional leaders could also target areas where

they could improve access to services. Finally, institutions could create a mentor program that helps single-parent students make connections on campus.

Additionally, institutions need to improve student support service offerings to single parents. This research indicated that single parents, especially single mothers, prioritize their family over their education. Institutional leaders could better recognize the needs of single parents by offering more flexibility in class schedules and extended hours to include late nights and weekends in the library, tutor services, and computer labs. These leaders could also recognize single parents' need for childcare. Institutions could offer childcare services on campus and alleviate a significant concern for single parents attending higher education.

Finally, institutions should provide single parents and their families the opportunity to connect and build networks and connections on campus. Previous research has shown that single-parent students often feel detached; however, those who find a sense of belonging are more motivated and committed (Bondar, 2020). My study showed that single parents feel left out and often isolated. Therefore, institutions could offer parenting-specific clubs and activities for single parents to network and build their social presence and sense of belonging.

Recommendations for Further Research

During this study, I documented several areas for further research to be conducted on single parents.

- Conducting a mixed method study that compares single-parent experiences at colleges that have on-campus childcare facilities and those that do not.
- Conducting a quantitative study that explores support services offered remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Conducting a qualitative study that explores the relationship between single-parent student success and mentorship.
- Conducting a qualitative study that explores the experiences of single-parent students who dropped out of college.
- Conduct a mixed method study that surveys teacher perceptions of nontraditional learners and evaluates teacher knowledge of nontraditional student needs.

First, childcare has been thoroughly documented as a hurdle to single-parent college success. Previous research has shown that it is a major reason some students never attend. Throughout this study, the participants discussed childcare, and multiple times it was suggested that colleges should have childcare facilities on campus. Conducting further studies that explore the comparison between single-parent experiences at colleges with on-campus childcare facilities and those without would provide excellent details on the benefits of on-campus childcare. It would also document whether on-campus facilities meet student needs and help alleviate the childcare concerns of single-parent students. A mixed-method approach to this study would allow researchers to survey the participants and interview them to better clarify their experiences with or without on-campus childcare.

Second, there is a need to learn more about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. From my research, I discovered several student concerns about remote learning. Many study participants felt less supported during this time, believed they received less communication, and missed out on essential knowledge they would need later in other classes. Therefore, conducting further studies by surveying students about the support services offered remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic could highlight areas where institutions support remote learning and where higher education can improve their support services for online classes.

Next, there is a need to conduct further studies that explore the impact that mentorship can have on single parents attending college. My study participants talked highly of personnel on campus whom they called their mentors, even though their school did not have a mentor program. These participants suggested that mentors helped them navigate all the confusion, and they believed having a mentor to guide them gave them confidence that they could succeed. Therefore, conducting further studies to examine the usefulness of mentorship for single parents could offer institutions of higher education an avenue to better support this population of students.

Next, within my study, participants talked about dropping out of school or the possibility of dropping from their college. Financial struggles were the most popular reason why they made this consideration. Another reason was the difficulty and emotional strain of juggling so many responsibilities. Conducting a study exploring the experiences of single-parent students who dropped out of college could offer greater insight into the challenges single parents face. It could also allow higher education institutions to redesign programs and services to better support single-parent students.

Finally, within my study of single parents, participants recognized that nontraditional students often feel like outsiders in the classroom. The study discussions revealed the idea that teachers were not always available and lacked proper communication skills and flexibility. Many of my study participants desired more support from their instructors than was given. Conducting a mixed-method study that surveys teacher perceptions of nontraditional learners and evaluates teacher knowledge of nontraditional student needs could offer a better understanding of teacher perspectives. Using a mixed method approach to this study would allow researchers to survey teacher practices and knowledge and interview them to better understand their perspective.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study aimed to explore student perceptions of their lived experiences as single parents attending community college. In Chapter 1, I introduced the phenomenon of single parents attending community college, stated the problem being studied, and presented the research questions that would guide the study. In Chapter 2, I explored the literature surrounding single-parent students. Explored topics included hardships that hindered student success, such as financial trouble, childcare difficulty, family responsibilities, and academic and emotional struggles. The review also discovered that contributions to single-parent success included motivational factors, support services, and helpful resources. In Chapter 3, I outlined the methods used in the study. In Chapter 4, I presented my study findings. I concluded my research in Chapter 5, where I summarized the study findings and provided implications for practice and recommendations for further research.

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APPENDIX A: Interview Protocol

Hello. My name is Debbie Johnson, and I am an Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis (ELPA) student at East Tennessee State University. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research study and talking with me today. Please note that there are no right or wrong answers. I want you to feel comfortable during this interview, and I hope you will feel free to share your thoughts and feelings openly. I am conducting this research study to explore the lived experiences of single parents attending community college.

With your permission, the interview conversation will be recorded. The purpose of recording is to ensure all details are documented because it is difficult to write everything down while maintaining good conversation and being attentive to you and your experiences. Everything you say will remain confidential. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to participate, or you can choose to change your mind at any time. If you choose to quit at a later date, you may do so by contacting me directly. Please note that there is no compensation for participating in this study. You have been given a copy of the informed consent document. By verbally agreeing and participating in this interview, you are giving your consent to participate in this research study.

Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

With your permission, we will begin the interview.

Interview Questions

I. I would like to start by asking some basic information questions.

- Are you a single mother or a single father?
- What is your current year of college attendance?
- Do you attend college full-time or part-time?
- Did you attend during the COVID Pandemic?
- If yes, online or in person?
- Describe your pandemic experience as a single parent?

- How many children do you have?
- What are their ages?
- Are you employed? If so, full-time or part-time?
- What is your age?
- Are you a first-generation student?
- How did you learn about attending community college?

II. Now, let us focus on your college experience as a single parent.

- Talk about your experiences as a single parent attending a community college.
- Describe what it is like to be a single parent and a college student.
- Discuss your motivational factors. What was your motivation to start a college program? What motivates you to continue?
- Talk about any challenges, if any, that you have encountered while attending community college.
- Discuss your needs, desires, or wishes related to this experience.
- Describe your support systems, both personal and institutional. Who are the people that have helped you, and how?

Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experience that we have not discussed?

Thank you for volunteering to participate in my research and for taking the time to participate in this interview. Please feel free to reach out to me if you have questions or additional comments at a later date. Do you have any questions for me now before we end this interview? Thank you again for your time and participation.

VITA

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