

Capstone Project

Cycle of Poverty: Single Mothers in Community College

Jennifer Pocai

MAIS 798, Section 001

Dr. Angela Hattery (Chair), Dr. Jaime Lester, and Samantha Greenberg

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Chapter One: Introduction

According to the American Council on Education (2005), 16% of all undergraduate female students are single mothers, and out of those 25 and older, 28% are single mothers (pp. 8-10). Student parents are often low-income and persons of color, and roughly half of these students attend two-year postsecondary institutions (Institute of Women's Policy Research, 2013, p. 1; Institute of Women's Policy Research, 2014, p. 1). While student parents are at a much higher risk of leaving college without a degree than their non-parent counterparts, many postsecondary institutions are still failing to directly address their needs (Institute of Women's Policy Research, 2013, p. 1). Research indicates that individuals without a postsecondary credential are more likely to be unemployed and less financially stable (College Board, 2013, pp. 5-6). Children of parents without college degrees are less likely to earn a postsecondary credential themselves (College Board, 2014, p. 18). If barriers for low-income single mother college students are not addressed, the cycle of poverty will likely continue for their children.

Low-income single mothers face a multitude of barriers to enrolling in college courses, attending from semester-to-semester, and graduating with a postsecondary credential. Obstacles for this student population vary greatly, often overlap, and can take the form of government policies, institutional barriers, life challenges, and social hurdles. (Brown & Nichols, 2012; D'nn Lovell, 2014; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Forste & Jacobsen, 2013; Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010; Yakaboski, 2010). The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of low-income community college students who are single mothers, specifically their barriers to postsecondary access, persistence, and completion. Findings within the research were gathered to develop a data-driven toolkit customized for community colleges, which provides institution-

wide recommendations for increasing low-income single mother graduates and creating a friendlier campus environment for this student group.

Intersections between Gender, Race, and Socioeconomic Status

Parenting students are a subgroup of the expanding nontraditional student population on community college campuses with single parents being the majority (Cerven, 2013, p. 3). Nontraditional is defined here as possessing some combination of the following attributes: 25 or older, working, parenting, enrolled part-time, lower socioeconomic status, or a student of color (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011, p. 33; Johnson, Taasoobhirazi, Clark, Howell, & Breen, 2016, p. 3; Quintiliani, Bishop, Greaney, & Whiteley, 2012, p. 757). Student parents are often low-income, persons of color, and more likely to attend community colleges (Institute of Women's Policy Research, 2013, p. 1; Institute of Women's Policy Research, 2015, p. 1). In 2012, 69% of student parents' incomes were 200 percent below the federal poverty line (Institute of Women's Policy Research, 2015, pp. 1-2). American women are more likely to be poorer than men, and women of color are disproportionately living in poverty (Elmelech & Lu, 2004, p. 158). In the United States, households headed by single women have the highest poverty rates compared to all other types of households (Cerven, 2013, p. 3).

Research demonstrates a significant relationship between income level and educational attainment (Donlan, Prescott, & Zaff, 2016, p. 115). Low-income high school students have an average graduation rate 15 percentage points lower than their more affluent counterparts, and out of those that do graduate, only 68% enroll in college (Donlan et al., 2016, p. 113). Students living in low-income communities often "lack the human, institutional, and social capital that help youth navigate through obstacles to success" (Donlan et al., 2016, p. 115). By the time low-income students enroll in college, they are often underprepared for college-level academics

(McGlynn, 2003, p. 21). African American and Hispanic students are more likely to be living in poverty and less likely to complete a bachelor's degree within six years than their White or Asian peers (McGlynn, 2003, p. 21; United States Census Bureau, 2015, spreadsheet).

Cycle of Poverty & Education

Children of parents without college degrees are less likely to earn a postsecondary credential themselves (College Board, 2014, p. 18). Youth raised in lower socioeconomic households have lower high school completion and college enrollment rates than their more affluent counterparts (Crosnoe, Mistry, & Elder, 2002, p. 690). Lack of parent involvement, which is linked to lower parental education, is associated with diminished educational aspirations for children (College Board, 2013, p. 30; Perna & Titus, 2005, p. 486). Economically disadvantaged parents are more likely to be pessimistic about opportunities for their children's higher education, also adversely impacting college enrollment (Crosnoe, Mistry, & Elder, 2002, p. 697). Children reared by single mothers are at a heightened risk for poverty, and those in low-income families face the greatest barriers to academic success and future financial stability (Forste & Jacobsen, 2013, p. 331).

Conversely, women with higher levels of education have better relationships with their children and their children are more likely to have positive educational outcomes (Bloom, 2009, p. 486). Research demonstrates that the amount of time mothers spend engaged in their children's activities increases with their own level of education (College Board, 2013, p. 30). In the United States, children entering kindergarten who have parents with higher levels of education have better reading and math scores than their peers whose parents have lower levels of education (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2015, p. 3). Parental education is also a "stronger predictor of children's future economic, educational, and emotional outcomes" in the

United States versus the majority of European countries (Institute of Women's Research, 2015, p. 3).

Problem Statement

Low-income single mothers face a multitude of barriers to college access, persistence, and success (Brown & Nichols, 2012; D'nn Lovell, 2014; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Wilson, 2011; Yakaboski, 2010). Parents are at a much higher risk of leaving college without a degree than their non-parent counterparts (Institute of Women's Policy Research, 2013, p. 1). Research shows that college departure affects not only earning potential for students who are parents, but also educational outcomes for their children. Without a college credential, mothers typically earn less money and are less likely to be employed than mothers that are college graduates (College Board, 2013, p. 5). Children of parents without college degrees are less likely to earn a postsecondary credential themselves (College Board, 2014, p. 18).

Often community colleges are ineffective in addressing the barriers faced by low-income single mother students, and even unintentionally add further hurdles to credential completion for this student population (Brown & Nichols, 2012, p. 499; Women Employed, 2012, p. 1). Pregnant and parenting students have "largely gone unnoticed by the academic community" with scant scholarly literature available on this student group (Brown & Nichols, 2012, p. 501; Duquaine-Watson, 2007, p. 230; Kim, 2012, p. 75). Student parents often see themselves as invisible due to the lack of services that meet their specific needs (Duquaine-Watson, 2007, pp. 234-235). Further research is needed to identify best practices that will increase low-income single mother access, persistence, and completion at the community college level (Bloom, 2009, p. 499; Brown & Nichols, 2012, p. 527; Women Employed, 2012, p. 7).

Therefore, this study explored the postsecondary experience of low-income single mothers attending community college. Specifically, research questions for this study were: what obstacles exist to college access, persistence, and completion for low-income single mothers and what supports have been identified to assist these mothers in overcoming such barriers. Research from the disciplines of higher education and social justice were viewed through a feminist lens while examining equity for low-income single mothers within community colleges. Findings from this study were used to produce a toolkit containing recommendations for community colleges regarding how to create a welcoming environment for low-income single mothers and improve this student group's college completion rates. Topics within the toolkit include; students' rights and resources; developing a working group; faculty best practices; recommendations for key college offices; leveraging resources and securing funding; faculty and staff training; and student awareness campaign.

Overview of Study

Researchers have documented over a thirty-year period higher education's "chilly" institutional climate with both subtle and overt gender bias that leaves female students, faculty, and staff at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts (Duquaine-Watson, 2007, p. 229). Therefore, within this study a feminist critical analysis framework was used, which "considers gender a fundamental category ... [that] impacts the meanings and values assigned to every human endeavor" and challenges "unjust social and political order" (Brookfield, 2012, p. 5; Wilson, 2011, p. 220). Utilizing this framework asserts that gender division within higher education affects women's college access, persistence, and completion, and differentiates a woman's college experience from a man's (Yakaboski, 2010, p. 464). In this case, how mothering affects women's education and the education of their children was analyzed.

A literature review was performed to establish a “comprehensive understanding” of the experience of low-income single mothers in community college, which included gathering, synthesizing, and then critically analyzing research on the topic (Mertens, 2015, p. 91). A transformative paradigm was applied, which focuses on the lives of marginalized groups and attempts to confront social oppression and bring about social change (Mertens, 2015, pp. 21 & 236). Utilizing this paradigm, the literature review research was then leveraged to develop a toolkit providing community college leadership with detailed recommendations to improve academic outcomes for low-income single mothers. Change is the driving force behind this study and the toolkit is intended to act as an instrument to prompt that change.

Significance

Individuals who do graduate with postsecondary degrees earn more money and are more likely to be employed than individuals who possess only a high school diploma (College Board, 2013, p. 5). When individuals earn more, they pay more in taxes and the government spends less on social programs (College Board, 2013, p. 5). Completing a postsecondary degree notably reduces the likelihood of living in poverty for mothers, and reduces welfare recidivism (Wilson & Cox, 2011, p. 219). Research corroborates the fact that when low-income mothers earn college degrees, they are likely to increase their socioeconomic status (Wilson & Cox, 2011, p. 219). Children of parents that earn college degrees are more likely to earn a postsecondary credential themselves (College Board, 2014, p. 18). Furthermore, at a time when critics are accusing the community college of “reproducing the class inequities associated with advanced capitalism”, it is vital these institutions refocus on their mission of open access and reclaim their title of “Democracy’s college[s]” (Ayers, 2005, p. 528).

Terms and Definitions

Access – The ability of a student to be admitted into a postsecondary institution and enroll in classes.

At-risk- Students that are less likely to complete a postsecondary credential.

College for all – The concept that all individuals should have the right to a college education.

Completion – Graduating from college with a degree or certificate.

Cooling out – Lessening students’ educational opportunities and expectations

Cycle of poverty – The concept that poverty will continue from generation-to-generation unless an external intervention breaks the cycle.

Low-income – For the purpose of this study, low-income will be defined as students that qualify for Federal Financial Aid.

Nontraditional/underrepresented– College students can be referred to as nontraditional based upon any of the following or a combination of these categories: over 24-years-old, working fulltime, adult-like life circumstances, part-time enrollment, socioeconomic status, and race or gender (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d., para. 1).

Open access – Community colleges have an “open door” policy, providing access to postsecondary education for all who can benefit from it at an affordable cost (Shannon & Smith, 2006, pp. 15-16).

Persistence – A student continuing to enroll in classes from semester-to-semester with the end goal of completing a college credential.

Quality of life – a multidimensional concept that weighs positive and negative aspects of life, which include health, schools, neighborhoods, jobs, housing, and so forth.

Single mother – Throughout this proposal, single mothers will be defined as unmarried women with children.

Now that the study has been properly introduced, Chapter Two explores the current scholarly dialogue related to low-income single mothers attempting to access, persist through,

and complete a community college credential. The final chapter contains detailed information regarding research methods that were used in the project's creation.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

A multitude of barriers stand in the way of low-income single mothers and their dreams of a college education. Obstacles to a college degree can take the form of government institutions, programs, and policies; postsecondary institutional barriers; life challenges; and social hurdles. While each mothering-student's experience is different, the following literature review provides context regarding general barriers this student population encounters.

Government Institutions, Programs, & Policies

Low-income, single mothers are a financially and socially compromised population whose resources continue to dissipate (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Yakaboski, 2010). Prompted by the *welfare mother* stereotype that blames many societal ills on out-of-wedlock births, in 1996 the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) passed, which reformed welfare and caused a massive reduction in monetary support for education (Duquaine-Watson, 2007, p. 230; Kim, 2012, p. 70). Reforms pressure low-income women to find low-paying jobs with no growth potential prior to enrolling in postsecondary education (Wilson, 2011, pp. 51-53). Post reform, single mothers must work over 20 hours a week while attending college, a practice which has been proven to decrease graduation rates (Yakaboski, 2010, p. 466). Research shows PRWORA is associated with statistically significant declines in single mother college enrollment, especially fulltime enrollment at four-year institutions (Kim, 2012, p. 86). As a result, graduation rates of low-income single mothers decrease as part-time enrollment is correlated with a higher probability of dropping out (Kim, 2012, p. 87).

Welfare reform in 1996 replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Transitional Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and “established a preference for paid employment over educational or training activity” (Kim, 2012, p. 73). The TANF program allows only one year of postsecondary education and/or vocational training to count toward work requirements, inhibiting credential options (Austin & McDermott, 2004, p. 95; Beeler, 2016, p. 73). As a result, mothers on welfare are “actively discouraged” from pursuing a higher education (Bloom, 2009, p. 486; Katz, 2013, p. 275). When unmarried parents do attend college, they are three times more likely than non-parent students to be enrolled in short-term workforce training instead of degree programs (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010, p. 183). Beyond welfare reform *cooling out* low-income single mothers, community colleges are accused of doing the same by preparing students for low-wage jobs, directing them away from four-year institutions, and reducing student aspirations (Cerven, 2013, p. 3).

Research demonstrates single student parents undergo greater financial challenges and accumulate 20%-30% more student loan debt while in college than their non-parent counterparts (Katz, 2013, p. 285). Welfare and financial aid systems are not always properly connected as mandated by regulation, and students report frustration with the ignorance of caseworkers and financial aid officers alike regarding rules and regulations (Katz, 2013, p. 285). This lack of knowledge can cause case workers to view financial aid as a source of income, negatively impacting the amount of a student’s welfare cash grant (Katz, 2013, p. 285). Financial aid opportunities like the Pell Grant, Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant, Workforce Investment Act, and institutional scholarships are varied and disjointed (Wilson, 2011, pp. 67-70). Due to this complexity, single mothers often do not possess all the information necessary to make knowledgeable decisions regarding financing and programs of study prior to enrollment

(Wilson, 2011, p. 74). Even when low-income single mothers are successful at accessing aid, they average \$5,507 a year in further unmet costs (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2015, p. 13). Flaws like these in government programs and policies prevent single mothers from accessing postsecondary education.

Unmarried parenting students that do enroll, delay postsecondary education and enter college with inadequate K-12 academic preparation more often than their non-parent counterparts (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010, p. 182). Single mothers are more likely to have attended substandard secondary schools in low-income areas that lack proper resources (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2010; United States Department of Education, 2012; Women Employed, 2012, p. 4). Additionally, 18% of single parents earn a General Educational Development (GED) credential instead of a standard high school diploma as opposed to only 6% of all students (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2015, p. 2). Almost half of single parent students score under 700 on the ACT/SAT, compared to 18% of other students (Goldrick-Rab, 2010, p. 183). Due to insufficient preparation in the public-school system, unmarried parenting students are more likely to begin their college experience in developmental courses, which lengthens the time and increases the funding needed to complete a postsecondary credential (Goldrick-Rab, 2010, p. 183). Furthermore, less than one half of students referred to developmental education complete the remedial work and move to college-level coursework (Bailey, Wook Jeong, & Cho, 2009, p. 255). Government institutions, programs, and policies are part of a vicious cycle that prevents poor women from "permanently improv[ing] [their] economic condition" by creating obstacles to postsecondary access and success (Wilson, 2011, p. 53).

Institutional Barriers

Another key challenge for single mothers are institutional barriers at college ranging from scheduling conflicts to age limit policies that do not allow children in certain areas on campus (Yakaboski, 2010, pp. 465-477). Lack of housing for parenting and pregnant students, lactation rooms, family inclusive events, and campuses that are not child-friendly create an unwelcoming environment for student parents (Brown & Nichols, 2012, pp. 502 & 520; Yakaboski, 2010, p. 470). Pedagogical practices that include group projects and mandatory participation in activities outside of the typical class time and location can be especially challenging for low-income, single mothers (Duquaine-Watson, 2007, p. 233). Attendance policies that lack allowances for family emergencies and faculty without empathy for the realities of parenthood act as barriers for student parents (Duquaine-Watson, 2007, p. 235; Women Employed, 2012, p. 1)

Single mother college students indicate frustration with navigating segmented and scattered college campus resources, and articulate the desire for more in-person, customized, and aligned supports (Forste & Jacobsen, 2013, p. 342). Single mothers report awareness that grants and scholarships exist, but state they have inadequate knowledge regarding how to access those opportunities (Forste & Jacobsen, 2013, p. 342). Furthermore, lack of individualized educational and career counseling negatively impacts this student group's confidence that they are investing in educational plans that will lead to jobs with economic stability (Forste & Jacobsen, 2013, p. 341). Student parents often see themselves as invisible due to lack of acknowledgment that services are needed specifically for their student population or spotlighted in a stigmatizing way by faculty and fellow students (Duquaine-Watson, 2007, pp. 234-235).

Life Challenges

Lack of housing, transportation, food, clothing, and other basic needs are often referenced in scholarly dialogue as obstacles to access, persistence, and completion for low-income single mothers (Brown & Nichols, 2012, p 503; Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2015, p. 16; Katz, 2013, p. 291; Women Employed, 2012, p. 6). Forms of assistance, such as various government programs and services, are disparate, confusing, and not easily accessible, which leads many low-income, single-mothers to forgo them altogether (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010, p. 189). Some mothers choose not to apply for social programs due to the attached stigma that makes them feel as though they are "abusing the system" (Wilson, 2011, p. 232). Other mothers do participate in basic needs community programs like food banks, free clinics, and clothing closets; however, many of these programs have program participation requirements in order to access the resources, which can prove restrictive for already overburdened single mothers (Katz, 2013, p. 295).

Another critical barrier to single mother persistence and completion is the lack of affordable childcare. When surveyed 84% of community college Chief Academic Officers indicated that affordable childcare was a barrier for their students, while only 42% reported that their colleges offered on-campus childcare (Rankin, Katsinas, & Hardy, 2010, pp. 214-215). A study conducted by the Institute of Women's Policy Research (2015), revealed that 89% of campus child development centers maintained waitlists, and the average list was roughly 85% the size of the centers total enrollment (p. 9). On average only 41% of the slots were filled with students' children, the remainder were taken by children of staff and faculty or other community members (Institute of Women's Policy Research, 2015, p. 9). Contributors to the lack of on-campus childcare include diminishing federal funding and "liability greatly outweigh[ing] the

benefits”, as stated by one administrator from the Rankin survey (Yakaboski, 2010, p. 466; Rankin et al., 2010, p. 214). Absenteeism due to lack of childcare can lead to subpar performance, withdrawing or failing classes, and ultimately, student attrition (Rankin et al., 2010, p. 213).

Single mother college students also grapple with role strain. Often mothers are the primary caregivers for their children, which equates to dual roles of both parent and academic (D’nn Lovell, 2014, p. 370). While single mothers often cite improving their financial circumstances for their children as a main reason for pursuing a degree, many are conflicted due to the feeling of putting themselves first or missing out on more of their children’s lives (Forste & Jacobsen, 2013, p. 342). Mothers report that their identity as students “impose[s] on their identity as mothers” and balancing the two roles is their greatest hurdle (Wilson & Cox, 2011, p. 224). Student-mothers often view these two roles as mutually exclusive, which may contribute to lack of persistence (Wilson & Cox, 2011, p. 224). Resolving the conflict between these dueling responsibilities is necessary for academic success (D’nn Lovell, 2014, p. 370).

The unique life challenges that low-income single mothers face make this student population more vulnerable to mental health issues (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010, p. 190; Shenoy, Lee, & Leng Trieu, 2016). Single parent students are disproportionately affected by a number of mental health stressors, including financial, family, and relationship troubles (Shenoy et al., 2016, p. 152). According to a study conducted by Shenoy, Lee, and Leng Trieu (2016), 11.5% of single parent community college students reported they seriously considered suicide, as opposed to 9% of non-parent and married students (p. 154). Almost twice as many single parent students stated they attempted suicide compared to their counterparts (Shenoy et al., 2016, p. 154). Complicating the issue further, many unmarried parents in college are forced to forgo

health insurance, leaving them with fewer resources for assistance (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010, p. 190; Wilson, 2011, p. 64).

Social Hurdles

Haleman (2004) states, “the phrase ‘single mother’ often conjures images of poor, welfare-dependent, and frequently minority women who lack adequate education and employment skills and the motivation to acquire them” (p. 770). Due to stigma, single mothers in a community college setting commonly report feeling either disregarded or spotlighted, instead of integrated in with the rest of the campus population (Wilson & Cox, 2011, p. 225; Yakaboski, 2010, p. 465). Some single mother students state they have “experienced behaviors and attitudes that are explicitly unwelcoming” from faculty, staff, and fellow students (Duquaine-Watson, 2016, p. 235). Unwelcoming behaviors and attitudes can come in the form of faculty lacking empathy for the unique challenges single parent students face or teasing and taunting from classmates (Duquaine-Watson, 2016, p. 235). Marginalizing conduct like this can cause single mother students to feel isolated and reluctant to identify themselves (Brown & Nichols, 2012, p. 501).

Tinto (1988) authored seminary works regarding student persistence in higher education and revealed a strong correlation between social integration and continued enrollment (p. 446). According to Tinto (1988), when students feel in conflict with their postsecondary institution, or isolated from other students like themselves, their likelihood of persistence decreases (p. 95). Students who have significant responsibilities outside of academics, like single mothers, are more apt to experience this lack of integration (Austin & McDermott, 2004, p. 95). In part, this is due to multiple demands on their time, leaving limited “physical and psychological energy” left for college life (Austin & McDermott, 2004, p. 95). As single mothers tend to feel isolated and

marginalized in a community college setting, they are at a heightened risk of dropping out prior to completion.

Research demonstrates that social networks are a vital component to single mothers' college experience, either bolstering or blocking student success (Beeler, 2016, p. 75; Cerven, 2013, p. 10; Katz, 2013, p. 291). Supportive social networks can provide encouragement, emotional comfort, monetary assistance, and help facilitating the college enrollment process (Beeler, 2016, p. 75; Cerven, 2013, p. 9; Katz, 2013, p. 291). On the other hand, unsupportive social networks can impede single mothers' college access and success. In a study conducted by Cerven (2013), some single mother students reported a significant other blocked their access to college; a few even stated a romantic partner "forbade" them from attending (p. 10). Family members and partners cited traditional gender roles, women as primary caregivers for children, and the need to work and contribute to expenses as reasons not to enroll (Cerven, 2013, p. 10).

Opposition to College for All

Opposition exists to the community college's mission of open admissions (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014, pp. 4-37). Some critics of college for all cite U.S. Department of Labor estimates that only about 30% of jobs created within the next decade will require a postsecondary degree, which approximately equates to the number of individuals currently graduating from college (Carey, 2011, p. 49; Glass & Nygreen, 2011, p. 5). A study conducted by Strohush and Wanner (2015) found that up to 13% of graduates would be better off if they had not attended college (p. 271). This finding directly corresponds with current data on student loan delinquency (Strohush & Wanner, 2015, p. 261). Finally, U.S. Department of Labor data also revealed the underemployment rate for college graduates has remained at approximately 33% for the last two decades (Abel, Deitz, & Su, 2014, p. 4). In other words, about one in three

college graduates are employed in positions that do not require a postsecondary degree (Abel, Deitz, & Su, 2014, p. 4).

An even more controversial argument against college for all is presented by Charles Murray, author of *Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, who suggests the majority of individuals are not intelligent enough for college (Carey, 2011, p. 49). Associate Professor, Ann E.K. Sobel (2012), points out in her article, *Should Everyone Go to College?*, that 28% of individuals who took the ACT exam in 2012 did not meet college readiness benchmarks in any of the four subjects tested (p. 83). Sobel (2012) also references students who remain in college five years or more due to their inability to pass courses required to earn a degree as further evidence that not everyone should go to college (p. 83). Like-minded detractors suggest that allowing underprepared students into college “diminish[es] the meaning of college admission, [and] erod[es] the value of a college degree”, as well as forces taxpayers to pay twice for skills that should have been learned in secondary school (Handel & Williams, 2011, p. 29).

Scholar, Nel Noddings, contends that instead of pushing a “college for all” agenda, the United States should embrace vocational training as an equally acceptable alternative like some European countries, and asserts that not all college graduates should anticipate greater lifetime earnings than non-degree holders (Glass & Nygreen, 2011, p. 2). Sobel (2012) echoes this thought, stating students should not be pressured into pursuing a college degree if their interests and career goals do not correspond with one (p. 82). Lastly, writer Matt Bruenig (2015) asserts that free college for all would benefit the rich more than the poor (p. 113). Bruenig (2015) states “giving extra money to a class of disproportionately well-off people without securing any reciprocal benefit to poor and working-class people who so often do not attend college, all while

valorizing the college student as a virtuous person individually deserving of such benefits, would be at worst destructive, and at best, totally pointless” (p. 114).

Conclusion

In a 2008 study conducted by Rankin, 28% of community college Chief Executive Officers identified the “inability or lack of desire to be able to connect with ...minority or economically disadvantage communities” as an issue (Rankin et al., 2010, p. 219). When the terms nontraditional or underrepresented college students are mentioned, students of color and lower socioeconomic status come to mind. Single mothers are another marginalized student group with intersections between gender, race, and class that also deserve attention from scholars, faculty, and administrators alike. Although gaining more traction, there is a lack of scholarly research on both community colleges and low-income single mother postsecondary students (Brown & Nichols, 2012, pp. 527-528; Institute of Women’s Policy Research, 2015, p. vi; Women Employed, 2012, p. 2).

If single mothers do not complete a college degree, they are more likely to earn less and less likely to move up the socioeconomic ladder (CollegeBoard, 2013, pp. 5-6). Women 25 or older working fulltime in 2011 earned a median salary of \$20,700 if they completed some high school and \$30,000 with a high school diploma, which equates to 133% and 200% respectively of the federal poverty line assuming she had one child (CollegeBoard, 2013, p. 15; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2016, chart). The more dependents a single mother claims while making the same income, the lower her family’s level of poverty (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2016, chart). Living in lower socioeconomic communities and families decreases a child’s probability of completing high school and enrolling in college themselves, thus repeating the cycle of poverty (Crosnoe et al., 2002, p. 690).

Evidence demonstrates when low-income mothers do earn a college credential, they are likely to increase their socioeconomic status and their children are more likely to do the same, breaking the generational cycle of poverty (Bloom, 2009, p. 486; CollegeBoard, 2013, p. 5; Institute of Women's Research, 2015, p. 3; Wilson & Cox, 2011, p. 219). However, student-parent completion rates show not enough is being done to support this student population on community college campuses (Institute of Women's Policy Research, 2015, p. 2). Reforms both within the community college and larger societal structures are necessary to uplift low-income single mothers and their children via education. If further research into best practices for low-income single mothers in community college does not take place, mothers suffer, their children suffer, and ultimately, society suffers.

As demonstrated in this review of the current scholarly dialogue regarding low-income single mothers in community college, this student population encounters numerous barriers that must be overcome in order to earn a postsecondary credential. While some are opposed to the concept of college for all and the idea of reforming higher education to better serve at-risk students, many works are cited within this proposal in favor of additional supports for low-income mothering-students. The next chapter provides methodological details regarding my project.

Chapter Three: Methods

Scholars who use a transformative paradigm focus on the lives of marginalized groups, attempting to confront social oppression and bring about social change (Mertens, 2015, p. 21). Therefore, the aim of this study has been to understand barriers to postsecondary access, persistence, and completion as experienced by low-income single mothers attending community college and affect change through the creation of a toolkit outlining how community colleges can

transform as institutions to better support this student group. Upon completion, the *Single Mothers at Community College: Toolkit for Success* website will be promoted to organizations that cater to community colleges and focus on underrepresented student populations.

Researcher as Instrument Statement

I began employment in the field of higher education in 2011 at Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA). During my time at NOVA, I worked for the College and Career Pathway Initiatives programs. All NOVA Pathway programs support students who face barriers to college access and success. Student demographics from these programs range from first-generation college students, formerly incarcerated, immigrant families, lower socioeconomic status, unemployed, students served by the foster care system, and so forth. In recent years, as an Initiative Manager I created holistic services and a sense of community for low-income mothering-students. Directly assisting at-risk students has led to a personal passion for advocating to break down their barriers and build up their supports.

Passion is what drove me to return to college and pursue the completion of my own postsecondary education in order to better advocate for underrepresented student populations. I earned a Bachelor of Individualized Studies (BIS) in December 2015 and am now pursuing a Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies (MAIS), both with a Concentration in Higher Education from George Mason University. My undergraduate degree includes a specialization in at-risk student populations. This project proposal directly overlaps with my experience serving young, low-income mothers enrolled in community college and my own journey as a single mother college student.

Toolkit Creation

Single Mothers at Community College: Toolkit for Success includes national data revealing the significance of the issue, research-driven recommendations regarding specific steps community colleges can take to improve low-income single mother success, and concrete resources to assist institutions with designing, planning, and implementing change. Outlined specifically in Appendix A, the toolkit contains three sections with various sub-topics crafted for the audiences of students, staff, and faculty. The toolkit was created in the form of a website to allow for ease in dissemination and access, and whenever possible information on the site has been linked to original sources to develop a robust and comprehensive resource. A screenshot of the toolkit's landing page can be found in Appendix B, and the site is located at www.singlemomsincommunitycollege.org.

Toolkit Contents

Single Mothers at Community College: Toolkit for Success is comprised of information gathered, analyzed, and synthesized from scholarly, government, and education sources, as well as real-world examples from various postsecondary institutions. The toolkit begins with an explanation of its purpose and the significance of the issue. Significance was established using national statistics regarding low-income single mothers' poor completion rates, data specific to community colleges, intersectionality, ramifications for lacking a degree, and exploring the cycle of poverty. Sources used to demonstrate significance include research from the American Council on Education, the College Board, the Institute of Women's Policy Research, and the United States Census Bureau, as well as various scholarly journal articles.

After illustrating national significance, the Single Mothers section provides information on the legal rights of pregnant and parenting students; various resources single mother students can leverage to increase their likelihood of persistence and graduation, and guidance on starting a student group and advocating for expanded supports for expecting and parenting college students. The Single Mothers section also contains Scholarship Central, a searchable database comprised of grant and scholarship opportunities specific to expecting and parenting postsecondary students. Sources used within this section include the American Association of University Women, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Center for Parent Information and Resources, Feminist Campus, the National Center for Student Parent Programs, the National Women's Law Center, the Pregnant on Campus Initiative, the Pregnant Scholar, and United States Office of Civil Rights.

The toolkit's Staff section offers guidance on establishing a working group to advocate for enhanced pregnant and parenting student supports; advice for college offices vital to single mother student success; recommendations regarding institution-wide policy and practice; as well as resources for developing and implementing student awareness campaigns, and faculty and staff training. References for the Staff section include the American Association of University Professors, the Aspen Institute, the Association of Title IX Administrators, Endicott College's Family Friendly Campus Toolkit, the National Coalition for Campus Children's Centers, and the University of Kansas' Community Tool Box, as well as various scholarly and professional articles and reports, and real-world postsecondary examples.

Lastly, the Faculty section contains information pertinent to faculty on the legal rights of pregnant and parenting students; pedagogical barriers to the academic success of this student population; research-driven pedagogy recommendations; and syllabus language suggestions and

examples. Sources used to draft this section include a variety of scholarly journal articles, firsthand faculty advice within Inside Higher Ed and the Chronicle of Higher Education, and real-world examples from postsecondary institutions. Infusing a narrative element, photos of faculty members holding students' children during class are incorporated throughout this section along with links to the stories of inclusion behind the pictures.

Appendix A: Toolkit Outline

Single Mothers at Community College: Toolkit for Success Outline

- 1) Home
 - A) Purpose
- 2) Single Mothers
 - A) Know the Facts
 - B) Know Your Rights
 - C) Resources and Supports
 - D) Start a Student Group
 - E) Scholarship Central
- 3) Staff
 - A) Working Group
 - B) Key Offices
 - i) Child Care Supports
 - ii) Counseling and Psychological Services
 - a) Social and Emotional Supports
 - iii) Facilities
 - a) Lactation Rooms
 - b) Family-Friendly Spaces
 - c) Changing Tables
 - iv) Grants and Development
 - v) Non-Academic Services
 - vi) Title IX Office
 - C) Institutional Efforts
 - i) Institutional Policies
 - ii) Accessible Services
 - D) Awareness and Training
 - i) Awareness Campaigns
 - ii) Faculty and Staff Training
- 4) Faculty
 - A) Student Rights
 - B) Pedagogical Barriers
 - C) Promising Pedagogy
 - D) Syllabus Suggestions

Appendix B: Toolkit Home Page



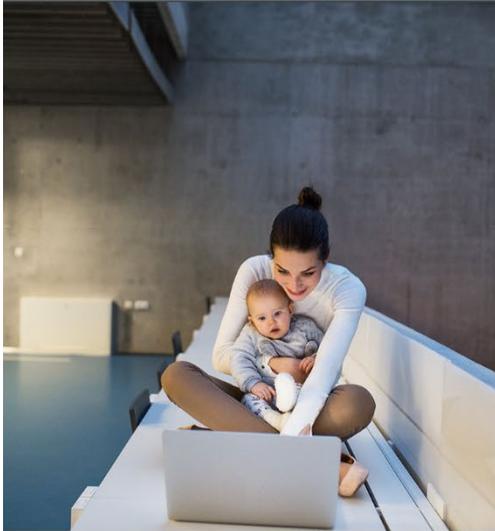
Single Mothers in Community College
Toolkit for Success

Home

Single Mothers

Staff

Faculty



Purpose

Provide a research based free online tool community colleges can use to better support single mother students.

According to the [Institute for Women's Policy Research](#), 1.7 million single mothers were enrolled in college during 2015-2016, with the largest share of student parents attending community colleges. Student parents are often low-income and persons of color. While student parents are at a much higher risk of leaving college without a degree than non-parent students, many community colleges are still failing to directly address their needs. [College Board](#) research shows that individuals without a college degree are more likely to be unemployed and less financially stable. Additionally, children of parents without degrees are less likely to earn a degree themselves. If barriers for low-income single mother students are not addressed, the cycle of poverty will likely continue for their children.



SINGLE MOTHERS

62% of mothers in college are raising children without a partner.

[Read More >](#)



STAFF

Barriers must be removed and replaced with supports for student success.

[Read More >](#)



FACULTY

Pedagogical practices play a vital role in single mother persistence and completion.

[Read More >](#)

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