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ABSTRACT

OCTOPUS MOMS: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO ARE MOTHERS

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Northern Illinois University, 2017
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The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of college students who are mothers at a large, public Midwestern research university. Using a feminist theoretical perspective, the focus of the research was to better understand how students who are mothers experience college. I sought to understand how the gendered nature of higher education and family roles impacted the experience of college mothers.

A set of three semi-structured interviews was conducted with eight participants who identified as college students who are mothers. This interview process was followed by an analysis of the data using epoche bracketing, phenomenological reduction, horizonalization, imaginative variation and textural and structural descriptions. I examined all of the data using Schlossberg's transition theory as a model to understand how students who are mothers navigate transitions during their college experience.

The main themes identified include; Octopus Mom; Personal Relationships Provided Emotional and Logistical Support of College Students Who are Mothers; Changes to Self and Threats to Persisting and Engaging in College. These findings furthered the literature on this subject. Recommendations and suggestions for further research are also provided.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

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OCTOPUS MOMS: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO ARE MOTHERS

BY

JILL ZAMBITO

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING, ADULT AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Doctoral Director:
Carrie Kortegast

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To the eight mothers: Krystal, Caitlyn, Queen, Princess, Khloe, Allison, KM and Elizabeth, thank you for volunteering your precious time so that I could better understand what it was like to be a college student mother. You shared your personal lives with me. As a result, it is my hope that your voices will change the landscape on college campuses for future college students who are mothers.

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PREFACE

My interest in learning about the lived experiences of college student mothers began in the summer of 2007 when I became the director of a department on a college campus which directly supported commuter and non-traditional students. I was intimidated to work with college parents because I was and remain without children. I quickly learned, however, that the students I supported had little interest in my parental status. They simply wanted support. I developed close professional relationships with many of the college student mothers who utilized my department. Working closely with them, I quickly grew interested in wanting to be able to bring their experiences to a larger platform to increase awareness of their college journey, educate my colleagues, and provide improved resources for them.

Throughout my coursework in my doctoral program I further increased my knowledge of their experiences by making them the subject of any possible project, assignment, or research paper. The women I first had the pleasure of working with in my former department were the inspiration for this study. They made me first ponder the ways in which colleges and universities support or fail to support them. Additionally, those women enlightened me to better understand what their needs were as college students who are mothers.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In July 2007, I became the Director of Commuter and Non-Traditional Student Services at Northern Illinois University (NIU). Prior to beginning my tenure at NIU, I had professional experience in student involvement, orientation, and commuter services. My familiarity with commuter and off-campus student populations was the reason why I gravitated toward the position at NIU. I most enjoyed working with that demographic and was ecstatic about making the leap to a department which provided more support services than what I oversaw previously. I was particularly excited to have the opportunity to work specifically with commuter students. I knew how to help them, and embraced the chance to focus on a few specific populations instead of the larger number of different types of students I had supported elsewhere.

Upon arriving at NIU, I was actually quite anxious about working with additional types of non-traditional students including student parents, adult learners, and military students due to my lack of experience with some of these groups. I was especially nervous about working with students who are mothers. I do not have children, and I have little experience with them other than a few babysitting jobs from when I was in high school. Additionally, my husband and I have no plans to become parents. These factors caused me to wonder how I would be able to demonstrate to students who are mothers how I could be an advocate for them without having parental experience. As someone without children, I was worried they would not trust me or see me as a resource. In addition to not having children, I had a very traditional undergraduate

college experience. Upon arrival at NIU, I questioned how I would be able to relate to the unique and challenging experiences of non-traditional students considering I never personally experienced some of their challenges.

Within days of starting that position at NIU, I quickly learned that I needed to overcome my fears surrounding supporting student parents. The students I had the pleasure of working with did not care about my background at all. They were thrilled to have support. They were elated that a staff member knew their name, remembered they had children, and could identify from where they commuted. The student parents (and all the non-traditional students served by the department) simply wanted support, a sounding board, and someone with whom to problem-solve. I was grateful to have learned this vital lesson so quickly, and I immediately fell in love with my work.

Throughout my experiences in Commuter and Non-Traditional Student Services, I grew more interested in particularly understanding how to best support students who are mothers. These specific students seemed to balance numerous roles as students and as parents and they managed to succeed at both. I was in awe of their abilities to succeed and worked to support them with their struggles. I wished to understand more about their lived experiences as they transitioned into, through, and out of college. I wanted to learn in what ways they felt the most supported, the type of services they reported as the most useful, and what was most helpful for their college success. While I do not specifically support student mothers in my current professional role as the Director of Student Involvement and Leadership Development, I strive to teach others to think of ways to reach out to this demographic. I hope one day to again serve

students who are mothers within a support unit. Until that opportunity presents itself, I wish to dedicate my research to learning ways in which educators can all better support this population.

In this chapter I frame the state of affairs for college students who are mothers. I provide the purpose of the study and the research questions which served as the study's foundation. Additionally, I present a brief literature overview regarding this specific student demographic and the need for further contemporary research. Lastly, I outline the intended research design and significance of the study.

College Mothers

In the United States, approximately four million college students have dependents (Nelson, Froehner, & Gault, 2013). Additionally, approximately 40% of student parents work at least full-time, and most spend nearly 30 hours weekly providing care-giving activities. With little current research available regarding students who are mothers, specifically between the ages of 18-24, college educators are unable to fully grasp this population's collegiate and motherhood experiences. To best support and retain this student subpopulation, research must be conducted to illuminate this topic.

While many researchers examined and continue to research non-traditional students and college students who are mothers, very few specifically target the undergraduate student mother between the ages of 18-24 who is married or unmarried. Learning more about this particular group will provide new information about the traditional-age student who is also a mother with unique roles and experiences.

Since many four-year colleges and universities focus their retention strategies and support structures on traditional-age students, researching the lived experiences of student

mothers in this age-range could prove beneficial to numerous entities within higher education. The student mother subset within this traditional-age student population receives less attention and fewer support services catered to her specific needs. This particular student demographic is typically getting lumped into the greater traditional student population, although their needs may vary significantly from those of their traditional student counterparts (Wilsey, 2013).

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of students who are mothers at a large, public Midwestern research university. Using a feminist theoretical perspective (described in detail in Chapter 3), the focus of the research was to better understand how students who are mothers experience college. Data was obtained during three semi-structured interviews with 8 participants. The central research question was: What are the lived experiences of college students who are mothers at one large, public Midwestern research university?

The following questions served to help orient the study:

- In what ways, if any, do the students' relationships with their family members change throughout their college experience?
- What contributes to and what prevents women's persistence as college student mothers?
- How, if at all, do the students' sense of self change through their college experience as mothers?

These questions helped guide the focus of my research with college students who are mothers as I examined how they move into, move through, and move out of college.

For purposes of this study, participants had to be traditional-age (18-24 years old) undergraduate students who had at least one child. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2, prior research indicated that college mothers were not fully integrating into college life, which could lead to lower retention and graduation rates. Greater understanding and additional literature is needed regarding the "social, psychological and demographic factors that new college mothers face during pregnancy and as college students" (Brown & Amankwaa, 2007, p. 29). Furthermore, administrators must implement change in order to provide students with opportunities to engage in campus life (Astin, 1999). If university leaders wish to better retain student mothers, it is critical to provide opportunities that help them engage.

Brief Literature Review

With overall student enrollment declining at colleges and universities nationwide (Lauerman, 2014; Mangan, 2014), administrators, faculty, and staff need to make concerted efforts to attract new students and to assist them in persisting through college. Non-traditional students and students who are parents remain a steady population, yet colleges do not typically concentrate recruitment efforts or retention strategies on these populations. Admissions processes on college campuses often do not include questions addressing the parental status of incoming students (Field, 2017); therefore, institutions do not have much data on the size of this population on their campuses (Nelson et al., 2013). Knowing if a student is a parent or becomes a parent while enrolled would be helpful so educators might better support this population.

Adult students, or those who are over 25 years old, balance numerous roles in their lives in addition to coping with major life situations including birth, death, divorce, and bills

(Schindley, 2002). An adult student's roles likely compete with the role of college student due to his or her other numerous potential responsibilities. Such roles and duties make completing coursework an enormous challenge. The number of adult students has steadily grown over the past five decades, yet higher education is not effectively teaching them, nor are universities prepared for this population (Caruth, 2014). In 2009, adult students made up approximately 43% of all students enrolled in higher education (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2002).

Many factors impact the experiences of non-traditional student populations that include adult students and students who are mothers. Non-traditional students are those who have experiences which differ from those of a traditional student. Non-traditional students are typically 24 years old or older, have dependents or children of their own, are single parents, are married, divorced, or widowed, are military veterans, and/or are re-entry students (NCES, 2002).

As higher education was built on a foundation which mainly supports traditional four-year experiences, some colleges fail to fully engage non-traditional students, student parents (Caruth, 2014; Field, 2017) and students who are mothers. However, this student parent population tends to out-perform their non-parent peers and earn higher GPAs (Nelson et al., 2013) even with the added pressures and responsibilities involved with child rearing. It would make sense from a retention perspective for university leaders and educators to consider focusing attention on the students who want to attend our institutions and rethink the way schools support all students. This approach would support a retention model focused on the needs of non-traditional students, particularly students who are mothers.

The number of non-traditional women attending college has increased over the past 20 years (Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998). In fact, women over 25 years old represent the fastest growing student demographic in higher education (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). There are over four million college student parents in the United States and women, or students who are mothers, make up at least 71% of all student parents (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds, & Froehner, 2014a).

Despite the significant number of college students who are mothers, colleges and universities are often ill-equipped to support these students. For instance, child care, a critical support service for student mothers, is a dwindling resource in higher education. Since 2002, there has been over a 10% drop in child care centers on community college campuses (Gault et al., 2014b). Moreover, student parents are significantly more likely to leave college before completing a degree (Nelson et al., 2013). Higher education institutions must give students who are mothers adequate attention as well as make appropriate changes to improve the way this student group is supported through their collegiate success.

Theoretical Framework

Schlossberg's Theory of Adults in Transition was used as the theoretical framework for this study to better understand how students experience transitions in their lives (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). Students who are mothers experience several transitions throughout their college experience. They must prepare for the academic transition, the potential child care challenges, possible work schedule alterations, and possible lack of personal support. Schlossberg's transition theory provided insight into the numerous factors that can influence

personal transitions. Transitions can include events or non-events which may affect relationships, identities, and assumptions (Anderson et al., 2012). This theory focuses on the meaning individuals attach to a transition. Understanding the students' transitions and the meanings they associate with their transitions could help students make necessary adjustments and allow educators to better support students throughout their academic careers.

Research Design

As will be discussed in fuller detail in Chapter 3, my study on college students who are mothers used a constructionist epistemology that informed the theoretical perspective, research methodology, and methods. The basis of constructionism is that each person creates meaning in unique ways, even when the meaning involves the same phenomenon (Crotty, 1998). This epistemology allowed me to better understand that each of my student participants might experience and make meaning of their college experiences in different and unique ways. Additionally, a feminist theoretical perspective framed the study in pursuit of understanding the oppression of women (Prasad, 2005). I sought to understand how the gendered nature of higher education and family roles impacted the experiences of college mothers. Lastly, I gathered information on students who are mothers through a phenomenological methodology. Phenomenological research is "a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants" (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). Through my phenomenological methodology, I gained a greater understanding of the lived experiences of this singular student population.

In my study, I conducted three interviews with each of the participants focusing on how they moved into, moved through, and moved out of college I interviewed college students who are mothers between the ages of 18-24 who were enrolled at a large, public Midwestern research university at the time of the study. Enlisting the assistance of staff members who direct support services specifically for this population, I recruited participants through emails and referrals. The data analysis included epoche bracketing, horizonalization, imaginative variation, and textural description (Moustakus, 1994). Additionally, I examined all the data using Schlossberg's transition theory as a model to understand how students who are mothers navigate transitions during their college experience. The entire research design is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Significance of the Study

Since nearly four million college students have dependents, studying students who are mothers is important for many reasons. The majority of unplanned pregnancies occur among the age group 18-24 (Brown & Amankwaa, 2007). This age group constitutes the age of the majority of undergraduate college students (Brown & Amankwaa, 2007). With few exceptions, women typically take on most of the responsibilities involved with caring for their child (Brown & Amankwaa, 2007). In many cases, women view their pregnancy as their responsibility (Brown & Amankwaa, 2007). Earning a college degree is critical in the current climate, and younger women who raise children are less likely to complete their education than their childless peers (Brown & Amankwaa, 2007). Despite the numerous challenges involved, it is, in fact, possible to be a mother and be a college student.

Student mothers constitute an increasing student population (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Scott et al., 1998). Coupled with the current economy, it is suggested that educators should learn how to appropriately support this student group to recruit them, meet their needs, and retain them. If this population continues to grow, and they continue to enroll in institutions of higher education, administrators may benefit from finding ways to better meet their needs on our campuses—like they do for traditional student populations. It is apparent from the existing research that efforts to research the experiences of students who are mothers and factors which impact their success were much more prevalent in decades past than today (Bax, 1998; Burns & Scott, 1990; Gonchar, 1995; Reisinger, 1999). Higher education institutions appear to have fallen behind the times in terms of staying current with seeking ways to meet the needs of students who are mothers; therefore, this type of research can certainly benefit the field. If administrators do not specifically know what factors best support the experiences of college students who are mothers, then universities will be less likely to provide resources that can help them succeed. Having a better understanding of the needs of this population would allow universities and educators to better engage with student mothers, improve the likelihood of their success (graduation), and attract larger numbers to college campuses. It is my hope that my contribution to the higher education and student affairs literature will be of benefit to both students who are mothers and my colleagues.

Without contemporary research on the experiences of students who are mothers, universities may remain stagnant in how they approach this group in both academic and student affairs. Clarity is needed related to the experiences of this non-traditional student subpopulation in order for schools to properly support them. Non-traditional students are attending universities

in growing numbers (Scott et al., 1998), yet four-year public universities continue to cater most of their resource offerings to traditional undergraduate students (Field, 2017). To better serve non-traditional students and retain them at higher levels, college administrators must further examine the needs of this population. More specifically, student mothers remain under-served within this subset, and it is essential to better understand their lived college experiences as they transition through college.

From my years of working with students who are mothers on campus, I know they struggle to balance their numerous roles and responsibilities. I also know they tend to care about their academic experience differently compared to their traditional student counterparts. If educators could learn more about what keeps student mothers on college campuses, or what prevents them from succeeding, those in power could create better educational environments to retain them. Students who are mothers are an equally important population, but typically have access to fewer resources. I value my experience working with this population and want to work to improve campus settings on their behalf. With more knowledge and targeted plans to implement change, universities will be able to attract a much larger student mother population to universities and potentially change the landscape for future generations.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I described my professional experience working with non-traditional students, and students who are mothers, and my sincere desire to learn more about students who are mothers in the hopes of seeing them provided with more effective support on college campuses. Students who are mothers remain a steady population on college campuses, yet

traditional, four-year institutions rarely cater to their specific needs (Ortega, 2013). During these competitive and unstable economic times, universities may profit from focusing on the retention of this population—a population that wants to be in higher education but could benefit from unique support mechanisms.

Chapter 2 includes a review of several research studies involving non-traditional student populations including student parents, students who are mothers (also referred to as female students with children), and student mothers, depending on the author. I also discuss the main themes that emerged from the literature including role conflict, academic challenges, motivation, barriers, financial constraints, and support mechanisms. I also outline the theoretical framework for this study, Adults in Transition (Anderson et al., 2012). Chapter 3 describes my research design including a constructionist epistemology, a feminist theoretical perspective, a phenomenological research approach, and a methodology utilizing one-on-one interviews with students who are mothers. In Chapter 4 I provide profiles of each of the participants and discuss their similarities and differences. Chapter 5 details findings related to changing relationships, navigating college motherhood, and changes to self. Finally, in Chapter 6, I provide recommendations and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter I review and analyze several research studies involving non-traditional students. While non-traditional students, in general, are an important population to study, I am most interested in studying students who are mothers. This population is also referred to as female students with children or student mothers, depending on the author. Given that little contemporary research focuses specifically on college mothers who are traditional-age students (18-24), I draw upon the larger literature base of non-traditional student populations and undergraduate parents.

The literature suggests college students who are mothers navigate college similarly to the broader non-traditional student population. Coupled with this thought, college students who are mothers from the 18-24-year-old age range also experience what Arnett (2004) refers to as emerging adulthood. During this period, people between the ages of 18-25 go through a significant phase of self exploration (Arnett, 2004). College students who are mothers may experience an acceleration of this identity development since as mothers, they also help their children to grow. As mothers, they also must make choices regarding their path and the path of their family instead of waiting until they complete their education like their childless peers experiencing emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004).

The following chapter will provide definitions for non-traditional students and college mothers. I also discuss the main themes that emerged from the literature including role conflict, academic challenges, motivation, barriers, financial constraints, and support mechanisms. Lastly, I outline the theoretical framework for this study, Adults in Transition (Anderson et al., 2012).

Motherhood

In examining the experiences of college students who are mothers, it is important to have a greater understanding of motherhood. Motherhood is a complex identity socially prescribed to be filled by women (Medina & Magnuson, 2009). Additionally, women are the ones most likely to oversee the raising of a child (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014; Medina & Magnuson, 2009). Becoming a mother requires the person to give of oneself without knowing if the child will make the same type of investment in the mother (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014). A brief examination of motherhood revealed three specific topics that surfaced most frequently in the literature, including the transition to motherhood, ideals associated with motherhood, and sources of support. These topics provide additional insight into the experiences of college students who are mothers.

Transition to Motherhood

The transition to motherhood is momentous and greatly impacts the mother, yet "research remains relatively scarce about this topic" (Hoffnung, 2011, p. 327). The transition to motherhood can be overwhelming and challenging for the woman. This identity can often feel

burdensome, as the mother develops an enormous responsibility through this new role (Hoffnung). Additionally, some first-time mothers report that the overall time associated with motherhood is a significant part of the transition (Wardrop & Popadiuk, 2013).

The new dedication of time involved with motherhood can be overwhelming as the mother manages the time-consuming nature of this new role (Wardrop & Popadiuk, 2013). While this new balance of time is overwhelming, time also plays a positive role in a new mother's life (Wardrop & Popadiuk, 2013). Time is an important factor involved with the transition to motherhood, as time helps mothers feel less of a burden and less overwhelmed because over time they become more comfortable in this role (Wardrop & Popadiuk, 2013). Since "pregnancy, childbirth, and the transition to motherhood are significant life experiences for most women" (Hoffnung, 2011, p. 327), understanding this transition in college students who are mothers is important.

Roles of Mothers

The standards for mothers continue to rise and involve numerous roles that require them to care for, to drive, and to nurture their families (Medina & Magnuson, 2009). Mothers often serve in these multiple roles, juggling numerous responsibilities simultaneously. Women with children tend to identify more closely with their role than fathers, due to the socially constructed ideas in current society (Medina & Magnuson, 2009). In a socially constructed understanding of motherhood, an ideal mother puts the needs of others first and practices "intensive mothering" (p. 91). The concept of intensive mothering is based on an ideal family, made up of white middle-class heterosexuals (Medina & Magnuson, 2009). Women in heterosexual relationships

continue to oversee home-centered tasks and formally fill the role of caring for others. Women who do not meet the standards of the ideal family and who cannot afford to invest time in intensive mothering are perceived as not living up to the ideals of motherhood and are criticized for becoming mothers (Medina & Magnuson, 2009). In particular, mothers who receive some type of public aid tend to be the most deviant from the notion of intensive mothering. Mothers on public assistance are often disrespected for not being able to meet the ideal standards set in current society (Medina & Magnuson, 2009).

Despite cultural and generational differences, women tend to define the characteristics of good mothers similarly (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014). One of the most common phrases mothers use to describe a good mother involves the "ability to successfully care for a child" (p. 16), in addition to loving the child. Additionally, women identify the importance of "being there" (p. 16) for the child, either through her physical presence, or simply being accessible, as another commonality of good mothering. Across cultures and generations, women report "love, patience and acceptance, being available, and transmitting values" (p. 16) as the most important components of being a good mother. In exploring the lived experiences of college students who are mothers, learning how the participants described the most critical aspects of motherhood will provide a greater understanding of their lives. This deeper level of understanding will allow for better insights into supporting the success of students who are mothers.

Sources of Support

One risk factor impacting young mothers is the absence of or limited access to formal and informal systems of support (Arat, 2013). This support includes social interactions with friends and family members. A support system, or a "protective factor" (p. 6), provides emotional support and overall assistance for the mother. Mothers who report a lack of a support system also report feelings of loneliness and isolation (Wardrop & Popadiuk, 2013). In a study conducted by Wardrop and Popadiuk (2013) friends and family can play a critical role in the life of a mother and when that support is inadequate, the mother can feel frustrated, angry, and lonely. Participants reported a desire for support structures to be more involved in their life and the life of their child. Additionally, reported lack of healthcare support when feeling dismissed by their doctors when they did not validate the mothers' concerns with their child (Wardrop & Popadiuk, 2013).

Social support is a critical factor to a new mother's wellness (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014). Social support helps reduce mothers' anxiety about the life transitions involved with motherhood and helps build confidence. In a study of over 2,000 mothers, Luthar and Ciciolla (2015) found that parenting is particularly taxing on college-educated mothers due to its significant demands and dedication of time, energy, and finances. Participants identified close personal relationships and friendships as providing more assistance than that of spousal relationships. The mothers also reported that while spousal and partner support are important, this type of support is not as critical. They shared that friendships actually help offset emotional burdens which would normally be placed on the spouse. Mothers in this study shared the need to feel loved and comforted regardless of the source of support.

Additionally, the authors noted that between 1993 and 2008 college-educated mothers actually *increased* the time they dedicated to child rearing from 12.0 to 20.5 hours a week (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015). Between 2003 and 2007, college-educated mothers invested over 130% more time in parenting management (scheduling, planning, transporting, and extracurricular activities) than their peers without a college education (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015). This dedication of parenting time when comparing the two populations is staggering. It may illustrate that a college education could impact the life of a child merely by having a time-invested mother.

A community of other mothers is helpful in making the transition to motherhood (Wardrop & Popadiuk, 2013). Some first-time mothers reported that being engaged in a community of new mothers helped ease their transition and made them feel like someone was watching out for them. Additionally, new mothers who understood or grew to understand the value of self-care and took action to practice self-care made them feel less anxious about motherhood (Wardrop & Popadiuk, 2013).

Motherhood is a complex identity that includes the bearing and rearing of children; these roles can "both enrich life and serve to limit women's other accomplishments in our society" (Hoffnung, 2011, p. 330). The experience of raising children can often have physical, psychological, and financial impacts on the mother which could also prevent her from pursuing other paths, including professional paths (Hoffnung, 2011). Additionally, "mothers are the people through whom others' lives are changed" (Medina & Magnuson, 2009, p. 90). Mothers have the opportunity to have significant impacts on their children, and often are the primary caregivers. Motherhood is an identity which is critical to better understanding the lived

experiences of college students who are mothers. Understanding motherhood allows for a greater understanding of student mothers.

Single Motherhood

It is important to mention that motherhood can be experienced as a sole parent, or, in the case of the participants in my study, as single student mothers. In general, single parenthood is seen as a more challenging or undesirable path (Beeler, 2016; McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015). Single parenthood can have negative impacts on a child's future and overall development (McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015). Stereotypes associated with being a young, single mother are prevalent and when coupled with a student role, the likelihood of a mother's academic persistence decreases (Beeler, 2016). Single student mothers have more challenges than their childless peers. Additionally, single moms are more likely to delay or never complete their degree due to their numerous and often conflicting priorities (Beeler, 2016). University officials should consider helping single student mothers establish support systems, gain access to financial aid, and learn about resources to further assist them (Beeler, 2016).

Non-Traditional Students and Changing Demographics

Non-traditional students are often defined as 24 years old or older, have dependents or children of their own, are single parents, are married, divorced, or widowed, are military veterans, and/or are re-entry students (NCES, 2002). Despite being of traditional college age (18-24), college mothers are seen as a subset of non-traditional students because of their status as

parents. At some institutions, non-traditional student sub-sets, such as students over the age of 25, outnumber traditional students (Beeler, 2016; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

Female students in higher education have outnumbered men enrolled in college since 2003 (NCES, 2005). Additionally, a growing number of non-traditional female students are entering college and many of them are mothers. It is estimated that nearly four million college students are the caregivers for at least one child (Nelson et al., 2013). Additionally, approximately 40% of student parents work full-time or more, and most spend nearly 30 hours weekly engaging in care-giving activities (Nelson et al., 2013). Thus, parenting and work responsibilities often present challenges for college parents pursuing their education.

As a subset of non-traditional students, student mothers also face similar challenges of other non-traditional students. However, traditional-age student mothers (18-24) at the same time might not completely relate to the experiences of other non-traditional students who are over the age of 24 because of developmental and experiential differences. While there are some college mothers who have children prior to enrolling in college, many college mothers become pregnant in college. The majority of unplanned pregnancies occur among the age group 18-24 (Brown & Amankwaa, 2007); this is also the age of the majority of undergraduate college students (Brown & Amankwaa, 2007). With few exceptions, women typically take on most of the responsibilities involved with caring for the child. In many cases, "women see their pregnancy as something they were responsible for" (p. 26); thus, they feel the need to accept the consequences for their pregnancy, including interruptions or delays in their college schooling.

Younger women, and single mothers who raise children, are less likely to complete their education than their childless peers (Beeler, 2016; Brown & Amankwaa, 2007). Moreover,

Wilsey (2013) found that traditional-age students who are mothers often failed to take advantage of unique course offerings and college services and instead enrolled in classes with their similarly-aged peers during the day. Inclusion "with traditional undergraduate students means that their unique needs are unknown by staff and faculty and may largely go unmet" Wilsey 2013, p. 212). Thus, these students often are overlooked on campus without the specialized resources and attention needed to assure their success. In general, there is little current research about the experiences of traditional-age college student mothers. However, this is a growing student population (Field, 2017; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Scott et al., 1996, 1998) that could benefit from additional support to enhance their persistence and success in college.

College Mothers

There are approximately 4.8 million college students who are parents in the United States. Of that population, college students who are mothers account for over 71% of those parents, totaling over 3.4 million students (Gault et al., 2014a). College mothers make up a significant population on college campuses. Again, there is little research specifically on traditional-age college mothers; however, the larger literature on non-traditional students and college parents is potentially helpful in understanding some of the issues college mothers face. This section of the literature review on college mothers addresses the following themes: role conflict, academic challenges, motivation, barriers, financial constraints, and support mechanisms. These significant themes affect the experiences of this demographic. With a greater understanding of these themes, college educators can improve campuses in order to address the needs of college students who are mothers.

Role Conflict

Many adult learners feel marginalized socially and academically when comparing themselves to high-school-aged students in college (Tinto, 2012). Adult learners often have work and family responsibilities that can limit the time they dedicate to their academic demands. An adult learner's roles as a student may be in competition with their other roles such as worker, parent, and partner/spouse (Beeler, 2016). If educators could support students as they face this potential role conflict, students who are mothers may be better able to transition into the role of college student. Role conflict can serve as a barrier to graduation by potentially preventing students from making their academic role a priority (Beeler, 2016). Through support mechanisms (described in greater detail later in this chapter), educators could coach students through this multiple-role experience. It is also important for educators to understand the multiple roles that may exist for a college student mother. This understanding may communicate to the student that the educational environment is one that recognizes their important role as mother. Schools could benefit from finding ways to remove the barriers that prevent adult students from persisting (Tinto, 2012).

Choosing to attend college is often seen as important in order to achieve professional goals and to enhance employment opportunities. However, attending college is often viewed as a choice rather than a responsibility for non-traditional students with competing priorities (Beeler, 2016). While some individuals might not have chosen to become pregnant, their responsibilities and obligations as a parent are often not a choice. Therefore, when college, parenting, and work responsibilities converge, it is often easier to withdraw from college and relinquish their student identity than their parenting and family obligations. Thus, student

parents are far more likely to leave school without a degree and not return. Compared to their peers, 52% of college parents withdrew from college prior to degree completion, whereas only 32% of non-parents withdrew (Koch, 2009). This role identification is so critical that "student parents' beliefs in their ability to function effectively in their school and parental roles predicted their perceived ability to meet the demands of their multiple roles" (van Rhijn & Lero, 2014, p. 551). Therefore, for college parents to be successful, colleges and universities would need to provide services to help alleviate these role conflicts.

Student parents often feel pulled in multiple directions as a student earning a college degree and as a parent balancing the needs of their children. Additionally, student parents must manage the fact that their values sometimes compete with the expectations others have of them in their various roles (Estes, 2011). For instance, students who are parents are expected to focus on college coursework even when their parent roles compete as they attend to such concerns as unpredictable child care needs, illness, and medical appointments. Both the student identity and the parent identity constantly intersect and both roles require much time and attention. Helping student parents hone in on the positive aspects of one of their identities could "diffuse the potential damage to the other" (Estes, 2011, p. 200). Overall, student parents want to succeed academically and they want to be involved with their children as good parents (Beeler, 2016).

The role conflicts between parent, student, and employee can cause students to feel like they have to choose between their parental role and their student role. Unfortunately, many colleges and universities offer limited support in assisting students in balancing these different roles. Student mothers are often torn between being a good student and being a good mother.

Academic Challenges

Adult students sometimes find it hard to admit they struggle academically (Tinto, 2012). Some universities offer specialized orientation programs for adult learners to help students fine-tune their study skills. In these programs, students make connections with staff from support units at the beginning of their college experience. Some orientation sessions cover topics to help non-traditional students transition back into school. This assistance can include sessions to help adult learners refine their test-taking strategies (Tinto, 2012).

Face-to-face interaction and instruction tends to be the most successful teaching method for students even though online courses may be more convenient for non-traditional students' busy schedules (Tinto, 2012). With this concept in mind, collaborative learning environments, which provide structured opportunities for students to work together and with faculty, are more engaging for adult learners than traditional lecture-style classes (Tinto, 2012). While online courses are more convenient for adult learners, providing schedule flexibility and convenience, this instructional method might not meet the academic needs of adult learners.

Adult students balance numerous roles in their lives in addition to major life events including divorce, death, taxes, birth, and bills (Schindley, 2002). Despite the stress associated with these significant responsibilities, adult learners also typically stand out in class for their valuable academic contributions, proving their abilities to manage life and student obligations (Schindley). When adult students miss class in college courses filled with traditional students, their absence is typically noticed (Schindley, 2002). Professors tend to appreciate the life experiences adult students bring with them to the classroom, and traditional students seek out adult students for support and wisdom (Schindley, 2002). Specialized advising, mentoring, and

academic support, as well as appropriately scheduled courses and support services that best fit the unique schedule of an adult student, could greatly impact the success of a non-traditional student (Tinto, 2012).

Returning to school. Astin's (1977) pivotal study on the experiences of women in higher education found that non-traditional women students face challenges such as employment, rising costs of living, and family demands. This study illustrated that women who returned to college gained a greater sense of self, independence, and knowledge. Additionally, family members saw the benefit of the female attending school. In some cases, husbands saw wives' schooling as a future gain for the family, decreasing their stress regarding financial stability. The benefits of college as well as the challenges in attending still remain today. Knowing that college students who are mothers face these challenges, college educators have an opportunity to support them through this transition.

Student-faculty interactions and flexibility. In order to meet the needs of the student parent population, successful student-faculty interactions are exceedingly important (Beeler, 2016; Medved & Heisler, 2002). In a study involving non-traditional age college students (30-40) and those with family responsibilities, Medved and Heisler found that faculty members can have a significant impact on the experiences of student parents, an often-neglected non-traditional population in higher education research. Student parents reported needing flexibility in the academic setting due to their role as parents (Medved & Heisler, 2002). Many students shared their need to take care of a sick child unexpectedly when child care became unavailable. Due to this unpredictable dilemma, student parents sometimes needed to choose parenthood over their role as a student, and absences from class could be an issue which impacted their academic

performance (Medved & Heisler, 2002). Students wished to have more flexibility related to class attendance and making up assignments to balance their roles (Medved & Heisler, 2002). Unfortunately, requests for these types of support were rarely granted for the participants in Medved and Heisler's study. Consequently, repeated negative attempts at negotiating special requests or accommodations with faculty prevented students' success in the classroom (Medved & Heisler, 2002).

Motivation

Motivation is one of the most common themes found in the literature concerning the experiences of non-traditional students. In the research, non-traditional students are specifically motivated to succeed to make their parents happy find new or better employment opportunities, take care of unfinished business, or fulfill lifelong dreams (Scanlon, 2008). Additionally, in Chao and Good's (2004) study investigating the reasons non-traditional students pursue college and how their education affects them, motivation and a sense of hopefulness emerged as important factors in student success. This sense of hopefulness critically influenced five additional themes including motivation, financial investment, career development, life transition, and support systems. Due to "their hopefulness, non-traditional students took active roles in managing their education, employment, family, and interpersonal relationships" (p. 7). The student participants described motivation as an "internal resource" which can enhance non-traditional students' learning and college experiences (p. 10). In general, motivation seems to be a key factor in adult student success (Brine & Waller, 2004; Quayle, 2007; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006).

While the enrollment rates for adult student mothers with children are increasing, the rate at which student mothers discontinue their studies also has increased (Scott et al., 1996). Motivation can serve as a predictor of degree completion and persistence along with age, marital status, and family support (Scott et al., 1998). Students who were highly motivated to complete their degree were able to achieve success (graduation) by overcoming their challenging life circumstances.

Barriers

Many barriers may impact the success of non-traditional students and students who are mothers; the two main categories include family barriers and institutional barriers. According to Cunningham (2013), "single motherhood is difficult, obtaining a higher education, in particular a graduate degree, is challenging and sometimes alienating, and attempting the two simultaneously often seems impossible" (p. 182). Some of the reported barriers that prevent single students who are mothers from succeeding include college practices, institutional barriers, finances, access to affordable child care, scheduling challenges, prejudice, and conflicting roles and responsibilities. Within these barriers, the pursuit of higher education can take a toll on families. The student mother often is at odds with being what she thinks is a good mother and being a good student.

Family barriers. Life circumstances including family, marital, parental, and employment status, as well as civic engagement, all serve as barriers to the success of a non-traditional student (Keith, 2007). Family plays a large role in the success or failure of female students in higher education. In some cases, non-traditional students have supportive family members who encourage them in their academic pursuits (Brine & Waller, 2004; Quayle, 2007). Some families

have accomplished this by taking care of home responsibilities and childcare to allow the student to concentrate on schoolwork (Quayle, 2007). Other families showed their support by helping to financially support students' educations or to serve as a sounding board by sympathizing with the student's struggles (Brine & Waller, 2004).

However, having supportive spouses and family members is not always a given. Schindley's (2002) study found that some women reported that their husbands were unsupportive of their desire to attend college as they preferred to maintain the status quo of their marriage. Other husbands worried that if their wife attended school she would later find a better job and a better life and would eventually leave him. Some men simply did not understand why their wives wanted to enrich her life by furthering their educations. A lack of spousal and family support can make attending college and persisting to graduation more challenging for college student mothers.

Unsupportive family members and spouses can have a negative impact on women's ability to be successful in college (Brine & Waller, 2004; Scott et al., 1996, 1998). Common concerns included family members fearing the newly gained knowledge would separate them from the family. For instance, Scott et al. (1996) found that hostility from family members, when combined with other stressors, led some of the participants to discontinue their studies completely. In a different study, the students' family members felt threatened by their learning and thought their self-improvement would lead to unbalanced family dynamics. Overall, families felt intimidated by the student's college experience. This fear sometimes led to poor treatment by the student's family and friends, which led to lack of support both financially and personally (Brine & Waller, 2004). In some cases, the unsupportive family members had college

degrees themselves but still did not support the students in their pursuit of an education (Brine & Waller, 2004). All these factors discouraged the students who are mothers from continuing their studies.

Without family support, students may not be able to complete the most essential and basic requirement of college: attending class. For some non-traditional students, childcare is oftentimes needed through the support of their family to attend class—a simple, yet challenging task for a student mother juggling multiple responsibilities. Equally important, family support can also entail family members being willing to discuss the student's college experience without jealousy or judgment. Family support can certainly take shape differently for each individual. Additionally, students with family members who are not able to help with childcare, home care, or other forms of support can act as barriers which can hinder student success. Family support is clearly a critical factor in the success of students who are mothers (Beeler, 2016; Brine & Waller, 2004).

Dispositional barriers. Dispositional barriers, which involve intrapersonal qualities, also affect students' success. Non-traditional students oftentimes enter college feeling intimidated about competing with traditional-age students, experiencing feelings of inadequacy, and harboring concerns about fitting in at school. These barriers sometimes prevent them from completing school altogether (Keith, 2007).

Institutional barriers. The institutional barrier, or the campus climate, creates yet another set of obstacles for non-traditional students to overcome (Beeler, 2016; Bowl, 2001). Non-traditional students must learn the culture of academia to overcome institutional barriers. Students must learn or relearn college expectations; they must adjust or readjust their time

management skills and restructure their schedules in ways which fit well with the university, their family, and their own lives (Bowl, 2001). An "increase in access needs to be accompanied by a change in the culture of higher education institutions [in] that such a change would benefit mature and non-mature students alike" (Bowl, 2001, p. 142).

Despite the existence of support services available to non-traditional students, students who are older and employed are much less likely to utilize them (Keith, 2007). The student's age, work hours, and stress associated with tuition costs are correlated with use of services provided to non-traditional students. The older students are, and the more hours they are employed, the less likely they are to utilize a service (Keith, 2007). Understanding how to support students, especially those who are employed, is important. Flexible hours of support would benefit this busy student population. In order to decrease the institutional barriers for students who are mothers, university administrators could consider being more intentional about the services and the methods by which the services are provided.

Other institutional barriers prevent non-traditional students from accessing resources due to inconvenient departmental office hours and class schedules, a lack of pertinent campus engagement options, and inferior career planning for adult students (Keith, 2007). Additionally, students reported the large impact faculty members can have on their success as a student. If the student experiences supportive interactions regarding their family obligations, he or she is more likely to succeed (Cunningham, 2013).

Scheduling alignment. Higher education schedules do not often align with K-12 schedules, thus making it difficult for college mothers to attend to childcare needs (Yakaboski, 2010). Undergraduate mothers often have to make difficult choices such as missing classes

because their children's school was closed for the day or because the school day ends earlier than that of a traditional college student. College mothers are frequently challenged by this type of mismatch in schedule alignments (Yakaboski, 2010).

It is clear from the literature that institutions' leaders could be more intentional about the resources designed for non-traditional students. Providing appropriate services is insufficient. School personnel could be more mindful of where and when the services are provided in order for students who are mothers to access them. Additionally, it could be beneficial to consider a similar alignment of course scheduling with that of the local K-12 school schedule.

Financial Constraints

For many non-traditional students, financing their education is a major concern (Bowl 2001; Brine & Waller, 2004; Reisinger 1999; Scott et al., 1996). In addition to other adult responsibilities and obligations, furthering their education is not always financially possible. Having a strong sense of hopefulness can assist students in overcoming their financial concerns (Chao & Good, 2004). However, economic and material risks are common reasons why non-traditional students drop out of college studies (Brine & Waller, 2004; Scott et al., 1996). Many student parents reported concern about inadequate funding, specifically as it relates to simultaneously attending college and paying for childcare. Maintaining awareness of the significant influence of economics in the lives of non-traditional students and providing financial support, budgeting workshops, and advisement could prove helpful.

It has been noted that single mothers could greatly benefit from higher education and the potential earning increase associated with a degree (Beeler, 2016; Haleman, 2004). However,

some students who are mothers experience a cycle which can prevent them from advancing. In this cycle, the single mother is poor because she lacks a degree qualifying her for a higher paying job. She may have not earned a degree because she had to withdraw from college to earn money. Lastly, she dropped out of college because she had a child for whom to care. This type of cycle can prevent single mothers from finishing their degree and makes it exceedingly challenging to advance to improved employment (Haleman, 2004).

A college education has been described as critical to the financial success of single mothers (Beeler, 2016; Haleman, 2004). Single mothers, in part, aspired to complete their degree to model the way for their children (Haleman, 2004). While the women in Haleman's study identified personal factors as barriers to degree completion, many societal barriers also existed of which the women had not always been aware (Haleman, 2004). For single mothers to receive specific governmental financial support, it is required that the recipient work part-time. Yet many single mothers attempt to attend school full time. Adding part-time employment to a hectic life schedule with family responsibilities is oftentimes impossible, negating their ability to access the financial assistance (Beeler, 2016; Haleman, 2004).

Support Mechanisms

Other support services discussed in the research included the need for specific career counseling, academic advising, and the creation of social support groups for non-traditional students and student mothers. Additionally, it has been suggested orientation programs, career counseling options, workshops, and events should focus on their specific needs (Quayle, 2007).

Because many non-traditional students experience major life transitions during their collegiate career, providing counseling efforts which focus on transition could also prove helpful.

Additional ways to help non-traditional students and students who are mothers are through specialized support services (Pelling, 2001). Creating an introductory class to help non-traditional students ease their way into college is one way to support them (Pelling, 2001). This type of course should focus on study skills, strategies for success, support services, and tutoring. These topics, in addition to adjustment issues, financial matters, and an introduction to campus life, could help reduce student stress and discomfort in college (Pelling, 2001).

Support groups. An important support service that helps students better succeed in college is provision of organized support groups (Ting, 2008). Ting (2008) used a support group in his work with non-traditional students to provide a platform for discussions related to academic and study skills and social development to include students' connections to others. Named the "ExCEL group," it provided support for "Excellent Commitment and Effective Learning" (p. 330). In Ting's model, the group leader meets with a small group of 10 to 12 students for a specific length of time. The leader guides the group, asking participants questions and encouraging role-plays and other interactive discussions for problem-solving and learning. The group members are expected to commit to this experience and to one another. Additionally, the students are given assignments to complete, assessments to take, and regular meetings with their group leader and academic advisor to attend. Some of the topics covered within the group include study skills, relationship building, time management, test preparation, self-appraisal, positive self-concept, studying in a particular field of study, finding a mentor, multiculturalism, getting involved, and evaluation (Ting, 2008).

Social support groups. Despite the fact students who are mothers typically lack free time, there is a need for informal and formal social support groups to allow students opportunities to interact with others possessing similar life experiences (Astin, 1999; Beeler, 2016). These social groups can offer women opportunities to process their experiences as student mothers while letting them recognize they are not alone (Beeler, 2016; Quayle, 2007; Reisinger, 1991; Yakaboski, 2010). Most importantly, educators ought to create colleges that fit the needs of students instead of selecting students who fit perfectly into institutions (Bax, 1998).

Academic advising. Academic advising specifically designed to meet the needs of this growing student population is another critical support service to consider (Reisinger, 1991). Higher education should provide specialized advising because, "Adult women are facing a whole different set of life situations than the average [19-year-old] college student" (Reisinger, p. 19). It is important to recognize that adult women face a uniquely different set of roles, including "wife, mother, career professional, daughter, sister and community member" (Reisinger, p. 3). As such, universities should prepare appropriate academic advising where staff members take time to understand the multiple roles of these students and recognize that the regular hours this service is provided may not be best suited for the challenging schedules of students who are mothers.

Role models. Some of the research included in this review stressed the importance of the concept of the role model (Pelling, 2001; Quayle, 2007; Scanlon, 2008). It is valuable to have leaders in academia who are non-traditional. Universities should advocate for a non-traditional faculty and staff hiring policy to provide more opportunities for non-traditional students to have role models who can relate to them (Pelling, 2001). These unique role models would help retain

non-traditional students on campuses by allowing the students to better connect with the university as a result of having a campus mentor with whom they can connect (Pelling, 2001).

Students who are parents not only benefit from having role models in their lives, they also tend to recognize their desire to serve as role models (Beeler, 2016; Quayle, 2007). As such, they strive to be better people, better students, and better parents. Many of the students who were parents and participants in the research that I reviewed discussed their futures and the importance of serving as role models for their children (Quayle 2007; Scanlon 2008). Providing opportunities for student parents to serve as role models in a formal setting could improve the experiences of their peers as well as those of other non-traditional student populations.

Career counseling. In regard to career counseling, educators may need to take the time to understand the aspirations and career goals of non-traditional students in order to support their success. When it is known what students hope to gain from their college experience, educators can align programs and services appropriately (Chao & Good, 2004). Career counselors are in a unique position to guide and assist college women. Counselors can be influential in the career decision-making process and can help alleviate some of the barriers these students often face (Quimby & O'Brien, 2004). Additionally, university administrators may consider providing counseling programs for female reentry students and couples therapy, as it "is important to recognize how the changes in the reentry student will affect the non-participant family member once she returns to college" (Bax, 1998, p. 82).

Many women students in higher education face challenges related to their multiple roles. Some of these women must deal with the stressors involved with returning to school, juggling the responsibilities of a family, and the lack of support systems. Additionally, they may face role

identity conflict and basic institutional or personal barriers. Many of these same themes are present in the lives of students who are mothers. Understanding these themes from the perspective of current students provides additional opportunities for universities to better meet their needs.

Childcare. Much of the research on non-traditional student subcultures emphasized the need to provide students who are mothers with what authors frequently label a vital service: on-site child care (Beeler, 2016; Bowl, 2001; Gonchar, 1995; Reisinger, 1999). On-site child care is "essential to the education of college-student mothers and to the academic mission of the college" (Gonchar, 1995, p. 226). Students who do not have access on-site child care and other nonacademic resources are negatively affected by their absence and less likely to persist. Student mothers are also concerned about inadequate funding, specifically as it relates to attending college and paying for childcare (Bowl, 2001).

Childcare is a critical resource for many female students with children. Even though some universities provide campus child care, sometimes these facilities have age-related restrictions. Some childcare facilities do not allow infants and only allow children fifteen months and older. This age restriction can hinder the student mother's progress by preventing her from attending classes immediately following the birth of a child (Mercado-López, 2013).

Theoretical Framework: Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Schlossberg's student transition theory (Anderson et al., 2012) served as the theoretical framework to examine the lived experiences of college student mothers. Students who are mothers experience several significant transitions throughout their lives and, more specifically,

as college students. These students must prepare for the academic transition, the potential child care challenges, work schedule alterations, commuting time, and possible lack of family support. Schlossberg's transition theory provides insight into the numerous factors which influence the manner in which a person experiences a transition (Anderson et al., 2012). The theory explains that transitions can include events or non-events which can impact relationships, positionalities or identities, and assumptions. In order to comprehend a person's transition, one must consider the nature and circumstances of the transition (Anderson et al., 2012). The theory's focus is on the meaning individuals attach to the transition.

As it relates to students who are mothers, knowing that the previous research identified that this demographic tends to experience challenges with their transitions, this particular theory provided relevant insight and direction. Understanding the student's unique experience of this transition and the meaning associated with the transition provided information that helps the student make proper adjustments and allows educators to better support the student throughout her academic career.

Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) sought to understand how adults change over time. What they found through their research is that the age of the individual is less important through a transition. Rather, it is more critical to understand the various roles and positionalities of the person in transition than other factors. These roles tend to have more of an impact on the experience than the person's age. These authors also highlighted the transition model as a way of better supporting people in transition. In their model, people experience what the authors referred to as the 4 Ss or the "4 S System" (Schlossberg et al., p. 26). Transitions require people to let go of certain roles and pieces of their lives and assume new roles. Many transitions

involve significant events and sometimes even "crisis situations" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 30). Much learning and growth can occur by coping with these types of situations.

There are four steps within the transition theory including situation, self, support and strategies (Anderson et al., 2012). The first step in a person's transition involves the identification of the transition and asks, *What change is yet to come? Is this change expected or unexpected?* This line of questioning will help the person think about the transition with greater clarity and more knowledge. This step also identifies where people are within their transitions and how their roles impact the changes or are impacted as a result of the changes.

Situation. In the situation stage of a transition, a person asks, *What is happening?* Trigger, timing, control, role change, duration, previous experience, concurrent stress, and assessment all impact the person's situation (Anderson et al., 2012). All these specific elements are important to consider when supporting a person's transition. It is also important when helping a student in transition to think about what triggered the transition, the timing of the change related to other aspects of the student's life, and whether the person is in control of the change. Additionally, one should consider if a positionality or role change was involved with the process, if the change is permanent or temporary, how the person dealt with similar changes in their past, the level of stress entailed, and how the person is impacted by the overall transition. Personal, demographic, and psychological resources are also important to consider regarding the factor of self in the 4 S System (Anderson et al., 2012).

In my research, it was important to learn when the student became a mother (before or during college) and whether or not she delayed her studies as a result. I learned more about how she balanced her roles as mother and student. Learning what types of resources the mother

accessed or had access to allowed me to better understand how the person felt about her situation and support. Knowing about this potential access to resources informed her levels of support, which impacted her experience as a student mother. Lastly, demographic information including number of children, marital status, and living environment all impacted the situation of the student, all of which is detailed in Chapter 4.

Self. In the stage of self, one asks, *To whom is it happening?* The following are especially relevant for students as they address change: "socioeconomic status, gender and sexual orientation, age and stage of life, state of health, ethnicity/culture, psychological resources, ego development, outlook – optimism and self-efficacy, commitment and values, spirituality and resilience" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 73). A student's personal characteristics could have a direct impact on the way in which someone experiences a transition. In my study with students who are mothers, the demographics participants represented illustrated both commonalities and differences depending on their lived experiences and backgrounds. Through an interview process, described in detail in Chapter 3, I discovered how aspects of self impacted the students' experiences.

Support. In the third area, support, one asks, *What help is available?* Social support can be vital to coping with stress and stressful transitions. Within the support factor in the 4 Ss, types, functions, and measurements of social support are important. When working with students in transition, one should ask whether or not the person is receiving the type of support needed, does the person have a variety of support (family members, friends, peers, organizations), has the support system been impacted by the transition, and does the person feel the support system is helpful? (Anderson et al., 2012). While some universities currently

provide support services to students who are mothers, understanding how the students access or why they choose not to access these resources may provide further direction to knowing this population more fully. In my study, I learned how the students' personal support mechanisms impacted the participants' experiences through important transitions, which is described in Chapter 5.

Strategies. Finally, exploring strategies, one asks, *How does the person cope* (Schlossberg et al., 1995)? The fourth and final step in the system refers to the person in transition taking charge of the situation and controlling the ways they respond in the scenario, strengthening her/his resources in the process. In strategies, it is important to think about the ways in which individuals modify the situation, control the meaning of the situation, and manage stress after it has happened (Anderson et al., 2012). In my research, I learned how students who are mothers used or failed to use their surroundings, resources, peers, and family to succeed.

Summary

In Chapter 2 I reviewed the literature on non-traditional students including multiple sub-populations. These sub-populations included mothers, female students in higher education, students who are parents, single students who are mothers, and students who are mothers. It is important to understand the overarching population as one becomes more engaged with students who are parents and then ultimately with students who are mothers. While much research regarding non-traditional students exists, there is less current data available on students who are mothers, specifically those between the ages of 18-24 who are married or unmarried. Some common themes which emerged from this literature review included role conflict, academic

challenges, motivation, barriers, financial constraints, and support mechanisms. When educators more fully understand these themes, the ways in which this population is supported can be improved.

This review of the literature illustrates what factors commonly influence the college experience for non-traditional students, female students in higher education, students who are parents, single students who are mothers, and students who are mothers. The common themes and categories that emerged from this research include factors that hinder or help student mothers and how their motivation predicts their success. Other common themes include how having a role model, or serving as a role model, impacts a student's college experience, as well as how financial matters are a critical concern of this population. Families and life circumstances play a large role in the success or failure of students who are mothers and sometimes personal relationships are jeopardized in the pursuit of a college degree. A common message from the majority of the studies reveals the need for increased support services and advocacy for this student demographic.

Studying the lived experiences of contemporary college student mothers by inviting them to share their personal experiences was necessary to better understand how they made meaning. Their experiences illustrate what is most essential in navigating the ways in which college students who are mothers move in, move through, and move out of their college careers. Chapter 3 describes the methodology I used to conduct this research study.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The following chapter describes the research design used to guide this study, including the epistemology, theoretical perspective, and phenomenological approach. Additionally, I detail the methods used for data collection and analysis as findings emerged. Lastly, included in this section is a description of the researcher's personal connection to the research.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of students who are mothers at a large, public Midwestern research university. Using a feminist theoretical perspective, the focus of the research was to better understand how students who are mothers experience college. I conducted three semi-structured interviews with 8 participants. The central research questions was: What are the lived experiences of college students who are mothers at one large, public Midwestern research university?

The following questions helped guide the study:

- In what ways, if any, do the students' relationships with their family members change throughout their college experience?
- What contributes to, and what prevents, women's ability to persist as college student mothers?

- How, if at all, do the students' sense of self change through their college experience as mothers?

These questions helped inform the focus of my research with college students who are mothers as I examined how they moved in, moved through, and moved out of college.

Epistemology

The epistemology of a research study provides the philosophical guidance for the research process. For my study, I used a constructionist approach that informed the theoretical perspective, research methodology, and methods. Constructionism includes an understanding that "truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of your engagement with the realities in your world" (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). Using this approach, each person may create meaning in unique ways even when the meaning involves the same phenomenon. A constructionism epistemology allowed me to understand that each of my student participants experienced and made meaning of college as a mother in unique ways and allowed for differences. Additionally, I, as the researcher, also constructed meaning through my role as the interviewer. I constructed meaning from the experiences the participants shared as it related to that which I interpreted (Crotty, 1998). As described in greater detail later in this chapter, phenomenology and a constructionism epistemology are very intertwined in research approaches (Crotty, 1998), further supporting this type of epistemology in this particular study.

Feminist Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical perspective is the philosophical stance which supports the selected methodology and acknowledges the assumptions involved with the research (Crotty, 1998).

Using a women-centered perspective focuses on understanding women's lives related to family, traditional societal organizational, and educational structure (Prasad, 2005). Despite the fact that colleges and universities have evolved to include more diverse students, "men continued to be the prevalent beneficiaries of higher education for nearly two hundred years" (Ortega, 2013, p. 151). The experience of men and a male-dominated value system continue to be institutionalized as the norm on college campuses.

In this research study with students who are mothers, the feminist theoretical perspective framed the study in pursuit of understanding or identifying the oppression of women. While the focus of my research is on the lived experiences of college students who are mothers, as a feminist researcher, I also sought to understand if the gendered nature of higher education and traditional family roles impacted their lives. Feminist research tradition includes examinations of how women cope with situations (Prasad, 2005). This theoretical perspective was suitable with the use of Schlossberg's transition theory, which questions how people cope through lived transitions (Anderson et al., 2012).

A feminist theoretical perspective guided my research process. How a researcher defines feminism or how that person thinks about and forms ideas about patriarchy, power, and gender directly influences the way in which the research is conducted and the data is analyzed (Pillow, 2002). Feminist research and methodology include a reciprocal dialogue where the female researcher and female participants exchange ideas in the "research relationship," supporting one another and providing resources along the way (Pillow, 2002, p. 15).

While some argue that interviewing is specifically a feminist research method, how the research is conducted is what actually defines feminist research (Pillow, 2002). Some methods

which help define feminist research include a goal to empower women as a result of a study, a focus on the details regarding the daily lives of the participants, and attention to gender. In feminist research, the researcher is sensitive to power relations and ultimately committed to changing the position of women in society. It is my hope that my research will support the future collegiate experiences of students who are mothers.

Phenomenological Methodological Approach

I gathered information on students who are mothers through a phenomenological methodology. Phenomenological research is "a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants" (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). I wished to understand the lived experiences of students who are mothers. The focus of phenomenology is on "illuminating details and seemingly trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in our lives" (Laverty, 2003, p. 24). The goal is to create meaning and gain an understanding of the phenomenon. The researchers' experience and background impact the way in which they approach research, which is not something that can be separated. The researcher is actually connected to the subject matter and the person's assumptions are an important part of the process.

The use of a phenomenological research approach, guided by a feminist theoretical perspective, maintained the focus of learning about the lived experiences of my participants at the center of my study. Additionally, it was important to me to understand what some may suggest are trivial details, in order to genuinely grasp the experiences of students who are mothers. As a feminist using a feminist perspective, my attention to and desire for equal access

for all genders remained connected to this process. I wanted to empower my participants, and paid close attention to the intricacies of their lived experiences.

Feminist Phenomenology

Phenomenology and feminism were rarely associated until recent years. This separation was due to the fact that phenomenology is grounded in philosophy which has a male-bias or an ungendered approach to research. Many feminist researchers ruled out phenomenology as a tool, because it removed differences rather than addressed differences related to gender (Fisher, 2000; Schües, 2011). Feminist research is socially and politically motivated and uses a lens that is shaped by an understanding that oppression and inequality exist for women. Using a feminist approach to phenomenology allowed for the structure associated with phenomenology and a gendered view of the lived experiences of the participants to intertwine.

Using a feminist phenomenology, I examined the experiences of college students who are mothers and looked at the structural relationship and patterns connected to women's roles in society. In the case of these participants, the roles of interest are student and mother. I acknowledged any oppression which existed as a result of their gendered experiences. Research with a feminist phenomenology questions "the nature of space, time, and the body" (Schües, 2011, pp. 1-2). In my research, I also examined college mothers and the timing of their experiences, including how they balanced time within their multiple roles, noting the time they spent with their child(ren) versus their time focused on coursework and other structured activities in their lives. A feminist phenomenological approach allows a researcher to understand the

meaning of the lived experiences, acknowledging that the experiences are gendered and recognizing that the gendered nature of the experience matters.

Methods of Data Collection

The following sections describe my methods of data collection, which include an interview series involving three interviews. I also discuss the recruitment process, which involved the support of several staff leaders in departments at the research site that provided assistance to the targeted student population. This section also addresses the participants involved with the study and the specific research site.

Recruitment

My recruitment plan to obtain participants included outreach and support from directors of resource centers that served non-traditional students at Filo Spinato University (pseudonym) (Appendix A) and students (Appendix B). Reaching out to staff members at my study site who worked with specific student organizations or functional areas supporting this population was critical. I contacted staff members and student leaders in Off-Campus & Non-Traditional Student Services, Campus Child Care, FSU Community, the College Parents' Group, and SWAN (Students Who Are Non-traditional) via email (Appendices A and B).

My research necessitated additional participants, and I therefore enlisted snowball sampling and asked participants for their recommendations for other students who are mothers on campus who were willing to participate. This particular sampling method allowed me to target students who had a relationship with staff members and other student participants at my

study site. This pre-established trust encouraged the students to participate, to speak more freely, and to have an increased desire to contribute knowing the researcher had a vested interest in their success.

Participants

Upon approval from my dissertation committee, I gained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct this study. Criteria for inclusion in this study included students who were mothers, who were married or unmarried, and who were 18 to 24 years old. Students who are older than 24 years have different life circumstances, support mechanisms, and potential needs than those who represent the 18-24 traditional college student age range (Wilsey, 2013). Wilsey (2013) noted that little research exists that explores the differences between traditional college-age mothers and adult-age mothers. I interviewed undergraduate student mothers only (versus graduate students) attending a large, public Midwestern research university. The undergraduate experience tends to differ from the graduate school experience. I was most interested in learning about the lived experiences of undergraduate students. While I wished to study students who are mothers who are married and those who are unmarried, only those who were unmarried agreed to participate. Understanding their needs as student mothers was important to me, as was learning if any major differences existed related to support structures needed for students depending on their marital status. The participants noted that their older and married peers with children had different experiences and support systems, but because no married students participated, I lack their true experience.

Research Site

The research site, Filo Spinato University, was a large, public Midwestern research university. Filo Spinato had a total enrollment of 20,130 with 15,027 undergraduate students. The average student age was 22, 51% of the population was male, and 49% was female. Filo Spinato was a university with a diverse student body and approximately 40% of its student body were students of color. Additionally, over 44% of all undergraduate students received Pell grants (IPEDS, 2016). Many Filo Spinato University students had high socioeconomic need. Filo has a diverse array of departments, functional areas, and student organizations which directly support the experiences of college students who are mothers. FSU allowed for a broad spectrum of students who fit my criteria to participate.

Support Centers and Student Organizations

I successfully recruited the projected number of students, eight, required to conduct this research study. In consultation with staff leaders and advisors who work to support the functional areas previously listed, there were minimally 96 students who fell into the parental and/or mother categories. According to staff members working specifically with this student population, 41 students who identified as student mothers used services at the research site and 55 identified as student parents. Off-Campus & Non-Traditional Student Services reported an average of 25 student parents, the Child Development Lab had 9 children of undergraduate college student mothers enrolled, Campus Child Care had 32 undergraduate students who were mothers, FSU Community (campus apartment complex) had 15 student mother residents, and lastly, the College Parents' Group (a student organization) had approximately 30 active college

student parent members. There was an overlap between some of the students using the support services.

I relied heavily on relationships with colleagues at FSU to recruit participants. These colleagues, representing several support units at FSU, responded immediately to my request for assistance and for that I am grateful. The first six participants who responded to my email inquiry called or emailed me within two days of the first communications being sent. When I asked the participants how they learned of the study, all of the initial students mentioned the specific units I contacted. The student mothers often made mention of these support services throughout the interview process, noting the high level of support they experienced from the staff members assisting those areas. I am confident that I would have struggled to identify willing students without these critical relationships with the various resource centers. With the support of the staff members at the centers, I successfully recruited an initial 9 students who were mothers for this study. After one student failed to respond to any of my communications, I completed the study with 8 participants.

Interviews

For the data collection process, I conducted interviews with each of the student participants. I conducted three individual semi-structured interviews with each of the eight participants. After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct research with human subjects, I conducted three sets of one-on-one interviews lasting between 60 and 90 minutes long with each participant. I used an interview guide (Appendix C) with specific questions aimed at learning about the experiences of my participants. In addition to the

questions included in my interview guide, I asked follow-up questions to delve deeper into their experiences, which allowed for a free-flowing discussion and overall knowledge gained. The interviews allowed for the student voices to be heard within the research presented. It was my hope that the student voices would provide a clear narrative of the common themes and raw experiences of these unique students so college educators may make positive changes on our campuses to support students who are mothers.

An interview involves a purposeful conversation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In this conversation, the researcher directs questions to obtain information from the interviewee. Through the interviewing process, I gathered detailed and descriptive data I then examined. I specifically used interviews in my research to best understand the students' experiences, noting emotion, inflection, and nonverbal cues. The opportunity to speak with students individually allowed me to concentrate on one student at a time without the influence of their peers or other potential distractions which other types of research may encourage. Interviews allow the researcher to "develop insights on how subjects interpret some pieces of the world" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 103). I wanted to understand the world of my subjects, including their roles of mother, student, and any other roles with which they identified. These intimate conversations provided unique opportunities for me to hear, in great detail, how they balanced their numerous roles. I successfully built a rapport with the participants to ease any trepidation they had, and further explained how their contributions were incredibly valuable to the study.

In feminist research, female participants tend to take less time to open up to women researchers (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Interviews also allow for follow-up questions and clarification. Interviews containing good listening from the interviewer usually stimulate good

talking (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I successfully used a feminist theoretical perspective with the female students as the focal point of the study. Within the first interview, the students seemed comfortable sharing personal stories related to and unrelated to the interview questions.

Because this population has added family responsibilities, I was highly sensitive to their hectic schedules. I therefore asked the students to dictate our interview times and locations. I conducted the interviews when it was most convenient for them; sometimes that meant over meal times or after work hours and after their child(ren) went to bed. I provided location options (student union, library, etc.), but in most cases the participants wished to meet in an office on campus in the student life building. This secure location provided the most potential for confidential conversations to occur. I helped to ensure the participants were comfortable in the setting, which also provided a more confidential experience. Before each interview, I explained to the participants that their names would not be included in the research process or in any written documentation. I asked each student to provide a pseudonym, which was selected with ease for the majority of the participants. I explained that any information they shared would remain confidential and would not be linked to them in any way. I recognized that in some cases the student participants may have wished or needed to bring their child(ren) along for the interview. Only one participant brought her child to one of the interviews. I recognized having a child present during the interview may have distracted the mother, but I needed to allow this to support the process of recruiting students with such unique needs and time constraints. In this case, the student who brought her son was not at all distracted by her baby. I tried to be as flexible as possible with the participants, understanding how fortunate I was that they were all willing to support my research and donate their limited time to me.

The interview process involved a series of three interviews with each participant in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences. The purpose of the first interview was to gather information about the participant in the context of the research topic (Seidman, 2006). During this interview I asked the participants to discuss their lives as they learned of their pregnancy and became mothers (Appendix F). The second interview focused on the participants' lived experience as college students. In the second interviews, I asked the students about motherhood and the numerous details involved with this role as it intertwined with their role as college students. I asked questions about their relationships with their families and support systems, and the professors and college staff members with whom they interacted. In this session, I also asked about a typical day for them as students who are mothers (Appendix F).

In the third interview, the participants reflected on the meaning of their experience as it related to the connections between the participants' life and work and how they understand the meaning in their life (Seidman, 2006). In this case, I asked them about the connections between their role as a mother and as a college student. I also asked the women about their future plans and about how motherhood as a college student has impacted them (Appendix F). The set of three interviews allows the researcher to build trust and establish a relationship with the participants over time (Seidman, 2006). This three-step process enabled me to build a relationship with the participants, and their comfort level in participating grew quickly during our time together.

Regarding the interview process as a whole, I recognized the need to allow for follow-up questions and flexibility in order to learn more from the participants, and I welcomed the

additional questions and comments that arose as a result. After conducting an interview, I stored the digital recording and my researcher notes in a file cabinet in my personal home office. All the transcribed data was stored on my personal home computer. I separated the raw data from my dissertation to ensure the protection of my participants' identities. Additionally, I hired a professional to transcribe immediately following each interview. When all the interviews and transcriptions were complete, I looked for emerging themes and commonalities I later analyzed; recommendations based on my findings are discussed in further detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

Methods of Data Analysis

The following section describes the data analysis involved with this research, including all the information collected through the interview process. The data analysis included epoche bracketing, horizonalization, imaginative variation, and textural description. Additionally, all of the data was examined using Schlossberg's transition theory as a model to understand how students who are mothers navigate transitions during their college experience.

Upon completion of each interview, I analyzed the transcriptions to determine if any themes emerged. Based on any emerging themes, I compared the data with the information and themes identified in the review of the literature. The themes which emerged in the literature review included: motivation, role models, financial matters, life circumstances and barriers, institutional barriers, and campus support services. All of these same themes emerged from the interview process as well as some new themes discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

The emerging themes from the literature and those which surfaced from the interview process contributed to recommendations for college educators to implement, discussed in further

detail in Chapter 6. The analysis of the data and the research from the literature review informed the recommendations. These recommendations are the result of the narrative the students personally shared as well as what is provided in the research I examined.

Epoche Bracketing

Upon transcribing all of the data gathered in each of the interviews, I used the process of epoche bracketing. The use of epoche bracketing involves setting aside any biases and previously constructed ideas about a concept. Using bracketing, a researcher focuses attention on that which is most important instead of emphasizing her/his preconceived ideas about a topic (Moustakus, 1994). Simply stated, "Nothing is determined in advance" (Moustakus, 1994, p. 87). I used this method in my study to focus on the basic elements described throughout the interview process allowing all areas to be given full attention. I focused on the qualities of the experiences by looking at the experience, describing the experience, and then returning to the information to look and describe again. This process allowed for detailed thinking and deeper understanding (Moustakus, 1994).

Phenomenological Reduction

After completing the bracketing, I engaged in phenomenological reduction (Moustakus, 1994). In this process, a researcher goes through different steps to attempt to achieve a higher level of understanding which involves setting assumptions and personal experiences aside, allowing for detailed ideas to surface as if brand new and untouched. Through phenomenological reduction, a researcher uses epoche bracketing, horizonalization, and

imaginative variation. This process allowed me to review the themes and consider different meanings. For example, throughout this process I considered how those participants who described themselves as single may have experienced college student motherhood differently than their peers with boyfriends. I employed these research methods in order to best understand, without great bias, how experiences were illustrated by my participants.

Coding

Upon bracketing, and within the process of phenomenological reduction, I then began the coding process. In the coding process, I searched through the data for patterns and similarities among the responses, and assigned words or phrases to represent any recurring topics. Coding involves "taking text data…, segmenting sentences…into categories, and labeling those categories with a term, often a term based in the actual language of the participant (called an *in vivo* term)" (Creswell, 2009, p. 186).

Throughout the coding process for each participant, I created a list of topics which surfaced. I wrote notes in the margins of my interview notes as well as on the transcriptions. I then put all these codes into a spreadsheet organized by theme and/or topic. Some of the first level codes included: coping strategies, finances, childcare/day care, family, peers, organization and time management, resources, role, role change, faculty, and peers without children. As similar topics emerged, I organized them together, when possible, and maintained a list of additional unique topics. I later returned to the data and, using codes (abbreviated topics), I made notes, writing the codes adjacent to the text. After returning to the text again, I categorized the topics when possible and grouped them when they related. Some of the second level codes

included nontrad v. trad, single motherhood, role model, octopus mom, superwoman, and change for the better. Lastly, I performed an analysis based on the categories.

I created a list of coding categories when I was ready to sort the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I did not predetermine what patterns would emerge, but the research questions aided in producing coding categories. I used coding families to assist in creating coding categories. Some coding families I used included setting codes (general information on the research topic), definition of the situation codes (subjects define or describe the main topic), and perspectives held by subjects' codes (participants share definitions of the topic, rules, norms, and viewpoints). Additionally, process codes (change of role) proved helpful in my research, knowing my participants experienced role changes throughout their college experience. A coding family critical to my process is what the authors refer to as relationship codes (friendships, families, and support systems). This coding family was also useful, understanding each participant has a different support system.

Horizonalization

Next, I used the process called horizonalization, where the researcher gives equal value to each statement. In horizonalization, "Each horizon as it comes into our conscious experience is the grounding or condition of the phenomenon that gives it a distinctive character" (Moustakus, 1994, p. 95). Through this process, each occurrence has equal value as the researcher attempts to gain new and deeper understanding. Through horizonalization, I provided descriptive codes for themes which emerged. All these codes were treated equally and I then clustered descriptive codes as they surfaced. One example of this was octopus mom/superwoman, which later became

octopus mom. This descriptive code referenced the finding that the participants successfully juggled numerous tasks and roles simultaneously.

Imaginative Variation

Through imaginative variation, I sought meaning through the use of imagination, considering differing perspectives. The purpose of this process is to "arrive at structural descriptions of an experience…the 'how' that speaks to conditions that illuminate the 'what' of experience" (Moustakus, 1994, p. 98). Imaginative variation allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of how students navigated and transitioned through their college experience as mothers. In this process, I attempted to recognize any underlying themes, and considered structures related to time, body, self, and others. As a result, I gained a better understanding of the meaning behind the students' ideas and experiences (Moustakus, 1994). All of the participants in this study described themselves as single (unmarried). Seven of the eight participants were not in romantic relationships with the father of their child(ren). Through imaginative variation, I drew deeper meaning from this analysis and found the students to be single by choice. Not only were the women not romantically connected to the fathers, the mothers chose to be single as a success strategy.

Textural and Structural Descriptions

The last part of this phenomenological data analysis involved synthesizing all of the textural and structural descriptions shared throughout the interviews (Moustakus, 1994). During this stage, I captured the essences of the lived experiences of college student mothers. In the

textural-structural synthesis, I strived to identify the essences of their experiences shared at the time of the research. I did this from the point of view of having had the opportunity of studying and analyzing the phenomenon as described by the participants. The results of this process are presented in Chapter 5.

Trustworthiness

People who conduct naturalistic studies are sometimes questioned about the strength and quality of their research, specifically involving trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Skeptics challenge naturalistic inquiry, presuming the researcher merely involves herself/himself in observations or responds to the shiniest, prettiest thing that most prominently presents itself. However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) defend the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiry and describe how this type of research can be tested by the researcher to collect the most reliable data.

There are several ways to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research. A few specific concepts to consider in trustworthiness include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). Shenton explained that, to most accurately record the phenomenon being studied, a researcher should use successful methods used previously in similar studies. He also suggested developing an early understanding of the culture of the organization through visits and document reviews. The visits could aid in creating a trusting relationship before the formal research begins. In addition, the author encouraged researchers to give participants opportunities to refuse their participation in the study so that only those truly

willing would actually participate. Honesty and candor should also be encouraged by the researcher.

Member checks are also encouraged, where participants read any text related to their specific contributions to provide edits to anything not correctly captured by the researcher (Creswell, 2002). To better ensure trustworthiness, I employed the use of member checking. After compiling the data from the transcriptions and drafting text, I asked my participants to review their interviews and requested they provide any edits if errors occurred and I misunderstood their responses. I sent them individual copies of their specific profile and portfolios from Chapter 4 as well as a copy of Chapter 5. Through member checking, the participants only provided minor edits. I incorporated their feedback to provide more accurate portrayals of their experiences.

In regard to ensuring transferability, researchers ought to provide thick description regarding details of the study including location, setting, number of participants, restrictions related to the population involved, data collection methods, and number and length of the sessions involved with data collection. These details will help others conducting similar research better understand the process and allow for potential transferability (Shenton, 2004).

Relating to dependability, the research process should be discussed in thorough detail for future work. This also allows the reader to better understand whether or not proper research methods were utilized. The research should include sections on “the research design...the operational detail of data gathering...[and] reflective appraisal of the project...” (Shenton, 2004, pp. 71-72).

Relating to confirmability, in order to reduce the impact of potential researcher bias, the use of triangulation is critical. Triangulation involves the researcher describing any predispositions, reasoning for favoring specific research approaches, identifying weaknesses in methods not used, and weaknesses explained regarding employed methods (Shenton, 2004).

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the study did not delve into how the race or ethnic origin of the participants informed their motherhood experience. The interview protocol did not include questions related to social identities outside of motherhood and gender roles. An unanticipated outcome of this study was the majority of participants identified as women of color (7 of out of the 8 participants). Racial and cultural backgrounds impact the institution of motherhood; however, the exploration of race, gender, and college motherhood remains underdeveloped in this study.

An additional limitation involved the specific student participants. The study attracted participants who were generally positive about their student motherhood experience. It is possible that the students who agreed to participate were ones who wanted to share their story because of their generally positive experience. Of the 8 participants, 6 used words with positive connotations to describe motherhood. It is possible that the participants were generally more confident and successful at managing their numerous roles versus some of their peers who may have struggled more. Those peers did not participate in this study. As a result, it is possible that the results were more positive and less representative of the entire population at FSU.

Researcher Positionality

In a previous professional position at FSU, I proudly served as the Director of Commuter and Non-Traditional Student Services. That role provided the opportunity to learn about the plight and unique and challenging experiences of students who are mothers. On a daily basis, I grew humbled by their stories, their appreciation of small gestures, and their requests for minimal support. Even though many of my students could have used an entire team of staff members, family, and friends for assistance, the students typically asked for small favors like the use of the departmental fax machine, time to process a recent personal issue, or something as simple as the purchase of coffee for the lounge. I am proud of their accomplishments, some of which involved paying their mortgage on time or landing a job with the campus newspaper as a photographer.

Because of that pivotal professional experience, I continue to be committed to learning more about how to support this specific population. I wanted to know formally ways in which they felt most welcome and included, the type of services they report as the most useful, and the most helpful resources they need for them to succeed in college. At the time of this study, in my professional role I did not specifically support students who were mothers. I continue to strive to teach others to think of ways to reach out to this demographic. I hope one day to again support students who are mothers within a support unit. Until that opportunity presents itself, I wish to dedicate my research to learning ways in which we can all better support this population.

Due to my work with students, my desire to make campuses more accessible to non-traditional student populations, and my passion for student mother success, my view of this topic is impacted as a result. It is my hope that my sincere interest supports my desire to learn more

about the ways in which college educators can support students who are mothers as a result of learning about their lived experiences.

Summary

In Chapter 3 I described my research design, including a constructionist epistemology, a feminist theoretical perspective, a phenomenological research approach, and a methodology utilizing one-on-one interviews with students who are mothers. I also illustrated why this methodology was best for my intended research. I approached my research with a feminist theoretical perspective through interviews which further retained students who are mothers at the center of my study (Prasad, 2005). I listened to their specific voices and learned about their unique lived experiences. I recruited student participants through departments and student organizations which specifically supported this population. Additionally, I gained an increased understanding of their experiences as they navigated transitions as college student mothers. A feminist theoretical perspective impacted all of the research, from my view as the researcher to my role as the interviewer. The feminist perspective guided the manner in which I heard the participants' experiences and transitions through their college career, and informed the ways in which I interpreted the data collected. This perspective was woven throughout the entire research process. Chapter 4 describes the profiles and portfolios of the participants, as well as similarities and differences among the student mothers.

CHAPTER 4

PROFILES AND PORTFOLIOS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the lived experiences of college students who are mothers. This chapter contains a brief description and profile of each participant, as well as a synopsis of her journey throughout college as a mother. These profiles highlight important themes which emerged for each individual participant. Key portions from their experiences are included to illustrate each women's individual journey. Additionally, Table 1 presents participant demographic information captured from the interview process including the students' age, race, year in college and timing of the birth of their first child, along with other salient information. This information contextualizes and impacts how participants experienced their transition as college student mother, as described throughout Chapters 5 and 6. The participants' individual experiences are described in great detail as well as the commonalities and differences which surfaced as a collective group.

Participant Profiles

Krystal (21, 1 child)

Krystal was eager to participate in this study and contribute her experiences. She communicated that she valued the opportunity to share her story in a study about college student mothers. She was confident in her roles as mother, student and leader on campus. Throughout the interview process, when discussing her experiences as a college mother she was serious and

Table 1

Demographic Profiles of Participants

Pseudonym	**Krystal**	**Caitlyn**	**Queen**	**Princess**	**Khloe**	**Allison**	**KM**	**Elizabeth**
Race	African American	White	African American	African American	Biracial	Biracial	African American	African American
Marital Status	Single	Single	Single	Single	Single	Single	Single	Single
Relationship Status	Single	Single	Single	Single	Dating Father of Child	Single	Single	Dating
Pseudonym of Boyfriend					Kevin			Henry
Socioeconomic Status	Middle Class	Lower Class	Lower Class	Middle Class	Middle Class	Lower Class	Lower Class	Middle Class
Time of birth of (first) child	During college	During college	Before college	During college	Before college	During college	During college	Before college
University Status	Non-transfer	Transfer	Transfer	Transfer	Non-transfer	Non-transfer	Transfer	Non-transfer
Major	Political Science	Elementary Education	Biological Sciences	Pre-medicine	Nursing	Social Services	Art	Undecided
Year in School	Senior	Junior	Junior	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Freshman
Part-time or Full-time study	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Full-time
Age	21	24	24	20	19	24	23	18
Age at the time of first pregnancy and age at birth	20	17	17	19	17 pregnant 18 gave birth	20	21 gave birth	15 16 gave birth
Children information	1 boy; 3 mos	1 girl; 5 yrs 1 boy; 2.5 yrs	1 girl; 6 yrs 1 boy; 4 yrs 1 boy; 4 mos	1 boy; 13 mos	1 girl; 1 yr	1 girl; 4 yrs 1 boy; 7 mos	1 girl; 1 yr	1 girl; 2 yrs

(Continued on following page)

Table 1. Continued.

Pseudonym of Child(ren)	Kenneth	Aurora and Michael	Imani, Anthony and Malcolm	David	Brandi	Geneva and Cooper	Shlena	Sarah
Employment	Quit job due to lack of child care	None	None	On-campus part-time job	On-campus part-time job	Off-campus full-time job	None	Off-campus part-time job
Housing	On-campus housing for non-tradition-al students	Resided in on-campus housing for non-traditional students and later moved to a local apartment	On-campus housing for non-traditional students	On-campus housing for non-traditional students	On-campus housing for non-traditional students	Suburbs; was homeless during mother-hood	On-campus housing for non-traditional students	On-campus housing for non-traditional students – moved mid-semester into local apartment
Member of college parents' organization	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Word used to describe Motherhood	Difficult	Dynamic	Rewarding	Amazing	Learning	Inspiring	A Blessing	Transition
Word used to describe College	A Journey	Over-whelming and Rewarding	Exciting	Crazy	Stress	Long and Net-working	A Blessing	A Whole Different World

straightforward. However, when discussing her son, Krystal was bubbly and light-hearted. Her face always lit up when she shared stories about her experience as his mom and explained that he was well-known on campus. When asked how her thoughts about having a child changed over time, she explained:

> I'm extremely happy. I'm excited to have a child. He's everything. If I leave him with a babysitter, I'm like, "I got to get home to see my baby, I miss him." He kind of makes me...I've always been a hard worker but he makes me pay a lot of attention to detail now, kind of because I have to be so patient with him. I have to pay attention to detail with him and that kind of spills over to different areas in my life now.

She even brought him to one of our interviews which was a wonderful addition to the process as he was a part of the interview by being in our presence.

Krystal had her son at the age of 20 while she was an undergraduate student at FSU. Because of this experience, she wanted to contribute to the study in the hope that people would better understand what it was like to be a student mother. She responded to my recruitment email within one day of the first request and was the first person I interviewed. Her enthusiasm and support of the study were evident and appreciated. A senior political science major with a minor in Spanish, she was highly involved on campus, serving as a leader in a variety of student organizations. She was determined to have the full college experience and was actively engaged in campus life. Krystal managed her time in a way that allowed her to successfully parent, help others, contribute to her university, and focus on her academics.

Krystal identified as "middle class" and "African American." She was incredibly mature and self-aware in the way she presented herself and through her confident responses. She knew exactly who she was, what she wanted for herself and her son, and had a clear path to achieve her goals, which she shared throughout our time together. She chose not to have a relationship

with the father of her baby boy because she "knew off the bat that he wasn't going to help. He kind of said that and acted that way." She explained that she and the father never had a formal connection and would never develop one. However, Krystal did receive significant support from her peers on campus. She explained that she relied mostly on her friends: "I definitely rely on my friends to just say, 'Hey, I'll take him at this time when you need it.'"

Krystal was very well-known on campus due to her involvement, as was her son. To remain as involved as she was at FSU, she brought her child to organization meetings and to student leader office hours. Her son seemed to brighten the day of all whom he encountered and could be seen in the arms of Krystal's friends at meetings, events, and the office where she volunteers.

Caitlyn (24, 2 children)

Caitlyn was generous in her time as a participant and carefully scheduled our interviews around her hectic schedule. Caitlyn was a junior elementary education major and arrived at FSU as a transfer student. She had her first child after attending community college for one semester. She identified as White and "impoverished." She was a capable and bright student and liked to be challenged in the classroom. She shared a connection she made with a specific teacher who impacted her experience. This particular class discussed the impact design has on a classroom:

> This last, yeah, last semester, it was, like, I got into this class with this phenomenal professor and I developed drive that I didn't even know I had….It's still, I went home two weeks ago and I was like, "I'm reupholstering all of my kitchen chairs, right now. That's it, and I did it."
>
> She pushed me so much to do more and stop. I've always given the most that was asked for. I always got straight A's. It wasn't a big deal, and then she looked at my work, and

> she's like, "You are capable of producing more." It was like every paper, every assignment, my expectations versus what other people were turning [in] were so different. She just— some of the things she would say to me were so applicable to other areas of life….Stuff about changing something that doesn't make sense or moving things around to make it flow better. That's what I do to my house now. I just—she has changed the way that I approach literally everything, from my house to my school work.

This specific professor had a profound impact on Caitlyn's life and she shared her gratitude by relaying this story and smiling the entire time.

In addition to being an active student, Caitlyn was also a highly engaged mother and was determined to have teachable moments with her children whenever possible. She described how she encouraged her children to ask questions and she always provided answers:

> We talk about everything that we do. If we're somewhere like, in school, I want her to know everything has a purpose. The way the room is designed has a purpose, everyone who's in here has a purpose. I want her to question everything. If we're walking through a study area and she's like, "Oh mom, there's a sofa there," and someone's studying quietly, I'll be like, "There is a sofa. Why do you think the sofa's right here?" and we'll talk about it.

Cailyn described herself as "single as hell." She described the father of her children as abusive and unsupportive of her goals. To pursue higher education, Caitlyn had to relocate and move away from her home. The children's father did not provide any financial support for them and was not a part of their lives. After learning of her pregnancy, the father of her children told her "he was going to leave." Her response was, "Okay, that's great." Two days later he checked himself into rehab. She eventually left home and the children's father to attend FSU to seek independence and improve their lives.

Caitlyn was keenly aware of who she was as a young woman, mother, and aspiring teacher. She described many scenarios of how she manages all the duties of motherhood in

addition to a time-intensive major. Despite her hourly schedule, she admitted that her plans were sometimes foiled:

> I try as best as I can. Sometimes it looks good on paper, and then it comes down to it, and I haven't been to a grocery store in almost two weeks, and we're out of all of our food. My son has a special diet, so I'm getting by on, like, nothing. I don't even know what I'm feeding him. I think I fed him oatmeal last night for dinner.

She was incredibly focused on her studies, her children's development, and her own professional path. When discussing her aspirations, Caitlyn shared:

> I think I'd want to get my bachelor's, and then my master's. I don't see the point in stopping education, I think it's important. I want my kids to think it's important. I want to keep learning. I think that…one of the best things that you can give yourself is knowledge.

Caitlyn cared deeply about her education, her children's learning, and their future.

Queen (24, 3 children)

Queen described herself as African American. She was calm, confident junior at FSU studying biology. Queen loved animals, and the twinkle in her eyes grew each time she had an opportunity to talk about her future career working with them. Queen was the first student to reply to the recruitment email for this study and shared that she was happy to participate to improve the understanding of the experiences of her and her peers. Queen was 17 years old when she had her first child prior to college. She carefully balanced the academic rigor of a science degree with the great demands of mothering three children. She talked about the need to manage unpredictable events involving her children while simultaneously needing to focus in the classroom. For example, she shared how her son woke her and her daughter up in the middle of the night as a result of a nightmare. After spending most of the night comforting her children,

Queen had to attend class the next day. While these incidents often leave her "dog tired," she was proud that she was still able to pay attention in class and stay engaged in her coursework.

When asked to describe motherhood, Queen's face lit up and she smiled excitedly. She stated:

> It [motherhood] can be a challenge, but at the end of the day, it's very rewarding. To have these three little people that love you and that are on your team. They're with you no matter what. That makes the biggest difference.

Queen was very proud of her children and they were her number one priority. At the same time, she was driven and motivated to succeed in her biology major.

Princess (20, 1 child)

Princess, a light-hearted and charismatic young woman, was enthusiastic to contribute to this study. She smiled throughout the entire three-interview process and was incredibly positive before, during, and after each interview despite talking about some of the hardships and challenges of college motherhood. Princess approached life with an upbeat attitude and was joyful. She was 20 years old at the time of the first interview and identified as African American. She was also a first-year student, studying pre-medicine in the hopes of becoming an occupational therapist. Princess was a transfer student and had her baby before enrolling at FSU.

Throughout the interview process, Princess shared how she accessed many local and governmental resources to support herself and her son. She explained that her knowledge of these resources and assistance programs for young mothers was due to her mother's knowledge of the subject. Her mother gave birth to Princess at age 19 and willingly shared her experiences and advice with her daughter. Princess shared, "It was my mom who was mainly talking to me

because she had me when she was in college, too. She had me when she was 19 so she was like, 'It's not a game anymore.'" Her mother's experience as a young mother helped Princess create a plan as a college mother.

When describing how she felt about motherhood, Princess was quick to say, as she grinned simultaneously, that it's "amazing." She shared:

> It's amazing because I got to see myself mature and everybody else has, too.…It's just like he's showing me the important things in life like preparing for your future, saving money, all that stuff. It's no longer about going out and being popular and who knows you and who you know and stuff because they're not putting any money in my pocket. He's definitely helped me grow up a lot.

Many of the student participants described how mature motherhood made them. With Princess, it was an obvious point of pride. She was aware that she had grown tremendously in a short time period due to motherhood. She was positive, matter-of-fact and happy about being a mother.

Khloe (19, 1 child)

Khloe, a composed, mature young woman, contributed to the study due to the encouragement of another participant who was one of her closest friends on campus. Khloe explained that she was "Black and White" and "definitely not rich" when asked to describe her racial and/or ethnic background and her socioeconomic class. She was 19 years old and enrolled in the nursing program, a highly competitive and selective major at FSU. She was a serious student focused on her academic success. She had her child when she was 17. While she was scared at the time, she was also really excited because she "always loved kids." She was worried that she was not going to be able to afford her baby but "ecstatic" she was having a child.

Unlike the other women in this study, Khloe and the father of her child, Kevin, were still together. Kevin was supportive and wanted to be a part of Khloe's and their child's life. He was previously on an athletic scholarship playing football at a southern university. After being at that school for a semester, he realized how much he missed his daughter and Khloe. He decided to transfer to FSU to be with them both. Having him present not only provided them both with support and companionship, it also allowed Khloe to work 17 hours a week while he cared for their daughter.

Khloe explained that she really wanted to be involved on campus. However, she was not able to because she worked long hours, had a time-intensive academic major, and was a mother. She wanted to join a sorority but homework and her daughter were her main two priorities. She explained, "Freshman year was hard because that's what I really wanted to do. All my friends were pledging, my boyfriend even wanted to pledge, my peer mentor even had the chance to pledge." But pledging a sorority is time-consuming and she "couldn't make those sacrifices." She felt like she "missed out on things" and it made her feel like she was "not part of the university or experiencing the college life."

Khloe noted how mature becoming a mother made her. She explained that balancing all of her obligations made her even more organized and cognizant of time. She provided a thorough description of a typical day for her:

> I would wake up about 3:00 in the morning and I have 15 minutes to eat breakfast and get ready and go. Hit the door about 3:15, 3:30, to go to work. Go to work and work, clean. Then 7:30, I'm usually done at 7:30 on Tuesdays....I will go over to the nursing building, do classes. I think it's an hour break in between. Between then I'll probably get some Subway or McDonald's or something, eat lunch, go back to classes, then I'm done with classes at 4:00. Tuesdays is usually when her father works, so I don't have the car. At 4:00, I have to come down to the student center, take the bus, go to her daycare, grab her. Then it's a speed walk because I have to catch the bus coming back around so I don't

> have to wait another hour for the bus to come. That's probably about a 10-minute interval.
>
> I go grab her, race back to the bus stop. Then by the time I get home, it's about 6:00. I'll do homework or I'll study for an hour depending on if I have a test or no test that week. By 7:00, I like to put her in the bath, and then [at] 7:30 I'll put her down to sleep. Then right when I put her down to sleep, I'll get in the shower and then get my uniform ready for the next day, make sure my bag is packed, make sure I have breakfast ready or if I want to bring snacks to class. Just in case if I wake up late, I have everything. All I got to do is get dressed and go. Usually I love to be in bed by 8:00. If I'm not in bed by 8:00, I'm crabby. Then I just start it over the next day.

This type of detailed schedule was common among the eight student participants, but Khloe was the only student who managed such a demanding work schedule in addition to her motherhood and student responsibilities. She described her experience with both confidence and extreme fatigue.

Allison (24, 2 children)

Allison, an engaging participant, shared intimate details about her past leading up to her current family situation. She did not hold back from discussing difficult issues from her recent past, including a short period of homelessness. Allison described herself as "Asian, African American, and Irish," explaining that "my mom is Asian and Irish, [and] my dad is African American." She was a junior at the time of the interview and was at FSU studying family social services.

After having what she described as a traditional beginning to a college experience, Allison had her first child during her second year of school. Allison, who attended college part-time and worked full-time, was incredibly accommodating throughout the interview process. We met in person for the first interview on a day she attended a special orientation for her family

social services academic program—otherwise she was not on campus that semester. For the second and third interviews, she graciously agreed to meet over FaceTime after she arrived home, having worked a full day. Throughout this process, she was excited to introduce her family to me through this form of video conferencing. She involved her children, the father of her children, who was present for the third interview, and her pastor and his wife (with whom she previously lived). Allison was incredibly open and willingly shared her life experiences with me in the hopes of helping future college student mothers.

Allison, the only part-time student in this study, resided in a suburb over an hour away from FSU at the time of the interviews. She worked full-time and took online courses but hoped to return to campus in the near future. She recognized the need to finish her degree, but the financial burden was too great and working was a necessity.

Allison shared that she wanted to be an example for her two children: "Now I have to set a higher standard for my kids. I want to push for that bachelor's, at least!" Allison experienced difficult situations during her first pregnancy. She shared, "My first one was the hardest because I was homeless. My family kind of out-casted me, my adoptive family. I actually stayed in a homeless shelter for a minute." Allison, like two of her peers in this study, also had an abusive man in her life. She explained that she "went through an abusive relationship" with the father of her first child. She later "ended up going to a shelter for abused women" after she gave birth. She explained, "I still was going to school, I just was going to a community college. I just came back here and did it again." Allison did not dwell on this stage in her transition as a mother. Instead, she focused on improving the quality of life for her children by earning money and a college degree.

KM (23, 1 child)

KM, the most outwardly sensitive participant group, was warm and sincere. She often teared up when talking about her little girl and was proud of her accomplishments along her challenging path. She was a senior art major who transferred to FSU from a college in the South. She identified as African American. She was incredibly proud of her daughter, Kinley, and willingly shared stories regarding her growth and development as a one-year-old. In the first interview, KM shared that when she first learned she was going to become a mother, she wanted her baby. She said, "I want to keep her. Even since then, of course, millions of people got in my head but I just [stuck] with what I chose and I kept her." She rejected the suggestions of others to terminate her pregnancy and was elated with her decision to become a mother.

KM explained feeling like she lost herself after first giving birth. She stopped caring about her own basic needs, her appearance, socializing, and that which was once important to her. She shared a story of being in Target in the baby aisle and running into her sister. Her sister said, "I didn't recognize who you were. I had to take a double look and say, 'Wow, is that my sister?'" After her sister failed to recognize her in a public setting due to her change in appearance, Kinley's mom experienced a "wake-up call." She decided to take action to find herself again. She shared:

> …last year I lost my identity of who I was as a person to take care of my daughter. I didn't do my hair, I didn't care what I had on, I couldn't even tell you how I used to dress. I completely lost myself.

This experience caused KM to refocus on her identity and invest time into self-care.

While at FSU, KM rethought her academic purpose. She explained that she also lost a piece of her student identity after becoming a mother. She realized her focus was to graduate efficiently instead of pursuing an emphasis that may have been more time-consuming:

> Now that I'm a mom, it's just like, okay, you get your degree so you'll have something to stand for and then you'll be able to gain other things on the side….Once you're able to provide for her, then you can go back to school, so to me it kind of shift[ed] my direction from being in school to provide, making sure that I'm stable to provide for her. Instead of majoring in something specific now just like, how can I make it out of school faster so I can start working and provide for her. To me, it just kind of changed in the way like now when I go to class, you're going for your daughter; you're not going for you. As far as just studying, it's like, okay…you're following the path that is right for your daughter.

KM hoped to return to school later in life to specialize in a specific area of art in pursuit of a master's degree. Until then, she wanted to focus on completing her degree as swiftly as possible to begin a career to meet the needs of herself and her daughter.

Elizabeth (18, 1 child)

Elizabeth, the eighth and final student participant, was a freshman undecided major. She was the youngest college student mother in this study at 18 years old but her maturity surpassed her youth. She was warm, down to earth and open with her feelings about her college motherhood experiences. Elizabeth identified as African American and attended class full-time.

Elizabeth had her baby girl when she was still in high school at the age of 15; she was a sophomore and her child's father was a junior. While she was not in a romantic relationship with the father of her daughter at the time of this study, she was dating a man who has been in her child's life since she was born. Originally, Elizabeth was romantically connected with the father of her daughter, trying to make it work; she explained:

> We last[ed] three years. Things didn't work out. He started becoming very selfish…being just that teenage boy. He was going to do whatever he wants whenever he wants. I wasn't having it. You know, girls mature faster than boys. I gave him plenty of chances and it was like, "Okay. We just need to be co-parents. That's it."

When asked in the first interview, "What, if anything, has changed for you since becoming a student who is also a mother?" Elizabeth smiled as she explained all of the positive ways she had grown. She explained, "I learned my strength. Being able to juggle homework while a crying baby is crying over some teething problems." She also explained, "It's hard but you push through it. I have learned who I was because I love being a mother, even though I'm young, but that's my baby girl." She recognized that being a mother made her mature quicker:

> It actually just made me grow up faster. That's a pro and a con because sometimes I just want to be a teenager. I want to go out, but there's times when you just don't go out because you ain't got no babysitter.

Elizabeth's mention of a lack of child care was not unique. All eight participants explained their desire for more flexible child care, especially care available in the evenings, which is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Summary

These eight student mothers represent a diverse group of college students. They are all unmarried, represent African American (5), biracial (2) and White (1) backgrounds and identify with both the middle (4) and lower socioeconomic (4) statuses. Half of the participants began their academic journeys at FSU. The other half transferred from other universities and community colleges. Seven of the students attended college full-time, while only one of the participants was a part-time student. Additional detailed demographic information is provided in Table 1.

Five of the student mothers had their first/only child before beginning college, while three gave birth to their first/only child during college. Only one of the students in the study was in a romantic relationship with the father of her child, while the other seven students chose to be single, having noted negative reasons for this separation (discussed in Chapter 5). Three of the eight students described the father of their children being verbally abusive and as a result, those fathers only had "minor relationships" with the children. This relationship was challenging to manage since the fathers were infrequently present in the lives of their children.

Although it was not a formal question in my interview guide, three of the eight women reported their mothers passing away during their high school or college experience. The same participants discussed the impact this death had on them as daughters. Two participants talked about how their mothers' deaths caused them additional pain and suffering; and one (KM) sought counseling for her related depression. Khloe explained that she was initially worried about her ability to afford her child. A week after her mother's passing, Khloe learned that her mother had established a trust fund for her which drastically impacted her ability to care for her child and provided significant relief.

Six of the participants explained that their family members' or their own previous experiences caused them to know how to access resources within their hometown community and their campus community, as well as government assistance. Some of the participants had to use some of the same resources when they were children. Some of the students' mothers became pregnant as teenagers and learned how to access outside support including financial assistance, food support and low-income housing options. Three of the six students accessed these resources as children. This prior experience and knowledge of accessing resources actually

helped the students improve the situation for their small families. This concept of the positive impact of previous knowledge is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

Impact of Timing of Births on Academic Experience

Five of the participants had their first child before beginning college, while the three others gave birth during college. None of the participants dwelled upon the fact that their college experience was interrupted or, in some cases, delayed as a result of their pregnancy. In some instances, where the mothers were already college students, the babies were born between semesters or during breaks. This was the case for three of the participants: Krystal, KM, and Elizabeth. They gave birth during summer months and had no delay in their return to college. Krystal had her baby in July before her senior year. KM gave birth to her daughter in July and then transferred to FSU and began her first semester a few weeks later in August. Additionally, Elizabeth gave birth to a summer baby while she was in high school. As a result of the summer birth, her schooling was not interrupted.

For the students who had children during the school year, this disrupted their academic plans. Allison, who had both of her children in college, joked about being a college student for six years due to interruptions in her coursework and work commitments. She laughed as she explained:

> I haven't given up on school. I know in the day it seems like I don't spend that much time on school, but just not giving up, I think that's a big step because a lot of mothers would've given up. After six years? They would've given up. So I think that little effort, I know it's little, but it's really big to me.

While she did not recommend a break or a delay of education to raise children, she recognized her need to take extra time as a student so she could work full-time. As a result, she chose to become a part-time student, which delayed her degree progress.

Krystal explained that because of the timing of her child's birth of she was able to continue her studies without interruption:

> He was born in the summer, July 14th, which gave me about a month turnaround to recover and get back in the school mode. For him being born in the summer, that kind of influenced me to say, "Hey, there's no reason that I shouldn't keep going, to finish school. It's my senior year; I have to finish. There's no break for me; I can't take a break because I know if I do, I probably won't be very motivated to go back."

Krystal chose to move forward with her final year in college just one month after giving birth. Elizabeth also had her child in the summer and as a result did not have to interrupt her studies:

> Yeah, well, actually I was very lucky and blessed, because I had my baby as soon as I got out of school from my sophomore year [high school]. Over the summer I had her, then after 7 weeks I was done recovering and everything, and she was able to be put in day care as soon as I started school. That's why I didn't take no breaks. That was really lucky, because I know actually girls who do take a break; they have to, like, so much to make up, and they actually have to do summer school and everything. Since I had my baby in the summer, I was able to just keep going. I would not encourage a break, ever, becoming a mother, because you're just not gonna go. You're gonna be like, "I'd rather work."

Elizabeth felt fortunate to have a summer birth because the timing allowed her to continue on to school more easily.

Princess laughed as she explained how her mother pushed her to begin college after having her baby. While Princess was pregnant she was also enrolled in college and she did not succeed academically. She shared how her mother's advice really helped her:

> It was my mom who was mainly talking to me because she had me when she was in college, too. She had me when she was 19 so she was like, "It's not a game anymore.

> You already screwed up one of your school years; now you're already behind and now you're about to have a baby. You need to get yourself together and get on your stuff pretty much."
>
> It was just talking to her that was motivating me to change and do better. Because it's not that I wasn't smart or anything. I just told her after I graduated from high school I wanted to take a break…but she felt like because of my school ethic and work ethic and stuff, she was like, "If I let you take a year off I fear you won't go back." Then I'm like, "Well maybe I won't go back so let me just try it to get it out [of] the way." Then I ended up failing. I should have just listened to myself.

Princess also recognized the need to trust her instincts related to her academic role, considering the numerous responsibilities a mother has to balance, all while attending classes.

The timing of the birth of their child impacted the students in this study. In the situations where the baby was born during the summer months, the mother did not delay or interrupt her studies. For students whose children were born during a semester, the students' academic lives were impacted and, in some cases, delayed.

Embracing College Student Motherhood

All of the participants embraced motherhood and their role as college students and cared about their studies. They all reported feeling positive about their role as mothers. Additionally, when asked to describe motherhood, six out of eight students selected a word with positive connotations. Allison said motherhood is "inspiring" and Kinley's mom said it was "a blessing." Those six positive words (and phrases) include: *a journey*, *rewarding*, *exciting*, *networking*, *a blessing* and *a whole new world*. All of the women possessed a determination to finish their degree, which was directly related to their desire to improve the quality of life for their children. Their children motivated them and pushed them to thrive.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 provided descriptions and profiles of each of the eight participants from this study. These brief profiles offer a glimpse into the lived experiences of college student mothers. The descriptions demonstrate similarities and differences among the participants. Chapter 5 examines the specific themes which emerged for the women related to octopus mom, personal relationships, changing relationships during college, changes to self, and threats to persisting and engaging in college.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

This research study was guided by the following overarching research question: What are the lived experiences of college students who are mothers at one large, public Midwestern research university? In addition, the following three sub-questions further directed this process:

- In what ways, if any, do the students' relationships with their family members change throughout their college experience?
- What contributes to, and what prevents, women's ability to persist as college student mothers?
- How, if at all, does the students' sense of self change through their college experience as mothers?

The five primary findings garnered from this study are organized by these guiding research questions related to: (a) Octopus mom; (b) Personal relationships; (c) Changing relationships during college; (d) Changes to self; and (e) Threats to persisting and engaging in college. The following sections detail each of the three themes as illustrated by the student participants in this study.

Octopus Mom: Navigating College Motherhood

College students who are mothers consistently reported the numerous responsibilities, roles, and tasks they managed simultaneously. They were mothers, caregivers, students, friends,

employees, and home mangers all at the same time, and often with minimal support. One student, Krystal, described the way in which she juggled all of these roles as being an "octopus mom." Many of the students in this study referenced this method of life management (Krystal, Caitlyn, Queen, and Khloe) and described their approaches throughout the interview process. To succeed as college student mothers, the students in this study recognized the need to tackle each of the roles and responsibilities like that of an octopus: one task or role in each of their tentacles. Oftentimes, the student mothers had to balance different responsibilities at the same time. Sometimes they would do homework and clean at the same time. Other times, they would care for their child while reading a class assignment. Being an octopus mom was challenging but an important strategy.

Octopus Mom: Managing the Numerous Responsibilities of College Student Motherhood

Being an octopus mom was a strategy which empowered the student participants as they realized how they successfully balanced tasks and simultaneously achieved academically. When describing all her responsibilities, leadership roles, office work, school work and motherhood, Krystal said, "I feel like I'm an octopus with how many things I have to do with my hands and stuff." After attending to all of her homework and organizational meetings, she still had to go home and address numerous tasks. Krystal explained:

> I still have to cook for myself so I can eat. I still have to clean up. That aspect of my life I sometimes forget about, but I still have to clean, I still have to give him a bath, I still have to take a shower and then put him to bed and sometimes he takes longer to go to bed than others.

Krystal admitted to sometimes trying to feel like "Superwoman" and recognized the need to strategize by "just accepting help and asking for help when I need it."

Cailtyn also described herself as a superior multi-tasker. She understood that she sometimes needed to prioritize and eliminate tasks that were not as pressing. She shared scenarios where she cleaned and studied simultaneously:

> What can I do while I do a chore? If I'm vacuuming, I can hold my laptop and read an article, and I can lay it on a surface and highlight it while I'm ...I'm not joking, I'll stick it on the top of the couch and highlight it while I'm vacuuming the floor.

Caitlyn definitely embodied the octopus mom persona and successfully balanced her motherhood and college student roles.

Khloe used the term "robot" to describe how she managed multiple tasks. She laughed as she described an interaction she had with her supervisor earlier that semester. He stood with her at work and, in awe of her ability to stay focused and balance her duties with a maturity unlike that of her undergraduate peers, he told her that she was a "robot." Her boss meant this term as a compliment regarding the way she conducted herself professionally. She was orderly, efficient, and excellent at time management.

The following section describes in detail the numerous ways in which students used their octopus mom role throughout motherhood and their academics. The main subthemes which support this mindset are: time management, child care, attitudes of success, access to resources, and focus and motivation. The student mothers in this study had to manage all these different areas of their lives and maintain an "I can do it all" attitude in order to face the daily responsibilities of their multiple roles.

Time Management: An Essential Tentacle for Octopus Moms

A significant portion of being an octopus mom was excelling at time management. The students in this study all reported planning out their weeks with minute details and meticulous daily schedules. The students all thoroughly described what a typical day was like for them. They provided detailed accounts of the time of day they awoke, when they showered, how they prepared their child(ren) for the day, their commute to day care, the time at which they headed to work or class, when they left work or class, the process of picking up their child(ren) from day care, meal preparation, bedtime for the child(ren) and finally, homework. It was evident that excellent time management and organizational skills were critical strategies in the lives of college students who are mothers.

Caitlyn admitted that she attempted to be incredibly organized with her assignments, household tasks, and personal errands but sometimes real-life situations prevented formal planning from coming to fruition:

> I like to take pride in my work, so I want to make sure I can allot the time. Then I go through and I write out all the readings. I look at how long that's going to take, how many hours I should spend studying, when I can fit them into my schedule. Then I draft a rough schedule for the semester, based on my availability. What I can do when, where I can fit what, any free time I have, what I can use it for.
>
> I try every semester to put together a shopping day, a laundry day, and it never works out, ever. I haven't done laundry in three weeks. My poor son is wearing army pants and a striped polo to school. He looks homeless. It's fine. We'll do laundry tomorrow.

While an incredible planner, Caitlyn sometimes had to be flexible with her schedule and recognized the need to focus on her children instead of caring about matching the clothes they wore to school.

Princess, like all her peers in this study, had each day planned out by the hour in order to keep her child on a schedule and accomplish the most with her precious time:

> It's like my life is on a schedule pretty much for the most part because I have to have him in a routine so he can know when to go to sleep and stuff. Everything is like boom, boom, boom, boom. It's not a lot of time just to relax and chill and just go with the flow type of thing like I used to. Everything just has a certain spot, pretty much.

Understanding the time management skills these students use to strategize their days might suggest that students are less likely to attempt to access resources, programs, and services on campus or in the community unless they are truly needed. College students who are mothers do not have any time to waste. Providing efficient services at convenient times could better support this student population's transition through college.

Child Care: A Critical Resource for College Student Mothers

A critical piece of the octopus mom concept was juggling child care. Seven student participants had steady child care, but one student had to schedule her academic life within the confines of her friends' schedules. These friends provided the care the student could not access due to financial constraints and/or availability of services.

All of the students, regardless of their access to regular child care, reported needing more flexible options and needing assistance during hours not included with formal child care options. Participants shared that they would prefer to use the child care facility on campus; however, there were a limited number of spaces for children of students. Of the eight participants, three were able to secure child care through the on-campus facility. For the most part, students who used the facility shared positive experiences regarding the quality of care their children received. However, the center had limited hours of operation. Queen shared that, because she did not have

access to evening or weekend child care, she was limited in regards to further engaging with the campus community.

Queen also befriended several of the students who worked at the campus child care (CCC) facility, stating:

> I would say that my friends come from CCC. These are the people that I have entrusted to care for my children while I attend classes, so I think it's a good idea to establish that type of relationship between them, between me and them. I maybe have two of them who I see outside of daycare, but it was just out of convenience that we became friends. I see them every day. There's no use in just saying hi and bye. My kids know them. I know them. It just works with all parties involved.

Queen's child care provider not only supported the development of her children and allowed her to attend class, but also enabled her to form meaningful connections with her peers.

The child care facility KM used off-campus came to her rescue when she was most distressed about finances. They provided her with a paid position to support her through her collegiate mother journey. She explained:

> They [child care staff members] were like..., "Let's make a job for you…. What's your schedule; how can we work with you? Be a door monitor; that way you can do your homework," and I was like, "This is so perfect…." I didn't know if I was going to be able to keep her in daycare as well because I couldn't afford it. That went on for quite a while so that first month it was, every time I went to class all I could do was worry and not pay attention in class and so after that is like, now—just—stress is trying to get my work, catch up, and just everything like my grades, trying to make sure they're in order.

Presumably, the child care staff were invested in KM's college success. By creating a position for her, they enabled her to support her child but also allowed her to attend college. They supported her through employment designed to meet the needs of her demanding schedule.

All the participants relied on child care in some form and, depending on classroom availability and finances, either used the facility at FSU, one of several options within the community where they resided, or family and friends helped.

In addition to immediate family, some students relied upon extended family to assist them in providing childcare. For instance, Krystal's cousin, who was also a student at FSU, assisted her in watching her son while she was in class and at work. She stated:

> I rely most on just my friends, to be honest. I don't think I'm eligible, but I'm not able to get him into campus childcare, so he's not in daycare at all, and so I definitely rely on my friends to just say, "Hey, I'll take him at this time when you need it." My cousin, actually, we worked our schedules together so that she could watch him Monday, Wednesday, and she has class Tuesday, Thursday, so we actually put our schedules together so that she could watch him during those days. It used to be I would have people here and there, my friends watching him while I worked, but it just got too sketchy, and it's not their fault, but sometimes they would have something to do that didn't work out with my work schedule, and I would have to call off, and I was just calling off too much and they were going to fire me anyway, so I quit, but I just rely on my friends.

While friends often expressed an interest in helping out, participants, like Krystal, found that friends were not always reliable sources of child care but managed to attend class and be involved on campus despite the challenge. Access to child care contributed to the students' need to be an octopus mom.

Attitude of Success: "No pity, please; my child is not a crutch"

Participants discussed possessing an attitude of "no pity, please" and children are "not a crutch." The participants did not want their peers or their professors to pity them for having children, nor did they ever want to use their child as an excuse for any special treatment in the

classroom. College students who are mothers reported how these attitudes impacted the experience by embracing these mindsets. In some cases, these strategies fueled their fire to succeed as students and as mothers.

Students shared not wanting to be pitied due to their status as a college student mother. Participants shared that they would often receive comments from peers, strangers, administrators, and faculty indicating that they were "sorry" to hear that the participant was a college mother. Princess shared, "It's not like our lives are horrible or anything like that." While participants wanted understanding from peers, faculty, and administrators, they were not looking for pity.

Participants often felt patronized by others who made statements such as, "I could never do that" or "It must be so difficult." For instance, Krystal stated:

> Also, I know people, they probably don't mean it in any type of way, but I've had people say, "Oh, I could never do that if I were in your position. I could never do that. That must be so difficult." Letting them understand. Yeah, it's difficult, but if you're forced to do something, you're probably going to make changes. You don't have to make…comments like that.

Krystal found comments like these unsupportive as well as inaccurate. She loved her son and did not see him as the burden that others did.

Similarly, Caitlyn shared she wished her childless peers understood how to be more supportive of their peers with children. She indicated:

> I wish they would know that their "I don't know how you do it" is not empowering. It doesn't make me feel good. It makes me so frustrated to be looked at with sympathy. This is my best accomplishment. I'm going to school full-time. I'm taking 18 credit hours, and I'm kicking ass. I'm going to get all As this semester, and my kids are...My son's two and a half. His linguistic proficiency is that of a three-and--a-half-year-old, almost four-year-old. My daughter, her Lexile level is at the second-grade level, and she's in kindergarten. I'm working my ass off to make all of this happen, and I don't know how I do it, but it doesn't make me feel good when you sit there and say, "Ugh, I

> have to work full-time. I can't even imagine what you're going through." That's not empathy, and I didn't ask for you to demean my lifestyle. I also think that it's frustrating.

Caitlyn wished that her childless peers had a better understanding of the effort, skills, and planning college students with children had to possess in order to succeed both academically and as parents. The students in this study wished their peers and university faculty and staff were aware of the accomplishments of college students who are mothers both in the classroom and in their campus leadership roles.

A similar subtheme which frequented the discussion revolved around the idea that being a mother in college and having children was not a crutch. The students specifically discussed appreciating flexibility in the classroom when a child became ill, or a doctor's appointment interfered with their learning. They reported never wanting their child to be an excuse for sub-par academic performance. Queen explained that she rarely revealed to her professors that she was a mother:

> I'm never usually open about being a mother, because I don't want to use that as a crutch. I don't want people to think, "Oh, she's a mom. She can't do that. Oh, she's a mom, she can't do this," or things of that nature. It's more of I just want them to understand my situation.

Queen wanted her professors and peers to know her as a student before knowing her as a mother, for fear of judgment.

Participants discussed developing strategies to cope with college, as they did not want people to perceive their success or lack of success as a result of being a college mother. As Allison stated, "Being a mom is not an excuse on why you can't turn in your homework." Similarly, Princess shared:

> At first, [going to college] was a little overwhelming because it was all the work and then, of course, him. So I just had to find that balance because I didn't want to use him as an excuse for why I didn't get anything done, or as a crutch for why I didn't get anything done. I just was like, "“This is what has to be done, so this is what you're going to do." I had to figure out a schedule for us so I could get my homework done. I'm more disciplined now.

Princess realized that she needed to be more disciplined and organized in order to manage being both a college student and a mother.

While participants shared they did not want to use their children as a "crutch," they did wish their professors better understood the challenges of being a college mother. Allison said, "I just wish they knew how hard it was. I wish they had some kind of compassion. Compassion goes a long way, and understanding." Allison perceived that some people treated her as if she deserved to have a difficult time in college because of the choice to have a child. She stated:

> A lot of people have it in their mind that it's a decision that we made, so we're stuck with it. We have to press through, jump through the hoops, because we made the bad decision. It's just compassion. It's hard to say. You don't want them to give you more time on assignments, or stuff like that. It's that double standard. You don't want to be treated special, and people think it's unfair because you're getting more time. People will say, "It's not my fault they opened up their legs and made the bad decision."

Allison's perception of people's attitudes towards young college mothers contributed to her desire to prove to others that she could accomplish academic life and home life without any excuses. Creating flexible options for students, when appropriate, was certainly appreciated by the participants in this study. However, it is clear that students were concerned that their childless peers would interpret accommodations as unfair and special treatment.

Access to Resources: Local, Campus and Community-based

Participants identified important college-based and community-based resources that supported their ability to be a college student and a mother. Campus-based resources included: a student organization for students with children, the counseling center, child care, Off-Campus and Non-Traditional Student Services, tutoring, mentoring programs, academic advising, and the library (the children's book section). Some referenced resources linked specifically to their peer group when discussing support mechanisms, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Participants also identified important community-based resources and prior knowledge to resources as important. Access to, knowledge of, and use of these resources were important factors contributing to the notion of the octopus mom. Additionally, time spent locating and accessing these services were also involved.

All eight student participants reported accessing several resources from the greater community and government. These resources helped provide healthcare, food, and motherhood coaching. The community and government resources accessed by the participants included: the Illinois Link card, WIC, SNAP, TANF, 4 C and Medicaid (discussed in fuller detail later in this chapter). A specific resource found in the literature review and in one specific interview was the use of a doula. Khloe used a doula when she was in high school and explained the benefits of this unique program:

> When she was first born, I was in Chicago. WIC has a program that...Well, actually, I was with it before I was pregnant and it's all the way through when they're six weeks [old]. They supplied a doula, which is like support help. They're with you through the whole thing, labor and everything. They gave me a playpen. They gave me diapers. They gave me pretty much anything that was needed. It's a nonprofit organization. I still talk to her now to this day. She's pretty helpful, especially with mother tips.

Using these resources allowed the student to receive the care she and her family needed. The community and government resources also provided greater access to food and other necessities, which further aided their navigation of motherhood. Accessing this resource eased some of Khloe's worry about finances because of the items provided. The doula guided her motherhood journey, which allowed Khloe to focus additionally on her academic career instead of being solely focused on learning how to be a mother on her own.

Children Provide Focus and Motivation for Education

Focus and motivation worked alongside the students' time management as they embodied the octopus mom. An overwhelmingly strong theme for the students who participated in this study was their focus and motivation. Every participant discussed motivation throughout the interview process. They talked about their motivation to succeed in college, to earn a degree, to graduate and, in some cases, to begin a Master's program. For instance, in talking about her daughter, KM shared, "She makes me feel like I can do anything in the world….She's my motivation, she's just everything." For the student participants, their child(ren) served as their most important reason to succeed in college.

Participants also shared stories about how they did everything they did in college for the betterment of their children's lives. For example, Princess expressed that she wanted to provide for her son, which motivated her to do better in school. She shared:

> He's my main motivation for school. My grades now are better than they've been in a long time. They've been better than when I first…went to college, because they were good in high school but when I first went to college I did really bad and it's a complete turnaround because it's like, I know I have to support him and be there for him and stuff and there's certain things that I want him to have that are expensive and I know I have to

> pay for it. I know he's completely my responsibility, so it just makes me want to do better in school and be a better person and stuff so he can have everything he wants to have and that I want for him.

Like Princess, participants expressed a desire to earn a better living so that they could provide for their families.

Their children were not their only motivation. Fellow college mothers served as both motivation and inspiration for the participants. Allison shared:

> They're [other college mothers] just walking proof that you can make it. If a person that has challenges, or taking care of a kid while trying to go to class and work, to support another—if they can do it, a person without a kid can do it. It just shows, if you have the determination and the mindset, the focus, you can do it. I think I've seen one girl that had 4 kids on campus. I'm just like, "How do you do it?" She said, "It's about support system, and it's about determination." You have to make a support system. You have to find resources. The only person that is going to make it is you. If you want it that bad, you will make it happen. I think they're a big motivation to the college.

Allison was keenly aware of the focus and determination she and her peers who were college student mothers generally have on their path to success.

Being a mother and college student was challenging; however, participants shared that their children motivated them to stay in school. For instance, Elizabeth shared that "motherhood is stressful" and considered dropping out. When feeling overwhelmed by her numerous responsibilities, she explained:

> It's just keeping up with making sure that I was taking care of myself and then also staying on top of school. It was about maybe a month in already, Sarah was getting good news from her teacher….I was so happy about that, but I was still trying to fight this urge to just quit. I didn't want to be here [in college]. Every time I looked at her, she was always the one who [was] like, "You've got to stay here because you didn't come here for nothing."

Regarding navigating motherhood and being a college student, Elizabeth stated, “It’s a balance… but it’s also hard to just keep yourself motivated.” While the women desired a degree, it was an ongoing challenge to stay motivated as students.

As previously discussed, Krystal was an actively engaged student at FSU and as a result, her son was as well. Krystal explained that while she was always a motivated person, her son certainly fueled her desire to further her campus engagement:

> The only way that he impacts it is that there’s a little more drive to be successful because I just want him to have a really great life, a great childhood, and things like that. He hasn’t made me say, “Oh, this is what I want to do,” because I’ve always wanted to do it, but he’s just pushed me more like, “Hey, you need to be doing this, this, and this so that you can reach your goal.”

Krystal’s son provided an additional push to succeed during college.

Motivation played a critical role in the success of college students who are mothers. For many of the participants, their children were the main motivating factor in their reason for earning a college degree. Motivation was an ongoing need throughout the course of the mother’s college career. Maintaining the motivation was an important factor which helped them persist and served as a factor in their octopus mom strategy

The metaphor *octopus mom* involved several different ideas, concepts, resources, attitudes, and strategies. The octopus mothers in this study navigated their experiences with multiple tentacles, each grabbing on to things along the way to help with their persistence and success as mothers and as college students. The octopus moms in this study juggled time management, an attitude of success, the ability to provide child care, access to several different resources, and focus and motivation. The students balanced all these components while attending school and caring for their children.

Personal Relationships Provided Emotional and Logistical Support of College Students Who are Mothers

Personal relationships were important resources for college student mothers. In some cases, their family members played a critical role in their success; in others, their friends and their neighbors assisted them. The participants also shared many stories related to the impact of positive interactions and relationships with faculty members (as described previously) as well as departments on campus aimed at supporting non-traditional students. Personal relationships were an important aspect of the participants' college experience as they moved through FSU.

In general, the student participants did not spend much of their time socializing. In identifying their peer group, the vast majority of their friends were fellow student mothers at FSU. Six of the eight participants established relationships with other mothers through the student organization dedicated to college parents on campus. Krystal explained:

> I think definitely going to College Parents Group actually impacts me as a student mother just because coming here I felt like I couldn't relate to people. All my friends don't have kids. People I know don't have kids. My peers. Sorry. My peers, and so once I found out about the group and I went there, it's made me more comfortable to consider myself...Obviously, I am a student mother, but it's made me more comfortable and…open so that even if my son is not with me and I'm talking to someone, I'm more open about saying, "Hey, I have a son. He's this old. Here are pictures."
>
> I'm more comfortable doing that just because, in that setting, it's not just parents. People who support parents who have kids also can come.

Krystal relied on the CPG for support and felt connected to her peers in this organization. Her positive experiences regarding her sense of belonging were shared by her peers in this study, as five of the women formally joined the organization and developed meaningful connections.

Others in the study relied on their friends with children who resided in the same campus housing complex. The university-managed facility housed was a high concentration of student parents (one of the goals of the complex), and the residents relied on each other for child care and support. Krystal stated:

> My next-door neighbor, she's pretty close to me, and she's always, "Hey, you ever need me to take him, I'll take him." I actually drop him off there a lot just because it's convenient. I don't have to take him out of the house, per se. They watch him, they're like, "Hey, you look like you need some rest. I'll just take him." I'm like, "Oh my goodness, you guys are amazing." When I'm trying to do homework, my friend will just come over and be like, "Hey, I'll take him for an hour." I'm like, "You guys are just amazing." I have a huge group of friends that are always like, "Hey, I'll just take him if you need it."

Krystal relied heavily on her peers, who readily offered their support and child care.

Although Princess resided in the family-friend housing option at the university, she described her peer group as people she knew from high school. All of the college students with whom she interacted, were those with whom she had attended high school:

> Well, I hang out with my friend Aaron, but that's because I've known him since he was a little kid. We went to high school together. I met him when he just graduated eighth grade. I was already in high school. He's two years behind me. I hang out with him the most because I know him. Then it's my friend Zykia. Me and her graduated from high school together, so we have history as well. Then I have my friend Corey. We went to high school together. He's two years younger than me too. He's Aaron's roommate. I really didn't talk to him in high school, but obviously since we're here now it's like we talk more since they are roommates and he's always around.

For Princess, a sense of familiarity was important for her relating to college friendships. As a result, she chose to reestablish or further develop friendships from high school.

For most of the women in this study, personal relationships were important. For some, new friendships were created throughout their college career. Some of the participants made friends with other peers with children through campus resources and student organizations. For

other participants, spending time with their family members in the campus community was important. Lastly, for one student, her high school relationships remained essential. For all the students, these personal relationships helped aid in their navigation and persistence in college. Additionally, these relationships helped them raise their children.

The College Parent's Group: A Vital Student Organization and Campus Resource

Many of the participants also shared their positive experiences with a student organization at FSU designed specifically for college student parents. This student organization provided their members with social and educational opportunities. Additionally, the children of the student members are invited to the meetings and campus events, making involvement with the organization easier for college student parents. The students in this study viewed this organization more as a support system and a resource than a way to be involved on campus (which is explained further later in this chapter). KM explained, "The people I hang out with are the girls in the college parent group and that's because I can relate to them by just having encouragement." Krystal shared similar feelings:

> Definitely going to College Parents Group actually impacts me as a student mother just because coming here I felt like I couldn't relate to people….Once I found out about the group and I went there…it's made me more comfortable.

This particular club was referenced by six of the participants as impacting their peer group, college experience, and support.

As noted previously, the students who joined an organization on campus aimed at supporting college student parents did so, not as a way to get involved or for leadership opportunities, but rather to access resources and support. Five participants discussed regularly

attending meetings and being very involved in the group. Participating in the College Parent Group was an important way for them to connect with peers with children.

KM shared that while she was in numerous clubs and organizations in high school, she only had the time to commit to the College Parents' Group at FSU. Prior to getting pregnant, KM attended another college where she indicated having "a lot of friends." After having her baby and transferring to FSU, she stated:

> Granted I don't have many friends here…it's not really many people I can like, okay, let's go study, let's go make sure we have this taken care of. I say that but on the other hand, I am involved in College Parents' Group where it's different parents meet every Tuesday and everything like that and the kids can come. [My child's] involved on campus now and things like that.

KM invested her limited time into this resource and valued her daughter's involvement as a benefit as well.

When asked about her experience on campus, Khloe noted her desire to serve in a future leadership capacity within the organization. She explained:

> I am part of an organization called College Parent Group. I was going to be VP this year, but homework, I had to decide between planning a schedule for the group and doing homework. I figured that out the day before I had to have the schedule made, but I am a part of it though.

Khloe's interest in the group was evident. Despite her hectic schedule and academic responsibilities, she made time to get involved with this organization as a way to connect with her peers and access a valuable resource.

Despite this significant number of student members connected with this student organization, seven of the eight participants said they could not be involved at FSU due to a lack

of time. While students were involved in the college parents group, they identified their involvement as a way to gain support rather than a mechanism for getting involved at FSU.

Krystal, the outlier in the participant group, was incredibly involved on campus. She served in a number of different leadership roles, was a member of five different organizations, and participated in conferences and other professional development offerings at FSU. She communicated clearly that she never wanted to stop her involvement due to her role as a mother. She did not want her child to ever think that he prevented her from doing anything. She also wanted to demonstrate to him that he could do anything as well. She shared:

> He's definitely influenced my aspirations as far as he makes me just want to finish on time just because I don't want to....In the future, I don't want to have to look…in his face and say that I didn't do something because of you. It's not your fault that you're here, it's not your fault [due to] my mistakes and having to be in this position. I don't want to tell him, like, "Oh, yeah, I didn't finish college because I had a baby or I didn't join this organization because I had a baby." That's unacceptable to me and I refuse to tell him that. That's kind of how he's influenced me to keep going and go on to law school and go on to whatever else I decide to do.

This highly involved student leader was determined to teach her child that he could do anything.

Krystal explained the great value of being involved and the reason she was incredibly determined to remain engaged:

> It's just given me a more positive outlook on my whole situation, seeing the silver lining in it. Although I do have a kid, it's still possible to attend class because there are other mothers who do it. It's still possible to be in organizations because there are other mothers who do it. It's possible to have friends and still have "me" time and still have fun because there are other mothers who do it. It's made my college experience better in a way, even better than when I didn't have a kid.

For Krystal, student involvement was an important part of her college motherhood experience.

Additionally, Krystal viewed involvement as a healthy way to interact with her peers and for her son to grow socially. She shared:

> I choose to be involved because I feel as though ... I feel as though if I were to be stuck at home just going to class and going home, that's a miserable life to me. I'm not getting to meet new people. I'm not being social. I'm just stuck. Although I love my son very much, I'm just stuck. We're stuck just looking at each other. It's a good therapy for me, but also for him, as well, to be surrounded by different people and know how to interact around people. Sometimes, kids are so scared of anyone but their parents, and he will smile and laugh with anybody.

Krystal wished to provide her son with social interaction as a means to allow him to grow and develop and as a strategy to feel good about being a college student mother. She also understood the positive impact campus involvement had on her college experience:

> I think that's part of me getting him out and joining different organizations to meet people and to bring him around those people and getting him comfortable around everyone and also for my own peace of mind, just because I don't want to be stuck at home staring at a wall, looking at my baby, just thinking I can't do anything because I have a baby, and that's absolutely not the case. I also go out to organizations because I want to be involved and I don't want to leave college and say, "I didn't do something because I had a son." That's not fair to him and that's not an acceptable excuse for me to ever say to him that, "Oh, I didn't join RHA because I had a baby. I didn't run to be on the eboard because I had a baby. I didn't run in special elections because I had a baby." That's unacceptable to me.

Krystal was strategic with her involvement, as it allowed her son to interact with her peers and allowed her to have her own outlet as a college student. She constantly demonstrated to her son that he could do anything he wished and she did not settle for any excuses pertaining to her role as a mother. For Krystal, involvement was an essential component in her college experience, but for most of the women, it simply was not a priority. Instead, it was viewed as a support mechanism.

Off-Campus and Non-Traditional Student Services (OCNTSS): A Formal Connection to Campus

OCNTSS, a campus resource designed to support non-traditional students and those who reside in off-campus housing, was also identified as a resource where student mothers connected with peers and received help. OCNTSS served as a formal connection to campus for the student participants. When Allison attended classes on campus (versus only taking online options), she was incredibly connected to the staff in that department:

> They've helped a lot; I've gotten a lot of work done in this town. Like, you know, rushing to print a paper, and I didn't have any money to print it, I could print there, fax there and I don't have enough time to look for what's going on on campus or anything so I sit there and listen to them and they tell me and update me.

OCNTSS provided both technical support such as a place to print, but also a comfortable place to hang out in between classes. Additionally, informal interactions with staff provided her with updates about campus events and information.

Allison's experience was not unique, as Khloe also referenced the support of OCNTSS. She shared, "Here I have a peer mentor that's a student mother herself." Khloe was assigned to her peer mentor through OCNTSS. They meet regularly and have become "best friends." This formal connection to the department provided her with a mentor, which developed into a meaningful friendship. This mentoring relationship provided Khloe with guidance, support, encouragement, and a formal connection to campus. This type of campus resource can help better connect college students who are mothers with peers and enhanced support.

Family Support Varies and has Potential of Significant Impact

Family was reportedly an important support structure for many of the participants in this study. In some instances, the students shared the significant impact their families had on their motherhood journey. For these participants, family was typically described as their mother and/or father but in some cases it extended to include the mother and/or father of the child's father, aunts and uncles, brothers, sisters, and cousins. Princess described a large and supportive family system:

> Well, it's my mom, my step-dad, my real dad, my aunties, and my grandparents. Then it's my best friend who's his godmother, her parents and her sisters. Then his dad's side of the family is super supportive, too. I have a pretty strong support system.

Princess was quite fortunate to have an extended family support system and she relied on them when it was necessary.

Family members demonstrated their support in a variety of ways for each of the participants. Some showed their support by simply being a source of positivity when the mothers first learned of their pregnancy or when they first gave birth. Others supported the student mother by coaching them on motherhood, on how to manage numerous responsibilities, and on how to access financial resources. Still other family members supported the students by providing child care, or encouraging the mother to socialize with friends and watching the child for an evening.

Of the eight participants, only two students reported receiving financial support from their families. One family, in particular, provided financial assistance to the young mother and consistently helped by buying baby supplies. Princess shared:

> She [her aunt] bought me a month's supply of diapers, wipes, all that stuff. Anything that I need help with, they'll be like, "Just let us know and we'll do it for you." I typically do everything by myself, though…I really only call them in case of emergency.

Princess did not wish to rely on her mother's and aunt's financial support regularly but when needed, she appreciated their assistance.

Elizabeth explained that her main source of support while at college was her brother: "Yeah, it's just me and him really to lean on each other when things do get tough." Due to his intense work schedule, she could not rely on him for child care, but he was a solid support structure otherwise and provided guidance, help, and emotional support. This support allowed Elizabeth to experience college student motherhood with a family member instead of on her own. The family support varied greatly from student to student but when it was present, it was recognized by each of the participants as positively impacting their experience. This family support allowed the students to juggle many tasks, be engaged academically, and be involved on campus.

Seven participants indicated that previous knowledge about accessing specific community and governmental resources prior to college aided in their ability to access resources in college. This previous exposure to resources saved the women time and energy, as they already knew how to access them instead of having to search for their existence. Three of the eight participants discussed growing up using food stamps and other government services. Elizabeth shared:

> I came from a struggled [*sic*] home…I was raised off of Link when she [her mother] didn't have anything [i.e., money], so I knew that resource from a little child. I knew, even the high school I came from, [public girls' academy], they actually provide[d] a lot of resources, in that sort because a lot of girls are actually on their own at the age of 16.

> They [the high school staff and teachers] try to help any way possible to have somebody stay in school, for one. I don't know, Chicago, I see the struggle. I've got family members in Section 8 [low-income housing], and Link cards and everything, so I just know about it. I knew some of them [resources] would help me.

Because of Elizabeth's prior experience using these same resources as a child, she had greater ease in locating and applying for them as an adult. This greater ease meant that instead of having to research which resources existed and how to identify them, she only had to learn how to apply for them and begin using them upon approval.

Students discussed needing to understand how to access community-based and government-supported resources, such as: the Illinois Link card (a debit card used for food stamp benefits), WIC (Women, Infants and Children; food assistance program), SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) (Illinois Department of Human Services, 2017), 4 C (Community Coordinated Child Care), and Medicaid (health coverage). Allison listed many different resources she accessed throughout her college student motherhood journey. She used "WIC; it's a program called Women and Children and LINK, public aid." She explained that "They help a lot. TANF helps." She said:

> TANF is a program where you can get money…okay, so I don't get money from…their father. So what the government does is they give me a little and then, they give me, like, $400 a month. And then what happens is the father has to pay that money back to the government.

While Allison accessed campus resources, these community and government-supported resources were critical to her success. The women in this study needed to understand how to receive services from multiple agencies, and prior knowledge assisted with their ability to know how to search for and apply for these opportunities.

Of the eight participants, five indicated that their mother or their child's father's mother accessed the same types of assistance as previous young mothers. Princess explained that her mother had her when she was a college student herself. Her mother therefore shared a lot of important advice with Princess when she entered FSU. Princess admitted that finding certain resources is not always easy. She said:

> It's more like you have to look for it [resources], which isn't a big deal, but luckily I just had my mom who knew everything that was going on so she knew, "You need to look up what schools have family housing. You need to see what type of child care assistance they have. You need to switch it over. You need to find a WIC office." She was just giving me lists of stuff to do so I could transition smoothly out here, and it worked.

The mothers in the lives of the student participants provided important information to the students regarding parenthood and accessing government services. This knowledge aided in the students' ability to access resources with greater ease.

Khloe also had similar experiences relying on the knowledge of family members and personal previous opportunities to access resources. She shared how helpful her boyfriend's mother and her own father were in teaching her about resources. She explained:

> Her [Brandi's] father's mom, and me and my dad, were on some of the services when I used to live with him. I was kind of aware of it too…. I went to WIC, and how I found a doula, I would ask, "Is there any more resources?" I'd just listen to everything they [family members and agency representatives] said, and all the things that they offered. I just kept an open ear, pretty much.

The students who had previous experience accessing resources or those with parents who had first-hand knowledge of these resources were more easily able to apply for them. In these instances, the students did not need to research which resources existed; instead, they focused their time and energy in applying for the resources of which they were aware.

In addition to learning how to utilize community and government resources for themselves, participants also discussed assisting others in understanding what supports were available to them. Elizabeth shared that after learning how to identify these resources and how to live like a "mature adult," she did her best to mentor others. She took time to teach follow student mothers and peers without children how to access support and basic life skills:

> I think it [college student motherhood] made me be more of a helper too because I see what some people go through. I had a good support system and everything at home at first, but now that I'm getting older…I don't depend [on] or ask my mom that much. I go through my own struggle. I don't try to bring her into everything. When I see somebody struggling, I'm either giving them clothes or extra food I have. I try to help somebody who actually need[s] ... Regardless if they have a baby or not, because some people, like, individuals, they have found out some people don't know about what's out there. I came across one girl; she said, "I never had a job in my life." I'm like, really? I'm like, "It's okay. I'll help you. It's okay." I remember how I felt when I was in a ... Never had a job. Never knew how to do something and everybody just stare[s] at you like, "Why you don't know this?" No. That's almost the worst feeling sometimes.

Elizabeth recognized her peers struggling and shared her knowledge of resources with them to help ease their stress.

Community and government resources were significantly helpful for the student participants in navigating student motherhood. The students' previous knowledge allowed them to access these systems with even greater ease. Acknowledging that all students who are mothers do not share this previous life experience or knowledge informs educators there is a need to provide guidance and training in accessing these resources.

Single by Choice

Most of the students in this study actively chose not to engage with the father of their child(ren) because the fathers were not adequate or reliable sources of support. The student

mothers intentionally disengaged from their relationships because the men were unreliable, did not provide financial support, were unhelpful, and did not have a consistent presence with the children. In some cases, strangers were more helpful and supportive to the students, including staff members from campus resource centers, counselors, and community-based staff. Seven of the students in this study were single by choice.

All the participants in this study were unmarried, and six described their relationship status as "single." Only one participant, Khloe, was in a romantic relationship with the father of her child. The participants discussed being single was a choice and a strategy to navigate college motherhood. Most of the women identified the fathers of their children as being unsupportive both financially and emotionally to them and their children. Because of this, they often choose to end relationships with these men and avoided starting new relationships with other men.

Participants stated that the fathers of their children often prevented them from having college and personal success. Elizabeth explained that while she and the father of her child "lasted three years," the relationship did not work out. She said, "He wasn't mature enough. He was a teenage boy." Elizabeth shared:

> At first, he was very immature about the whole situation with the baby. He knew that he had to take care of her, but he did not know how to be a father, so it was me. I'm buying Pampers, I'm doing milk, I'm getting clothes, making sure she's in school, making sure she have paperwork for school and everything. I was doing that all on my own.

After attempting to make the relationship work for quite some time, Elizabeth realized that he was not mature enough to be a parent or a partner. Because of his failure to engage as a father, Elizabeth ended the relationship, choosing single parenthood.

Several women discussed the fathers of their children not making time and showing a lack of interest in being parents. While the women tried to maintain a relationship with the

father so that the children remained connected, the women chose to not to be romantically tied to the father. Caitlyn discussed the lengths to which she went to involve the father of her children in their lives despite their lack of a romantic relationship:

> It was, I think, February, and my daughter just started noticing ... They're learning how to spell words, and she learns how to spell "Dad," but now she doesn't have anything to connect to it. They have family pictures up, but hers only has me and her brother. He'd been out of their lives for almost a year at that point. She started having a breakdown, and I tried to preserve his integrity by telling her that he was working on becoming a better father, becoming somebody that she could be proud of and that could take care of her.
>
> I started thinking about the implications that that's having on my relationship with her, the amount of blame that I'm getting. She just broke down and started bawling her eyes out one day, and it was for a half an hour. She was, "Why don't I see Daddy? Why don't I have a Daddy? Why doesn't my Daddy want to see me?" It was like, you know what? I'll reach out to him and see what his interest is as far as starting with phone calls.

Caitlyn realized the impact the father's absence had on her children and the blame she experienced as a result. She still chose to be single but wanted her children to have a father. She continued and explained:

> I reached out. He seemed super excited about it. He made the first one [planned visit]. Then he started telling me that it was inconvenient, that he couldn't make time for it, he couldn't do Face Times, because he couldn't...which is so silly because he smokes. He walks outside for a smoke break, ten minutes, at least four or five times a day. He smokes a pack a day. He could make time to do that, but he couldn't call because his new girlfriend feels threatened by his children and his development of a relationship with them. I have no interest in any sort of relationship with him. I've had a restraining order on him. I love him. I'm not in love with him, and I don't see any value in integration of his human into my dynamic, especially the one that I've built since I moved out….

The father of Caitlyn's children demonstrated his inability to be reliable, dependable and involved with the lives of their children. Despite giving him opportunities to be connected, the father grew more distant from the children. Caitlyn shared:

> He started missing phone calls. They started getting shorter and shorter. He couldn't make it. Finally, he missed my son's second birthday. He didn't call him, anything,

> didn't hear from him at all. Because he had time constraints, he could only call them between the time he got off of work and the time he got home, but sometimes he just had to smoke, chain smoke, so he couldn't talk to them then. I told him that he needed to straighten it up, and he was like, "You know what? Because it's not a presence thing. It's because I don't get to see them, it's like a disconnect." I was like, "Okay, well, maybe we can start visitation."
>
> It was designed to be once a week...or once every other week for four hours, or I would provide him with additional dates, like last minute, just in case he could make it, if they're important or something. He made my daughter's graduation, which she struggled so hard with, because she kept telling me she didn't want him to come, she didn't want him to come. Then she told one of her teachers that she didn't want him to come because she was afraid that he wasn't going to. He came, thank goodness.
>
> He made additional visitation dates, and he missed 100% of the ones that he made. I had to say "I don't know where he is." Then he missed six out of eight visitations that were set weekly...or biweekly, with no call, no text or anything. He refused to communicate. Finally, a week and a half ago, I told him that his visitation was terminated. I have sole custody of both of my children. I went to court. He never showed up.
>
> He doesn't pay for them. He never has, and he refused until my son was almost two to admit that he was his son. I was like, "You know what? You're done," and he didn't even respond until five days later. He was like, "What do you mean? I thought this was going well." I was like, "No. Sorry." I haven't heard from him since.

Hearing Caitlyn's story about the father of her children provided a clear picture of why she chose single motherhood. Her experience also demonstrated the numerous opportunities she provided the father to be involved in the lives of his children. Despite her best efforts, he could not commit. Caitlyn, like many of her peers, chose single motherhood.

Allison and KM both ended their relationships with the fathers of their children because the men were abusive. Regarding her relationship with her child's father, KM shared tearfully, "We've known each other for six years so at first it was, like, really good and then as soon as I had the baby...we were arguing and it was bad things and during that time he put me through a lot of emotional abuse." Both KM and Allison allowed the men to have minimal contact with their children to maintain a connection for the child, but there was no romantic relationship

between the mother and the father. The women, like most of their peers in this study, were caring for their children without any support from the children's father.

Krystal was also not in a relationship with the father of her child. She shared that she "knew off the bat that he wasn't going to help. He kind of said that and acted that way." Lastly, Elizabeth shared similar sentiments about her daughter's father's ability to be present in his life. She explained that she was in a relationship with the father of her child only for her child's sake. Her son's father was not mature enough to handle the responsibilities involved with parenthood. He simply did not know how to be a father, according to her. Elizabeth shared:

> Things didn't work out. He started becoming very selfish. Being just that teenage boy. He was going to do whatever he wants whenever he wants. I wasn't having it. You know, girls mature faster than boys. I gave him plenty of chances and it was like, "Okay. We just need to be co-parents. That's it."

Despite the chances Elizabeth provided their child's father to be in a romantic relationship, she chose to disengage. He lacked the maturity she needed in a partner.

Single by choice is a new finding which is helpful for educators to be aware of as people find new ways to support college students who are mothers. It is important to note the different levels of support some mothers may have, especially as these relate to co-parenting or the concept of single by choice. Educators should be mindful that for some students, being single is a choice.

College students who are mothers relied on many different relationships to access support and to navigate and ultimately persist in college. These positive relationships included peer groups, the College Parent's Group, OCNTSS, and family. The significance of these relationships repeatedly emerged in the data and through the students' personal experiences. Knowing how these eight women navigated college and the relationships on which they relied,

further enhance the understanding of their lived experiences. Additionally, for seven of the eight women, the relationship with their children's father was not one they relied on for personal, academic, financial, or emotional support. Instead, the majority of the participants in this study chose to be single by choice.

Changes to Self

Changes to self was an important topical area in this study. The findings demonstrated that the student participants experienced several significant changes to self, involving the specific themes of becoming a mother, role changes, and changing for the better. The mothers experienced these changes at different stages of their motherhood experience. Some of these changes occurred immediately for the women when they first learned of their pregnancy. For others, the experience of becoming a mother and overall role changes began upon giving birth for the first time. Finally, some of the changes developed more gradually once the mother began balancing her student role with her motherhood identity. Throughout this stage, each of the participants changed for the better. This section details the changes to self as experienced by eight college students who are mothers.

Becoming a Mother: "Today's a day like any other, but I am changed, I am a mother"

In general, the participants shared what were described as challenging transitions in becoming a mother, coupled with moments of joy, smiles, and laughter. The women, who were at first overwhelmingly frightened by the news of their pregnancy, chose to quickly embrace their new-found identity. Their fear was replaced with positivity and confidence. Princess explained:

> I went to Target and then I bought the test and I went in the bathroom at Target. Then I just saw the two lines and the second one was so faint, it became apparent at some point, but when I first did it, it was so faint and my heart literally stopped. I was like, "Oh my gosh. I know I am not pregnant. This is crazy."…My initial reaction, I couldn't even breathe. I was just like, "What the heck did I get myself into?"

Princess was first in denial and could not believe that she was pregnant. After having her son and focusing on their future, she explained how she changed:

> He's my main motivation for school. My grades now are better than they've been in a long time. They've been better than when I first …went to college, because they were good in high school, but when I first went to college I did really bad and it's a complete turnaround because it's like, I know I have to support him and be there for him and stuff and there's certain things that I want him to have that are expensive and I know I have to pay for it. I know he's completely my responsibility, so it just makes me want to do better in school and be a better person and stuff so he can have everything he wants to have and that I want for him.

For Princess, becoming a mother involved a change in her attitude along with increased maturity and self-confidence. Knowing that she was completely responsible for her son and his welfare served as a powerful motivator for her to do well in college.

Universally, the women in this study described feelings of fear, disbelief, and/or worry upon learning that they were pregnant. Participants shared that these feelings soon changed to happiness. Krystal shared her experience of learning of her pregnancy:

> It was my friend's birthday and we were going to go out and go drinking. I had [drunk] a little bit and I was feeling terrible. I'm like, "Alcohol has never made me feel like this. There has got to be something wrong." I ended up getting a pregnancy test because that was the only thing that I could think of to be wrong. I took 4 of them and I'm like, "This cannot be happening." I cried the entire night. I cried for probably 3 days straight. It was pathetic. That was the gist of it.

Krystal actually smiled and laughed throughout the process of sharing what sounded like a scary experience for her. She then explained she was "numb" about being pregnant: not changing her

social activities and remaining "self-centered." It was not until her child was born that "something clicked" for her.

Immediately after her son arrived and she saw him for the first time, she realized that she cared a lot about him and wanted to change her behaviors. Krystal explained, "I'm extremely happy. I'm excited to have a child. He's everything."

After learning she was pregnant for a second time, Allison contemplated whether or not to go through with the pregnancy. She shared:

> Then my second one [pregnancy], I was thinking about getting an abortion. Only because it's scary to handle two kids and still try to get my degree. I was already put back almost two years because of the first one. Imagine—"Oh my God, I'm going to be put back even more"—you know? That was kind of scary. I pushed myself to keep going. It's working out.

Recognizing the challenges of pursuing a college degree, Allison considered an abortion, not because she did not want to continue the pregnancy, but out of consideration for having to delay her academics and time to degree. Despite her fear of becoming a mother a second time and having a longer delay in her academics, Allison chose to continue the pregnancy knowing that she would have to work hard to continue moving through her college career. Allison found motherhood to be inspiring. While she juggled many responsibilities as a mother of two children, she was happy to be a mom. She shared:

> They inspire, they're kids but they really do inspire me. I do look back, like, "If I didn't have my kids, where would I be?" I think I would have still been partying, probably off doing whatever. They just, they push me. They kind of put that fight in me. They inspire me to do better.

While Allison was at first worried about keeping her second child, she chose to have her baby and remained a college student.

In discussing her initial reactions to becoming a mother, Queen expressed fear as well. She stated, “My mouth just fell to the floor. I couldn’t believe it. After learning it, I was still in high school, so I had to buckle down.” Queen channeled her fear into focus and earned her high school degree. She explained, “I needed to get myself together.” Becoming a mother made her shift her priorities and increased her focus on school, as she knew she was responsible for providing for her child. Despite the challenges and the changes she experienced after becoming a mother, Queen described motherhood as “rewarding.” She said, “It’s very rewarding. To have these three little people that love you and that are on your team, they’re with you no matter what, that makes the biggest difference.”

The student participants identified their fears followed by happiness and focus regarding the news of their pregnancy and giving birth. As a result of their pregnancy or the birth of their child, the students each changed their focus and grew more serious about life, goals, and their futures. Participants shared that this new focus and “need[ing] to get myself together” was because they were now responsible for supporting and caring for their child.

Changes in Role(s): Being a Good Friend to Being a Good Mother

This section addresses the pivotal transition and the important ways in which the students’ roles changed as a result of motherhood. All the student participants discussed how their roles changed either upon learning of their pregnancy or immediately following the birth of their first child. All eight participants addressed the fact that their social lives changed and their level of social activity decreased as a result of becoming a mother. Considering the participants in this study were all traditional-aged college students (18-24 years old), none of the participants

demonstrated disappointment related to this diminished social interaction, which may otherwise be generally expected from this age group. Instead of expressing remorse or resentment about this role change, they discussed how their children were their number one priority and their reason for getting serious as mature adults.

The students in this study focused on the changes related to their relationships with their friends. For some of the students, this was the most significant change, as their social lives declined and their concentration on their child(ren) increased. Queen explained:

> I changed my circle of friends. I noticed that I couldn't be associated with people who would party and drink alcohol regularly, smoke. My social life—I changed my social life and I started to do more and more research [on] how to properly conduct [myself in] interviews. I started to research apartments, the average cost for an apartment, what I would need, what baby will need. I also did [research] on what's healthy for baby and me.

For Queen, partying with her friends was no longer a priority. Instead, she spent her time researching how to be a responsible mother and adult.

Caitlyn reflected on the type of person she was in high school and how her behaviors and attitude changed after becoming a mother. She became an incredibly serious student who challenged herself in the classroom and as a parent who cared deeply about the development of her children. She described her teenage years:

> I was not a very good person in high school, so the friend that was with me when I found out [about her pregnancy] tried to pay for my abortion and tried to make me go get one. I was like, "I'm not doing that." My other friend that I was super close to was also, she was struggling with [drugs] a lot...The town I'm from, heroin is a really big thing. Her boyfriend was stealing all her jewelry. She was getting high all the time. It wasn't something that I felt comfortable [being around] when I was in charge of someone else's safety…. I focused on work and school.

Getting pregnant forced Caitlyn to reevaluate her friends and the behavior her friends engaged in. Her priorities shift from being a good friend to being a good mother. For Caitlyn, being a good mother included not exposing her child to individuals who were actively using drugs.

Similarly, Elizabeth shared how friendships changed for her after she had her child. She shared:

> When she [daughter] was very young and I just became a mom, I was still in the feel of, "Oh, I want to go out with my friends." I was very active. I had a lot of friends and everything. It was just one time when we were trying to go out and everything. Usually my mom, she's not really particular on curfew or anything, especially when I had everything done. She was watching my daughter. It was that time when I'm like, "Okay, it's 10:00; I need to go home. I'm not going to stay out all night and then have to get up at 3:00 in the morning with a bottle because she needs a bottle." That's just definitely one of those times. Even coming to college, it was a lot of parties and social activities and everything. I know how this generation is. They're more of a very wild generation, I would say. It was like, "No, I'm not going to go to some stuff just because I know I can't do that. I have to go home to a child."

Having Sarah quickly changed how she socialized and the way in which she prioritized her time. It was clear that the women in this study experienced a role change after becoming mothers and recognized this change process. Part of being a good friend involved socializing, attending parties, and hanging out. Having a child limited students' availability to participate in these activities. Moreover, many of the women discussed making choices to prioritize being a good mother over being a good friend.

Changing for the Better through Motherhood and College

All eight women in this study modified their lives as a result of motherhood. They described numerous scenarios where it was clear that they changed for the better due to motherhood. In some instances, the students made conscious decisions to make these

improvements, while for others, the change was involuntary. As mothers who were also students, the women in this study had to balance even more responsibilities including student demands and employment to pay for college. The women experienced growth, maturity, decisiveness, and independence as a result of being a mother in college.

Caitlyn shared on multiple occasions that she was not the same person as she was in high school and that becoming a mother was a pivotal experience for her:

> No, I think having them was the most incredible thing that could have ever happened to me. It's hard, but every day it's like I am so thankful that I got the opportunity to turn my life around and take charge of my life and I have so much more direction and purpose than I did before.
>
> I've become a lot more independent. I think going to community college and living at home was still, it wasn't enough, I think. It was like I was going through the motions, but it wasn't really, I didn't have enough control over my life. I was in an abusive relationship, and then my mom was super controlling. It was just unhealthy and as soon as I moved out, it was like I gained independence. I feel like I am such a better mother since I moved out [of] there. I'm capable of taking care of them and doing all of it, because I don't have anyone to fall back on.

Caitlyn attributed having children to assisting her in developing more independence and for "turning her life around."

Additionally, the act of going to college also increased Caitlyn's feelings of independence and ability to take care of herself and her two children. Caitlyn explained:

> I have grown so tremendously since I started [college]. I started at a community college, and I lived at home. I had to take classes secretly because my boyfriend didn't want me to be out, or socializing, or learn more, or be better. It was so important to me, still, that I was doing it, but I felt kind of guilty, so I wouldn't do my homework, but I was still getting good grades. It was like, one of those things where it was like, I don't know. My mom was still helping take care of me and my daughter. I didn't really have a sense of self….

> I've learned how to prioritize, and how to stand up for myself, how to push myself, and how to grow my children without the help of anybody. I think that has been the most rewarding thing in and of itself because now I can look at how far I've come, and how far they've come, and all of the progress that we've made. It's night and day. I used to need other people so tremendously. Then I rejected it for a little bit when I moved here because I was like, "I have my own kitchen; I don't even need you." Now, I feel so much more capable of dealing with my life. I'm making my life something more comfortable for me.
>
> I think that before, I didn't have that strong of a sense of purpose as I do now. I didn't really have a direction. I didn't let myself have a voice, and now I do.

Caitlyn grew tremendously after moving to FSU's campus and beginning her college career there. Prior to her start at FSU, Caitlyn had to keep her studies a secret from her ex-boyfriend. He wanted to prevent her from learning and from growing, as he was controlling and manipulative. Having a fresh start at FSU allowed Caitlyn to experience independence, growth, freedom, and higher learning. This move to the campus was a pivotal experience as a college student mother. She lived on her own, with very limited support, and was able to focus on her personal success, academic achievement, and her children's development. For Caitlyn, FSU was a way out of her abusive relationship and a means for self-improvement.

Many of the participants in this study talked about "buckling down" and "getting serious" once they found out they were pregnant. KM explained that "once I had her I was like, okay, I got to get my life together." KM "got her life together" by focusing on the needs of her child and being less selfish. She shared:

> My daughter definitely has taught me to be more caring, more patient, a go-getter because before I had her I had the princess mentality of okay, I can lose my glasses and somebody will replace them. I can throw my phone out the window and I won't have to worry about anything. Now, I don't have that type of mentality no more because everything is all about [my child's] needs. What is her needs? What is things that I have to do to provide for her or just certain things in that nature, so it was like more so just

> trying to, I guess, live for her. Not to take away from what I just said, but it's like because I do live for her, it's hard to balance the two of living for myself as well.

KM shared how she grew more conscientious as a result of motherhood. Additionally, for KM, transferring to FSU was an escape from a previous life with a verbally abusive ex-boyfriend. At FSU, KM was able to focus on her academic goals and the progress of her child. KM attributed some of her success to one of her teachers. KM shared a story of writing a thank-you note to this specific professor because that teacher was one of the reasons she succeeded. In her letter she wrote, "If it wasn't for people like you, I honestly don't know if I would still be in college right now." That same professor spent time with KM connecting her to support services, like counseling, on campus. For KM, like some of her peers in this study, attending college as a mother were two significant roles tightly coupled together.

In addition to "getting their lives together," many of the participants also referenced their maturity and how it drastically improved once they became a mother. Khloe said that she was "definitely more mature." She explained:

> I've been told I'm a 19-year-old [in] a 28-year-old body. I have a lot more patience. I'm very protective with everything. Not just necessarily my daughter, but everything now. If I actually earn something, I'm really proud about that. I actually feel like I actually deserve this. Overall, I feel like I've matured a lot.

For Khloe, being a college student mother made her a stronger, more mature young adult. She learned how to successfully balance a job, academics, motherhood, and involvement, all while maintaining a relationship with her boyfriend.

All of the participants modified their lives once they became mothers. The women made conscious efforts to change. Maturity, growth, independence and decisiveness all factored into

these change efforts. Growth occurred as a result of the experience of being engaged parents and academically focused college students.

The Changes to Self category contained three prevalent themes connected to the experience of college students who are mothers. The most salient themes within this category included becoming a mother, role changes, and changing for the better. Each woman spoke in great detail about how she changed as a result of becoming a mother. These changes impacted how they led their lives, how they prioritized responsibilities related to their roles, and how they made positive changes for the betterment of their child(ren). Gaining increased insight related to changes to self provides additional understanding of the lived experiences of college students who are mothers.

Changing Relationships During College

In addition to changes to self, the researcher identified two primary changing relationships with others: family support over time and personal interactions with faculty. This section discusses how relationships with others changed for college students who were mothers experience during college. These themes are detailed in this section based on the participants' testimonies.

Family Support Changes Over Time

Some of the participants noted a change in support from their family members over time. When the student mother first learned of her pregnancy, some family members conveyed disappointment and decreased their communication with the student. Other family members even advised the mother to consider terminating the pregnancy. However, over time,

relationships and support from family members improved and the student mothers experienced a higher level of assistance.

Krystal shared that her family became incredibly supportive after they became comfortable with the idea of her becoming a mom. She shared:

> Then my family, my parents came up to a few doctor's appointments that I had. They were extremely supportive. Well, after the initial shock they were extremely supportive. Then the rest of my family as well, aunts, uncles, cousins, everybody was checking up on me like, "Hey, what do you need, are you okay, how are you feeling, how's school?" They were like, "Do you need us to pick you up just to hang out, get out of [town]?"

Krystal was fortunate that her family became supportive, but not every participant experienced the same level of assistance.

Elizabeth shared that she relied heavily on her mom during her pregnancy. Their relationship actually became stronger from the moment she learned she was having a baby. Elizabeth explained:

> I knew it [pregnancy] happened, but I really thought it was impossible for me to get pregnant. I got pregnant. Then the doctors called my mom back in [the doctor's office]. They told her. My mom is my biggest supporter of everything because her reaction was, "What do you want to do?" That was the first thing she said to me. She didn't yell or scream. I know I hurt my mom in so many different ways, but she was there for me.
>
> From there, that's when life changed. My mom was prepping me in so many different ways. Actually becoming pregnant at a young age, my mom became closer because it was more like she was...I was going to [be] a mother myself.

While her relationship with her mother grew deeper, she experienced some challenges with other family members coping with her decision to keep her baby. She shared:

> She was being a mother. My dad—I told my dad. He was disappointed but he eventually stepped up. Now his granddaughter is the love of his life. That's his little girl. We told the rest of my family. Trust me, some of my family had negative things to say. One of my aunts told me, "You're not the first one. You won't be the last one."

Elizabeth was reluctant to share her news with her brothers but elated with their reaction:

> I was really nervous about telling my brothers. I had two older brothers. One of them, he was just like, "I'm proud of you." He was like, "You owned up to your mistakes. You're not just aborting a baby."

Overall, Elizabeth's relationships grew stronger with her family members throughout her pregnancy and after giving birth. She experienced some negativity at the beginning of her motherhood journey, but in the end, received much-needed support.

In Allison's situation, her family withdrew from her: "My family kind of outcasted me, my adoptive family. I actually stayed in a homeless shelter for a minute." Additionally, though her experience was not as severe, Caitlyn also felt disconnected from her mother when she learned of her pregnancy: "My mom was slow to come around. The first day she told me not to come home. She didn't talk to me for two days, and then that was it. She was over it." Allison relied on her family for some support, but her independence also grew throughout motherhood.

For other participants, their parents, who first outcast them, later developed a stronger relationship with them and with their new grandchild and increased their support for their daughter. Queen explained:

> I would like to thank my family for that. It was not nice. I felt, I don't want to say abandoned, but I just felt like they just left me out to dry because of a baby. I just thought, "Wow, I didn't kill anyone. Why are you guys treating me this way?" That was how they were initially, but as the pregnancy progressed, they started to accept it and they began...They didn't spoil me, but they helped me.

Queen's relationship with her family changed over time. At first she was outcast and shunned but after months of her pregnancy went on, her family members began to support her and her decision to have her child. Queen recognized how their support helped her.

Cailtyn explained that she and her father never previously had had a strong connection. However, because of significant financial constraints she experienced, Caitlyn reached out to him for support. She shared:

> I contacted my dad, trying to get extra money out. He's never been very supportive, so that was exceptionally hard on me emotionally. He berated me and belittled me, because I was never taught how to budget. I was never taught how to do any of this, and I don't think it's reasonable to expect a single parent of two to make it through a semester and the holidays and day-to-day on...What was it? Twenty-five hundred dollars. It's ridiculous. He provided me with an additional $3,000 on top of my grant for the next semester, out of my college fund, which was a fight, but it happened. I have no idea what I would have done without that.

Caitlyn's relationship with her father did not drastically improve; however, he did provide some financial assistance that was critical in allowing her to continue college. In this instance, while this financial request was challenging and came with unkind words, she needed the money to be able to provide for her child and stay in school.

Family members can play a critical role in the lives of college students with children. They can have a large impact on the student's success and may provide support in many ways. Conversely, the students who did not have support from their family members discussed how it negatively affected them. Students with children relied on their family members in different ways. For some participants, family members withdrew or abandoned the mother and in some instances the relationship grew strong as a result of the child's birth.

Changing Relationships with Faculty throughout Student Motherhood

The student mothers all shared their motherhood identity with their faculty members at some point in their college careers. Three of the participants were forthright about their children, while five of the students chose to withhold the information until they felt it necessary to share.

Both sets of students were intentional about sharing their motherhood identity with their professors when they felt comfortable with the decision. Communicating directly about their responsibilities as college mothers was purposeful to maintain a certain level of understanding in case of emergency situations where they would need to leave class to care for a child. In some cases, the students reported their relationships with faculty changing as a result of this communication. Additionally, some of the students formed personal relationships with their faculty. Seven of the students reported that their changing relationship positively impacted their experience as college student mothers. The following will discuss the two predominate strategies participants used for working with faculty.

Upfront approach to revealing motherhood identity with faculty. Only three of the participants shared that they had formal conversations with their faculty members at the beginning of each semester to share that they were mothers. This strategy helped them in preparation of child illnesses and unpredictable issues with child care. These three students consciously decided to share their motherhood identity with their professors. Krystal explained:

> At first, I wasn't going to actually let them [professors] know that, but then I started running into hiccups because when I first got to school, I had to get on the bus, take my child from Northern View to New Hall and I was trying to figure out a routine. In doing so, I was late a couple times, and that's not a great impression to start when you're first starting class, so I say, "I've got to do something," so I came to them and I said, "Hey, I have a kid. I know I've been late. I'm just trying to get into a routine, and I'm trying to see what works and what doesn't work, but as time goes on, I will have it down and I will get here when I'm able, at the correct time." I said it at the beginning of class and they were totally understanding of it.

Krystal was confident about her decision to reveal her motherhood status with her professors and it seemed to provide some relief and understanding.

Caitlyn took a similar direct approach of communicating her family situation with her professors. She highly valued her connections with her faculty members and shared her needs regarding her children with them:

> I think I've had the most success with instructors who have gotten the time to know me personally….When I come forward, when I tell them, "Hey, I have two kids. I'm not always going to be here. They take priority," they are able to build a little bit extra relationship with me. That way I can communicate, and I don't feel as guilty for, "Hey, I can't get this done on time. My life doesn't allow for it." It also can help with goal setting.

Caitlyn's strategy was upfront and for her, this communication allowed her to have a more honest relationship with her professors. She developed outstanding relationships with some of her faculty and was deeply impacted by one particular person:

> Like I said, my most incredible teacher held me to standards that I was comparing my work to other students, and mine was way...It wasn't way better, but it was more complex than theirs and more in-depth. I was receiving lower grades because they sat down, they got to know me, and they knew what I was capable of, and they held me to those standards but accommodated as needed. I think that that was the best thing that anyone could do.

Cailtyn talked frequently during the interview process of her desire to learn, to be pushed academically by her faculty, and of her greater academic engagement. She invested time into developing more meaningful relationships with her professors, and they saw her potential and desire to grow and made the same investment in her. Her upfront approach supported her ability to have more honest relationships with her professors which were meaningful and impactful.

Intentionally withholding motherhood identity from faculty until necessary. While five of the participants did not desire to make their motherhood status public, they shared their status with their professors when they felt it was necessary, for instance, when a family emergency arose. The students provided different reasons for choosing to withhold this information and

others did not provide a reason. Khloe, one of the participants who did not share her status willingly, did have to explain her situation when childcare fell through:

> Columbus Day this year…I had a midterm and the daycare that she's at is closed on Columbus Day. I originally had plans that another student mom was going to be able to watch her [child] during my midterm. She ended up being stranded in Chicago. I texted my teacher. I emailed my teacher while I'm still trying to study for my midterm. Mind you that I have [to] work [at] 4:00 in the morning. I'm trying to do everything before 7:00. Nobody's responding to me. I'm still stressing about taking the midterm and I'm very upset that my teacher's not responding to me. Then the next day I actually had to bring [my daughter] up to my class.
>
> I brought up there and I said, "I tried to get in contact with you. I'm not just making this up, but I honestly have nobody to watch her. My boyfriend's in class. All my other friends have midterms. The girl that was going to watch her is stranded in Chicago. Here I am."
>
> She [professor] actually said I could come back the next day and take the midterm. She was very understanding.

Khloe's professor was understanding and made an accommodation that allowed Khloe to still complete her work but also attend to her child's care.

Elizabeth shared that she preferred not to expose her motherhood identity with her professors. She explained:

> I try not to; if I have to I will. I would tell the instructor if I had clinical, or if it's something where it's hard to get out of if an emergency happened. With Gen Eds I didn't have to deal with that. If daycare called, I could get up and leave class. Class is, like, 200 people in it; they're not going to miss me. Since the classes are smaller now, and if it's during a time where her dad couldn't pick her up, I would definitely for sure tell the faculty, "Hey, look, if you see me glancing at my phone I'm not texting; I'm just making sure it's not her daycare calling me, because I'm a mom."

Elizabeth was additionally hesitant about sharing her information due to a written policy about not bringing children to class that was included in a previous syllabus. Due to an emergency

where she had no other option but to bring her child to class, she questioned how to approach the situation. She shared:

> Honestly, I would probably ask my teacher if it was okay because an English [class] syllabus…actually has a saying like "Don't bring your child to class." I took [offense at] that…at first, but then I had to think about it, like, everybody's not okay with that. Sometimes you got to do what you got to do. If some situation had [come up] and I'm not trying to miss that class, I'm going to be like, "Look, you're going to have to be okay with it, or I'm going to have to miss this class." She comes first regardless. I would definitely ask them if it's okay. I have had faculty members be like, "If you need me just let me know and bring her here until...For a test or anything don't miss it." That's the good things about FSU.
>
> Some of them [professors] know I'm a mother because I actually had to bring her up to class before. I'm not going to say that I have the strongest relationship with faculty members, because I don't really have time to go their office hours and what not. I'll say one of my instructors now, she talks to me whenever she sees me just sitting down outside of a classroom waiting for a next class. She'll just tell me… "I was a mom too. I had two kids in college too."

Despite Elizabeth's desire to maintain her privacy, she acknowledged that sharing her motherhood journey has positively impacted her relationship with at least one faculty member.

Some of the participants reported not wanting their professors to think less of them if they had to skip class or leave abruptly to care for a sick child. Additionally, they feared sharing their status with their professors because they worried about the professor presuming they were taking advantage of the situation. Queen explained why she did not automatically tell her teachers about having children:

> From past experiences, watching other student mothers, some of them use that [having children] as a crutch. I don't want my professors to view me as, "Oh, she has kids or she can't do this, or she can't do that." My children, they're not a distraction. They don't interfere with my academic life in any way. If anything, they help me. They're my motivation behind it.

Queen admitted that she shared her status with her professors, but not until she felt it was necessary.

Allison had similar experiences to Queen and only shared her status when she was taking class as a pregnant mother because she simply could not conceal her identity. The only other time she shared she was a mother was when "my daughter had pneumonia and she was in the hospital for like a week; then I had to tell somebody…. Other than that I don't think I've ever told. I've told a couple teachers I've gotten close to." Allison did not share why she chose this strategy but was confident in her decision to remain quiet about her identity.

In addition to their decision to reveal or conceal their motherhood status, participants shared the importance of connecting with faculty inside and outside of the classroom. Princess mentioned that she often was the only person in most of her classes who spoke up in class, stating:

> I try to participate a lot in class discussions. Sometimes I feel like I'm the only one in the classroom. I try to pay attention more and sit in the front so they [faculty] can know I'm there, which would be bad if I started missing class because then they'll be like, "Where's [Princess] at?"

While this annoyed her, she recognized that the professor would certainly remember who she was and it was important to her to demonstrate her desire to learn. This was important because she did not want the faculty member to doubt her commitment to her academics if she had to miss a class due to a child care issue.

Positive relationships with faculty. Many of the student participants highlighted the impact that positive interactions and relationships with faculty had on their experience as student mothers. It was clear that the women understood the importance of this relationship and

expressed their desire to be engaged in the classroom, take advantage of professor office hours when able, and be the best student they could be. Elizabeth had only positive stories to share about her experiences with her professors and the communication she had with them regarding her child:

> Actually, my teachers know me as a positive student and everything. I talk to my teachers when I really need their help, and ask questions. I'm either emailing them or talking to them. My counselor, she knows me. She knows my personal life. She knows that I'm out here wanting to make something … of myself and not just playing around. I would say that most of my teachers probably know that too by how I work and what I put in my work too.

It was important to Elizabeth that her professors and advisor knew who she was both inside and outside of the classroom. She was intentional about participating in class, succeeding academically, and interacting with her professors. She wanted them to know that she was a serious student and demonstrated this by being engaged.

KM had a similar viewpoint to Elizabeth and told her faculty members, when it was necessary, about being a mother. She developed closer ties with some of her professors and divulged her personal experiences with one person in particular:

> Yeah, for the most part all my teachers know I'm a parent and that's because I had to bring Shlena at least once [to class] or just show up with her type thing. So, all my teachers know for the most part that I am a parent. With my Coms teacher I do have more of an interaction with her because I kind of expressed to her, like, the things I am dealing with and everything like that and we were able to relate on just, like, the sad part, kind of thing, because she was telling me, like, she has depression, anxiety, and has to take medicines and stuff like that for [them]. I was telling her, like, I don't feel like I'm suffering from depression right now but I'm definitely stressed to the point where I'm crying every single day almost. And, I'm going to see counseling and everything and I was just telling her that after we had that conversation, like, we became closer.

KM's decision to connect with one of her professors allowed her to develop a closer relationship. This relationship provided her with much-needed support and guidance. Additionally, this

professor normalized the process of seeking mental health services, a resource KM relied on as a result.

Similarly, KM made a formal connection with one of her professors. She realized that one of her art faculty members, Dr. Johnson, took a personal interest in her success. This relationship evolved into a mentoring relationship. Dr. Johnson saw that KM was struggling and communicated her desire to support KM. KM and Dr. Johnson would meet and Dr. Johnson would provide advice about motherhood and child development. Dr. Johnson would also provide meals during their meetings. KM shared:

> Lately, she's been helping me as far as like giving me advice and stuff like that, when it comes to Shlena, like, telling me, like, different little things I can do and stuff, and when I first met her it was basically she was ordering food for the people in the office and she was like, "Do you want some food?" And I was like, no, like, trying to, like, lean off of it, because I honestly didn't have no money, and like, she, I guess, she … felt that, and she was like, "Well, I'll buy your food," and yeah, she was like, "If you let me I can ... have some motherly roles, and just, really help you out this school year." And so far she's been phenomenal.

KM benefitted from this personal connection and established an important relationship which positively impacted her life.

Negative relationships with faculty. Only one student reported a negative change in her relationships with faculty due to her motherhood status. Allison shared that while her experience in the classroom has "been fine" for the most part, "Sometimes it gets a little bit weird." She explained:

> I'm in childcare classes [due to her major], so it's weird when the teacher is talking about single moms, or talking about mothers, or talk[ing] about birth and then they point you out, like, "Oh ... who's a single mom?", or "Who's a mother? and this and that.

Additionally, Allison had a particularly negative situation with a specific teacher:

> So it gets a little bit weird when people know that you have a kid. I don't know, I felt like one teacher didn't like me because she couldn't have kids. I felt like she was really tough. I didn't even find it out, like, she was tough on me most of the semester, and then I found out she was, like, "I'm not able to have kids."
>
> And … I was pregnant, so, I really felt like she didn't like me because of that. But she was really tough, did not let me turn in anything late, did not substitute, nothing.

Allison felt that her pregnancy negatively impacted her relationship with one particular professor. While she was an outlier in this situation and her peers only reported positive changing relationships, it is important to note her unique experience since she linked it directly to being a mother.

The findings from this study illustrate the ways in which relationships changed for college student mothers. These changes included those with family members and faculty members. In some instances, these changes were extremely positive and had a significant impact on the participants. These changes allowed for increased understanding of the students' situations, which provided the students with relief when dealing with family emergencies, illnesses, and lack of child care. Additionally, the students who were able to develop more meaningful relationships with their professors received a greater level of support than their peers without these relationships. A better understanding of these relationship changes provides improved insight into the participants' experiences as students. It also illustrates the positive impact these more developed relationships can have on college students who are mothers. These positive, deep connections helped the women feel more successful and more connected to their academic pursuits.

Threats to Persisting and Engaging in College

College students who are mothers have numerous important roles and responsibilities to manage. However, these roles and responsibilities often contribute to challenges to persisting in college. This section addresses the specific subthemes surrounding threats to persistence, including: financial struggles, limited time, lack of understanding from their childless peers, and challenges related to fundamental resources like transportation and housing.

Financial Struggles

Finances was a common theme among the participants related to their experiences as a college mother. Despite not being asked any questions directly related to money, many respondents included financial discussions regarding hardships and inadequate funding. These discussions were woven throughout the entire interview process. The women noted their financial struggles when they described their socioeconomic status, discussed child care, their inability to get involved on campus, and their need to work full-time or part-time in order to support their family. As Queen stated, "they're [children] expensive." She, like other participants, balanced numerous expenses in addition to the costs associated with being a student. Queen shared:

> I have an outstanding balance now. Soon I'm going to enter into a payment plan. It's just having to pay for books and school supplies and then maybe Anthony needs diapers. His constant needs, and don't forget Imani. She needs rain boots. Maybe Malcolm, he needs boots as well for, maybe they've broken something that I have to repair, or paid [for] my car, because I need a car out here. I really would like a job to be able to manage them, manage all three. Being that there's really no daycare after maybe, I want to say 5:00, so I can't work the hours, because I'm in school those hours. That's tough right now. I try to do what I can, but it's becoming overwhelming.

Queen illustrated her financial struggles as a single mother of three children. There were always unexpected items her children needed, in addition to regular car maintenance, supplies, and educational materials. If she had access to more flexible child care options, she would work in order to pay for these items with greater ease. Similarly, Caitlyn stated:

> Additional financial resources. That is huge. My tires right now are not legal to be on the road. It's not safe for me to be driving right now, and I can't afford to replace them. I can't afford the work on it. I can't afford to replace the tires. I have to figure out a way to find time in my schedule to drop my car off, and then I [have] to find resources to ... There's just so many components of things that I need that I can't find time for because of all of the other things.

Finances were a very limited resource for the college students who are mothers in this study, and shaped their behavior. For instance, Caitlyn needing new tires was not only a financial issue because she needed her car in order to get to school and take her kids to child care. Not having a car was not an option, but she also did not have the funds to get new tires. This forced her to have to make some tough decisions, such as driving with tires that were unsafe. Throughout the study, the women were often in no-win situations where they had to make tough decisions, often because of the lack of financial resources. In all eight cases, the students did not have immediate solutions to their financial struggles beyond asking family members for additional support when community resources were not adequate.

KM shared a story of how she was terrified that her lack of finances would result in her losing her child:

> When I first came out here [to FSU] this year, my finances were horrible. I just got it in order and so my biggest fear was I was going to lose Shlena if I couldn't financially provide for her and for some reason now I think I'm a worry wart ... To me it's like finding that balance so I'm always thinking of the worst scenario that's going to happen so that's why I was thinking, like, what if I lose her because I can't financially take care of her? Like, I was running out of money and everything and I was ... I had so many job

> interviews and everything like that and none of them worked with my schedule and so that's how I got the job at the [child care center].
>
> I didn't know if I was going to be able to keep her in daycare as well because I couldn't afford it. That went on for quite a while so that first month it was, every time I went to class all I could do was worry and not pay attention in class and so after that is, like, now, just, stress is trying to get my work, catch up, and just everything like my grades, trying to make sure they're in order is just, like ... I think because I'm thinking outside of class while I'm in class it's hard for me to focus.

KM was so worried about her finances and the possibility of her child being taken from her because she could not care for her that she struggled as a student. Financial challenges are an important area of concern for college students who are mothers. The issue is of grave concern for some students and it impacted their experience as students, threatening their persistence.

Limited Time Reduces Involvement Options

College students who are mothers have very little extra time and energy because their first priority is their child(ren). Limited time prevented the women from fully engaging in campus life, involvement opportunities outside of the classroom, and work. In most cases, participants were juggling child care with coursework, both of which required significant time and attention.

Due to the numerous responsibilities of a college student mother, and a lack of time, campus involvement was very hard to manage. Students reported a desire to be engaged on campus but due to various roles and duties, it simply was not a reality for all but one of the participants. When asked why she did not pursue other involvement options on campus, KM simply stated, "Don't have the time."

Elizabeth and Princess explained that they wanted to be on a dance team on their campus but without access to evening or weekend child care, it was not possible. Princess shared, "Well, I kind of wanted to get involved in [the campus programming board]. I want to pledge [a sorority]; I know that for a fact. Maybe something else…a dance team, that's it." While Elizabeth temporarily joined the team, she ended up having to quit. She explained:

> I quit that. I was like, "Yeah, I can do it. I'm a mother but I can still do it." It quickly changed when it was like, "Oh, you need money" [for membership fees]. I could [not] be on the dance team. Some girls can be on the dance team. They go to school. They go to work. Me, I still have an extra one. I can't be on the dance team and I can't work and still be a student and still be a mother. It was one of those things had to go. Unfortunately, the dance team had to go because I chose to work and be a student and be a mother because I need to provide for my child. I'm not as social in college as I would be if I didn't have a child, in a way.

Despite Elizabeth's desire to be involved on campus, between the cost, time, and child care challenges, she was not able to participate.

A couple of the participants expressed interest in joining a sorority on campus, including Princess, who explained, "It's like I want to pledge [a sorority] but I don't know if that's possible because who will watch him during that process?" Allison also wanted to be involved at FSU and considered Greek life as an option but did not think it would be possible to manage. She shared:

> I always wanted to be in a sorority…I don't think I could be in a sorority…'cause I think you have to live in their house…I always X'ed that out [removed that possibility], like extra curriculum activities, I always X'd it out because I felt like I couldn't really manage it with a kid.

Allison was not alone in her thinking that Greek life was not a possibility as a mother. Her peers in the study shared similar thoughts and refrained from the recruitment processes.

Despite their desire to get involved, seven of the students opted against it due to their motherhood responsibilities and the need to succeed academically. Queen shared:

> I don't have any resources for childcare, babysitting, anything like that. I would try if it's an event that involves bringing my children, I will try. Any little thing as far as how tight my schedule is and how I study, it interferes with what I have going on during the week. If it's just a weekend, I'm completely available.

As Queen explained, the lack of child care and the need to focus on academics made participating in campus activities nearly impossible. Due to the women's priorities, including a lack of time and a lack of access to help, campus involvement was not an easily-accessible option for most college student mothers.

Childless Peers Just Don't Understand Motherhood

Each of the eight students individually and sometimes repeatedly described how difficult it was to connect with the rest of campus. Students without children experience college differently and the participants were quick to note these differences. For instance, Krystal shared:

> It's hard for people who don't have kids to understand why you can't do certain things or why you have to do something a certain way. It's difficult to connect with people because most of the college population doesn't have kids, or if they do you can't find them because they just go to class and go home. It's difficult to get work. It's difficult to sleep at night. It's difficult to eat for yourself. It's difficult to ... For me, it's just kind of difficult to do a lot of things, but not to say they're impossible, or I feel bad about them because I don't, but it's just difficult. It's not easy. He's not a toy, he's not someone I can just give back. Put him back because I can't afford him, you know. It's just difficult.

Despite Krystal's deep connection to campus through her numerous involvements (discussed later in detail) she still found it challenging to connect with childless peers. Her peers, like those of the other participants in this study, did not fully grasp all the nuances involved with

motherhood. This lack of understanding made it challenging for the student mothers to establish relationships with other students at FSU, serving as a threat to their persistence.

Similarly, Caitlyn shared, "I wouldn't necessarily hang out with them [childless peers] outside of academic purposes." She went on to say, "There's just too big of a discrepancy between where they are emotionally, mentally, what they're dealing with, and what I'm dealing with. It's just harder to connect." In a later interview, Caitlyn further explained,

> I think a lot of times it's harder because my peers, one, are not really... They don't really comprehend the amount of work that goes into being a parent. If they do, it's more of a sympathy thing, and that's absolutely not what I want. I don't want anyone to feel badly for me, because this is a decision I made, and I love every minute of it. It's hard, sometimes, when my peers start to, like, "Oh, you have it so hard." I'm like… "Let me be."

Caitlyn's experience of interacting with childless peers was not unique. The student participants reported that their childless peers did not comprehend all their motherhood responsibilities. Further, all the participants shared this viewpoint of their peers not understanding their situation, making it challenging to connect or form relationships. Additionally, the peers often demonstrated pity when learning about their fellow students with children. The student participants shared that pity was not a good way to support them and made them feel badly about their identity.

Allison shared her frustration with her childless peers for not taking time to understand the time constraints associated with being a college student mother:

> It kind of caused a lot of feud[s] between my classmates because they didn't want to accommodate because I had a kid. I would tell them, "It would be better if we can do it on Skype when she sleeps," or, you know, "We can even do it over at my house and she'll be sleeping in the next room," something like that. They didn't want to accommodate me; they wanted to do it around them.

Elizabeth also shared frustration with connecting with peers without children: “It’s very hard to connect to people here because I don’t know [many] people with children out here yet.” In discussing why it was hard to connect, Elizabeth shared:

> When people think of you having a child, they think, “Oh, baby daddy drama. You’re wild.” What do they call it now? “You’re a ho.” Something like that. It’s just ignorant stuff that people think nowadays. I’m just like, “Okay.” I'll let you know I’m a mother, but it just don’t phase me in a way that it would ... Coming from somebody who don’t have a child, who don’t understand my story.

Elizabeth’s testimony further illustrated the lack of understanding from childless peers. In addition to not understanding the experience of a college student mother, Elizabeth explained that her childless peers also shunned her because of her motherhood identity. This lack of understanding, in addition to shunning, contributes to the threat of persistence of college students who are mothers. Moreover, through their words and actions, many of the women’s childless peers communicate the message that college mothers do not belong on campus. It is evident that making connections on campus is important and doing so with their childless peers is challenging for students who are mothers.

Challenges to Moving Through College

Important themes emerged regarding various challenges college students who are mothers face as they move through their college experience. Participants identified different challenges that made it more difficult for them to engage in college and manage their academic and family responsibilities. These challenges included transportation, physical campus conditions, and housing.

Transportation inefficiencies. The most common challenge among the participants related to moving through college was lack of transportation. For some of the students, the campus community bus system was incredibly helpful, while for others, it was described as something which prevented them from having more efficient schedules.

In discussing what it was like to be a college student and a mother, KM discussed her transportation needs. She explained that time was a precious resource which she lacked and the bus routes impacted her daily experience going to class and transporting her child back and forth to daycare. She said, "Instead of going directly to class I have to drop her off at daycare. I don't have a car so every day I have to take at least five buses to get her to daycare and five buses to get us home." KM typically spent three hours on the bus each weekday. This time on the bus was time she could have invested with her daughter, studying, or earning money. A more efficient route would positively impact her ability to move through college.

The participants relied heavily on the bus system and shared that they faced challenges with efficiently getting on and off campus using the bus. Related to this issue, Khloe struggled with time she had to invest in order to travel around the FSU campus community. She suggested the university consider a shuttle for college students who are mothers. She stated:

> Another thing FSU can do...They can make a shuttle bus that goes to a lot of the nearby daycares, because sometimes that's a problem. I have to catch 2 buses just to get to her daycare. Maybe a specific shuttle bus, like how they do the Safe Line [evening and weekend shuttle service for students].

While Khloe depended on this service, it was clear that alterations to the system could greatly impact a student's ability to move through college as a student mother.

Krystal experienced transportation issues related to arriving to class on time due to the bus system. She explained that it took her a while to figure out the bus schedule and develop a routine with her child. As a result of this process, she was late to class a few times. She was concerned because "That's not a great impression to [give] when you're first starting class, so I say, 'I've got to do something.'" After that experience she decided to share her motherhood status with her professors so they understood that she managed several important responsibilities. In Krystal's case a bus overview or a route tutorial could have prevented her from challenges with the schedule from the beginning of her experience. Additionally, she shared, "Although there are daycares in the community, I don't have a car, so I can't get him to anywhere besides something on campus, and the bus system only takes you to certain places. That's pretty hard." While the bus can be a resource to students, because of the route offerings, it also prevents students from getting to some community resources.

One participant even recounted a time where she felt her peers staring at her while she was using the bus with her child. KM explained:

> People know me because I am a mom; even on the bus, the one my friend was with me on when we went to Target, she noticed that too; she was like, people stare at you just because you have a baby. It's so much attention drawn in on you, and so, people, like, really look or ... And it doesn't make me more popular in any way but it's just the attention that's received was there, yeah.

This experience made her feel very uncomfortable and more protective of her child. She felt that she should have been able to ride the bus without this type of treatment.

Lack of efficient transportation impacted the participants in many ways. The bus system was inefficient and did not provide direct means for the students to take their children to child care and get back to campus for class in a timely manner. In many cases the students had to take

multiple buses in order to complete this task, which prevented them from using that time for more productive activities. Additionally, some of the students reported being unaware of the routes and lacked directions, which sometimes resulted in the students being late to class.

Mobility issues on campus for college student mothers. The physical condition of the campus threatened the participants' persistence. Some of the student participants shared stories about how they struggled with specific physical aspects of their campus which impacted their college experience. Krystal and Allison both addressed how simply walking on campus was a challenge as a pregnant student and as a mother with a stroller. Krystal described how difficult it was to get around campus with a baby. She explained:

> Definitely specific challenges would be when I take him places, I always have to find a handicapped ramp so I can get him up there, which may not be the most efficient way to get into a building. When I'm coming to the [student life] building, although it would be much easier to just walk right up the stairs and go right in, I have to come all the way around the building and go up the side ramp.

Krystal's challenges with the physical condition of FSU made it more challenging for her and her son to move around campus. It is important to consider these struggles when considering more inclusive environments for students.

Allison also shared getting around campus was "a struggle, it definitely is." She did not have a car on campus and had to walk everywhere. While she acknowledged that most students walked to get around campus, she also explained:

> It's a bigger struggle when you have a kid. My kid was basically born on campus and from her being an infant I had to carry her and make sure she was warm enough, and then I had to get on the buses and stuff like that. Then after that when she could walk I had to drag her around campus trying to get to class, trying to get to daycare; sometimes I had to bring her to class. You know, if the daycare was closed, and then the stroller, trying to push her around in the snow and the ice and everything. Even like when I was pregnant. On campus, walking, I fell, like, three times.

Allison's challenges are not limited to her and could certainly be experienced by any student mother. Pregnant student mothers should not have to be worried about walking to class for fear of hurting their baby by falling. The needs of all students should be considered in regard to the physical condition of campus in order to truly support all students.

Housing. Participants expressed a range of experiences in finding and maintaining appropriate housing. While six students shared positive experiences related to their housing situation, the preferred option that FSU managed was financially constraining. This fiscal struggle caused them to seek other options throughout their college career despite the positive experience they had as residents. Students shared how their living situation impacted their college experience.

During Caitlyn's first year at FSU, she rented an apartment in a family-friendly complex on campus. During her second year at FSU, she rented an off-campus apartment in a neighborhood that she described as having "a bad reputation." The apartment was adjacent to renters who smoked marijuana frequently. The stench of the marijuana was constant and her children asked why it always smelled like skunks. She shared:

> There's areas in [town] where it's like, student housing, where I had to pretend [to the kids] like there were baby skunks in the apartment for a year. Yep. The apartment before, … they were so loud all the time that my daughter woke up screaming and crying because she thought someone was being killed.

During her third year of college, Caitlyn and her children rented an apartment in a neighborhood on the opposite side of campus. The new apartment had plenty of natural light and green space for her children. Additionally, she befriended her neighbors in this complex, who watched her

children when she was desperate for childcare. She noted how much this positive housing environment had on their family and her outlook.

FSU managed a housing complex on campus designed for non-traditional students. This campus option provides specific offerings to support student parents, including a family community center, family-friendly programming, and a small enclosed outdoor play area for younger children. Many of the students in this study rented an apartment from within this complex at some point in their career at FSU.

Princess resided in the university-managed facility and suggested that the school consider grouping renters within the complex by their children's age. Her apartment was adjacent to a student family with a teenager who made a lot of noise during the evening hours when her baby typically slept. Princess explained that if renters with babies could be placed in a section of the complex together, students might feel more comfortable because their schedules may be better aligned. Similarly, students with teenagers could be placed closer together, whose apartments might be more conducive to higher levels of noise in the evening. She explained:

> With the family housing, I feel like if somebody has children that all of us should be just in one apartment together opposed to some of us having kids, and then it's like some people with older kids and then it's just some people who are there with their roommate or their better half, whoever they share with. I think that they should have it where if you have, like, a baby or toddlers or something like that, all the people can stay together. I have a 1-year-old but my upstairs neighbor has a 16-year-old and it's, like, constant stomping and slamming and all that stuff all the time at all hours of the morning— one, two, three, four in the morning—and it's very inconvenient.
>
> For me, if my baby wakes up … I have to try to put him to sleep in the midst of all the noise that you all are making. That's typical for a sixteen-year-old to stay up all night, that's not a big deal. I can't just hit them with a broom or something to tone it down.

This housing option was definitely preferred by the participants but it was cost-prohibitive, forcing them to select cheaper options in consecutive semesters. These cheaper options often

were in less desirable and less safe locations. Participants, again, had to make tough choices between the housing they could afford and the housing that would be best for their families.

The findings from this section explored some of the primary challenges college mothers experienced in trying to move through college. The main three themes which emerged included transportation inefficiencies, physical campus conditions, and housing. These themes impact the basic needs college student mothers have related to their college experience. The inability to travel efficiently throughout campus and within their campus community impacts their experience getting to and from class and transporting their child(ren) to local child care facilities. The physical condition of campus hindered the participants from having a sense of safety when walking through snowy or icy conditions. Additionally, the students noted having challenges locating handicapped accessible ramps so they could enter buildings with strollers. Lastly, another fundamental need—housing—was identified. Even though the women generally reported positive experiences with the on-campus family housing facility, the costs forced them to exit their leases or move to more affordable options off-campus in consecutive years. These three themes, if more properly addressed by FSU, could help to better connect the students to the campus, helping them move through college with greater ease.

Summary

In Chapter 5 the lived experiences of eight college students who are mothers were examined. Themes related to octopus mom, personal relationships, changing relationships during college, changes to self, and threats to persisting and engaging in college were detailed. These main concepts were drawn from the research questions and sub-questions which guided

the interview process. Each of the headings contained themes and subthemes based on the findings from the data analysis.

Octopus mom was a significant theme related to navigating college motherhood. The sub-themes included time management, child care, attitude of success, access to resources, and focus and motivation. While the women identified many difficulties associated with this process, they were not halted by them. Instead, the women learned to navigate the challenges and use their resources in order to persist. Students with previous experience or family members with previous knowledge of how to access government aid and community resources shared stories of their use of such systems with ease.

Personal relationships were also a critical component of the experience of college students who are mothers. Within this section were included peer groups, the College Parents' Group, Off-Campus and Non-Traditional Student Services (OCNTSS), family support, and single by choice. While most of the participants chose not to be involved on campus, most of the students reported being engaged with the student organization specifically designed to support college student parents. The participants viewed this engagement as a support structure instead of an involvement opportunity. They also relied heavily on their peer groups and their families, when able, as well as a specific campus resource (OCNTSS) for networking and support. Lastly, seven out of the eight student participants chose to be single rather than remain in a relationship with the father of their child(ren). The women saw this as a strategy for success and made the choice consciously.

Within the changing relationships section of this chapter, the women identified numerous ways in which their relationships with their families and their college faculty changed as a result

of motherhood. In some cases, their relationship with their family members became more distant but in others their bond grew stronger. Additionally, the relationship with their college professors changed and the students reported how personal relationships with their professors positively impacted their academic and personal experience. Faculty interaction was an important relationship the students discussed. Overall, the participants reported having mostly positive relationships with their professors. They noted specific teachers who went above and beyond to support and mentor them. It is evident that faculty had a powerful and positive impact on their experiences and on their success.

Changes to self, the fourth heading, included the following themes: becoming a mother, role changes, and changing for the better. Many initial changes occurred once the women became pregnant and then immediately following childbirth. The women became role models for their children and made significant changes in their lives to be mothers, mature adults, and focused students. It was evident that becoming a mother was significant for the eight participants. The women shared their experiences of transitioning into motherhood roles and how their feelings, attitudes, maturity, and roles greatly changed as a result. Witnessing the pleasure the participants took in reflecting upon this transition was inspiring. Each of the students shared their trepidation followed by glee. All of them made important decisions in order to change their lives for the better, and their student identity was an important component of this transition.

Included in the final section regarding threats to persisting and engaging in college, four themes surfaced. The findings involved the financial struggles this population faced as well as the impact limited time had on their overall student mother experience. The data also addressed

the fact that the childless peers of the students in this study did not understand the vast responsibilities the participants managed regularly. Lastly, this section included the numerous challenges which prevent students who are mothers from moving through college.

In Chapter 5 the themes which emerged for each of the participants were discussed in depth. Having a greater understanding of their lived experiences related to octopus mom, personal relationships, changing relationships during college, changes to self, and threats to persisting and engaging in college informs the recommendations in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the findings from this study on the lived experiences of college students who are mothers. Their experiences were captured using a qualitative research approach, including a three-stage interview process with each participant. Use of the 4 S model (Anderson et al., 2012), allowed for deeper understanding of the various transitions involved with college student motherhood. Chapter 6 provides conclusions and recommendations for future research based on the analysis of the data collected.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of college students who are mothers. The literature on college mothers focused mostly on non-traditional age (over the age of 25) college parents and their experiences on college campuses (Caruth, 2014; NCES, 2002; Tinto, 2012); in this study I sought to understand the experiences of traditional-age college students. Key findings from this study centered on changes in relationships with family and friends, women's ability to persist, and students' sense of self. Overall, the women in this study had to balance two time-intensive roles—student and mother—with little formal institutional support. Participants were often left to their own devices to navigate college motherhood. Support often came in the form of relationships with family,

friends, and other parents they met through the College Parents' Group. Students experienced little formal institutional support outside of that from Off-Campus and Non-Traditional Student Services.

Changing Relationships with Family and Friends

The results of this study indicate that while there was a change in the students' relationships with their family members, it varied for each individual. Overall, the support the students received from their family members increased after giving birth to their child(ren). This support was prevalent throughout their college career as they needed additional financial and emotional support and child care. This type of support was supported by the literature, which addressed various types of assistance provided by family members to student mothers (Brine & Waller, 2004; Quayle, 2007).

The students' significant dependence on their friends at college was not addressed in the literature. The students in this study repeatedly reported the importance of their friendships. Using the 4 S system as a framework, as previously described, support is a critical stage in a person's transition (Anderson et al., 2012). This model helped to provide a clearer understanding of the sources of support that were most helpful to the participants. These friendships provided emotional support, guidance, direction, and child care. The participants' friends took time to help watch their children so that the student could attend class, go to a student organization meeting, or get academic help. The participants made these friendships through housing options for non-traditional students, within a resource center on campus

(OCNTSS), through the College Parents' Group, and through friendships established in high school.

Understanding the great impact these relationships had on the students demonstrates a clear reason for campuses to provide support opportunities for students with children. While two participants in the study had friends on campus from high school, the remaining students relied on their neighbors and friends they met through campus resources. These resources provided essential introductions for the students which allowed them to establish important relationships with peer student mothers. These friendships truly impacted the experiences of the college student mothers.

Single by Choice

Single by choice, a finding not previously mentioned in the higher education literature, was discussed repeatedly throughout the interview process. Seven of the eight student participants in this study shared that they were not in a romantic relationship with the father of their child(ren) by choice. This choice was a personal success strategy. After learning of the father's intentions of parenting, attitude, level of support, and sense of maturity, the student mothers made conscious decisions to remove the father from their situation, ending any romantic relationships which may have existed earlier. Some of the women reported previously being in abusive relationships with the father of the child(ren). Reclaiming their situation, a few of the women created clear boundaries to protect themselves and their families, allowing the father only limited time with the child(ren).

In general, single parenthood is viewed as a more challenging or undesirable path (Beeler, 2016; McLanahan & Sawhill, 2015). Participants were aware of the stereotypes associated with being a young, single mother. However, being a single parent was more desirable to them than being with the father of their child(ren). This concept of choosing single-motherhood challenges the stereotype and negative stigmas associated with single moms. This choice was a coping strategy for personal—and therefore academic—success. The women chose to be single as a means of succeeding in their multiple roles.

Strategy, another stage in the transition model (Anderson et al., 2012), includes how the individual copes, strengthens her resources, changes her situation and uses her surroundings. Seven of the eight women in this study explained how being single was a strategic choice. They chose single-motherhood over remaining in or attempting to establish or reestablish a relationship with the father of their child(ren). To these participants, being a single mother was not a deficit, but rather the result of an empowering decision. Therefore, understanding that for some college student mothers, being single is a choice and a strategy is important to consider when working with and supporting this population. This enlightening finding from the study adds to the current literature in higher education.

Women's Ability to Persist as College Student Mothers

Participants identified several factors that contributed to and/or hindered their ability to persist as a college student mother. Personal connections with faculty members, access to consistent child care, supportive campus friendships, and timing of births were critical to the

persistence of college student mothers. Lack of these four factors hindered a woman's ability to persist.

The importance of personal connections with faculty members was detailed in the literature (Medved & Heisler, 2002). These relationships have the potential to significantly impact a college student mother's academic experience. These relationships are important to their college career both inside and outside the classroom.

Child care (Bowl, 2001; Gonchar, 1995; Reisinger, 1999) was an essential resource highlighted throughout the literature as well. For college students who are mothers, having access to reliable and consistent child care is critical to their success. This type of care allows the mother to focus on her studies and potentially engage further on her campus.

Supportive campus friendships are also significant (Arat, 2013). Friendships provided the student mothers with support, peer guidance, social outlets, and in some cases, child care. Formal social ties allow college students who are mothers to connect in more meaningful ways with peers and with their campus.

The impact of the timing of births was another important factor revealed in this study, yet it was not discussed in the literature. It is important to understand this timing as it relates to a college student mother's transition. Using the 4 S system (Anderson et al., 2012), in the situation stage it was important to consider specific aspects of a transition including timing, role change, duration, and previous experience (Anderson et al., 2012). The timing of a child's birth has a direct connection with the mother's ability to remain in school. It could delay a student's ability to reenter the classroom or have other lasting results such as temporary withdrawal from classes or dropping out entirely. Knowing that such timing is critical to one's academic career, it is

important that students are coached, encouraged, and taught how to manage this timing and potential delay in college entry/reentry. This type of guidance could increase the student's likelihood of attending school and persisting.

The women in this study all remained students at FSU through the completion of the study. At the end of the academic year during which this study was conducted, seven students continued with their studies and one participant (Krystal) graduated. Allison remained enrolled part-time, while the other six students remained enrolled full-time. KM was not able to fulfill the academic requirements of her major and delayed her graduation by only one semester. The remaining participants were all on track to complete their degrees as planned.

Students' Sense of Self

The students revealed that their sense of self greatly changed throughout their college experience as it related to motherhood and through their role as a student. This change in sense of self was also mentioned in the literature regarding role changes (Wardrop & Popadiuk, 2013). Immediately upon learning of their pregnancies, following the birth of their child(ren), and throughout their roles as a college student parent, a student's sense of self changed. All the women in this study changed after becoming mothers. These changes included a heightened awareness of purpose, an increased sense of independence, and a growth in maturity.

Self, another stage in the 4 S model, involves the roles, identities, support structures, and strategies a college student mother experiences that impact her transition (Anderson et al., 2012). In this study, the eight participants each described the many ways they experienced a change in their sense of self. Some of these changes included an increase in motivation, drive, and time

management skills. They also included a decrease in social activity. The participants' previous experiences, ages, timing of childbirths, and number of children all impacted their transitions. Self was a significant part of the students' transitions and could certainly benefit from further study.

The changes in self provide educators with an understanding of how the students' roles alter after becoming a mother. Knowing these changes occur can provide guidance on what to expect from a student mother, how to support a student through this transition, and how to help her enter or reenter a college setting. This knowledge could impact the success rate of a student mother as she returns to campus after giving birth. These changes were not formally addressed in the literature previously, and these results therefore provided new insight.

Recommendations

Findings from this study may be used to improve practices in higher education to support this specific student population. Recommendations to impact the transitions of college student mothers revolve around the following themes: non-traditional versus traditional, campus environment (including housing and transportation), difficulty connecting with peers, and access to child care. Better understanding of the different transitions college student mothers experience served to guide the following recommendations for improving the undergraduate college experience for this specific population.

Broaden Understandings of Nontraditional and Traditional Student Identities and Needs

Given the findings that college students who are mothers identified as non-traditional, traditional and both non-traditional and traditional students, university educators need to be more

thoughtful about how guidance and support are provided for this student demographic. The students did not always identify as non-traditional or traditional; instead, that identification was more fluid depending on the students' situation and understanding of the definition of the term. Additionally, their non-traditional identity as a mother could change throughout their college experience. Perhaps the woman entered college enrolled as a traditional student without a child. After a year, the student could become pregnant and then her student identity would change to non-traditional (depending on the campus). Because her identity could change while in college, university personnel need to make access to specific resources more easily identifiable. All the students in this study identified as mothers. Thus, a recommendation is to provide resources online labeled specifically for student parents (mothers and/or fathers). Any support service directly linked to this population could also be listed on this online option, further guiding the student mother.

Having a better grasp of how college student mothers identify themselves as non-traditional or traditional could assist university officials in creating better support structures for them. Providing clearer definitions of what a non-traditional student is on a particular campus may help attract students who more closely identify in this way to better access specifically tailored resources. Conversely, it is important to note that the college student mothers in this study identified with both student demographics. As described in Chapter 5, these students sometimes felt like they identified more closely with one category but were treated as the other, or vice versa. This simply illustrates a need to better support the students regardless of this distinction. It also suggests that, because students often feel that universities treat them like

traditional students, more attention is needed to ensure they are not lost in the larger traditional student population.

Increase Access to Transportation and Housing

As previously discussed, housing and transportation were important themes college student who are mothers identified as impacting their college experience. The participants discussed the importance of a comfortable living environment for their families. Seven out of eight student participants, at some point in their college career, resided in a university-operated apartment complex designed to better meet the needs of non-traditional students including parents. While two of the students noted the high rental fees associated with this complex, they also mentioned a high level of satisfaction with the housing option. This suggests that while the idea behind the complex is successful, the financial structure is not. The students noted that members of the university community feel associated with this apartment complex and the resources available to their children.

The students described scenarios where, in an emergency, they were likely to have a neighbor (a student mother) who might be willing to assist if they needed someone to watch their child(ren). While no formal questions were asked about their housing environment, it was clear this was an important factor. Administrators at universities with residential offerings could consider this type of family housing unit on their campus. If an apartment complex does not exist within a campus, a wing or a floor of a residence hall could be dedicated to support college students who are mothers. This would create an improved sense of community, belonging, and acceptance and provide enhanced support.

Transportation was another theme associated with campus environment, which arose several times. As previously described, many of the students reported situations where they needed to take multiple buses to arrive at their final destination within the campus community. Better coordination of the buses within the campus community could improve the experience for college students who are mothers. Two of the student participants suggested creating a shuttle bus to take students to local child care facilities. Additionally, two participants discussed the challenges associated with walking on campus while pregnant, noting the potential dangers of inclement weather conditions. Some pregnant mothers may fear walking on icy or snowy sidewalks on their way to class. One participant suggested that mothers be allowed to access the same shuttle service on campus dedicated to supporting students with permanent and/or temporary disabilities to provide a safer method of travelling across campus.

Better addressing the housing and transportation needs of this population could greatly impact their experience within the campus community. Coordinating opportunities to allow them to share feedback about bus routes and campus housing could provide the direction needed to make improvements to the campus environment.

Develop Opportunities to Connect Students to Peers

An additional new finding was that college students who are mothers found connecting with their childless peers exceedingly challenging. The participants reported repeatedly that students without children simply did not understand the numerous roles and responsibilities associated with motherhood. As a result, the childless peers were less inclined to demonstrate flexibility related to classroom assignments, group projects, social life and overall understanding.

While the participants did not directly report a desire to connect with these peers, it was clear this demographic was not as likely to develop formal relationships with those who do not have children. Since traditional students without children far outnumber non-traditional student mothers on many college campuses, this finding suggests a need to better educate the campus and provide more opportunities for students who are mothers to connect with each other. Making friends and developing connections is important, and coordinators on college campuses could be more intentional about creating opportunities for social interactions.

Child Care: An Essential Resource for College Students who are Mothers

Child care was a theme which surfaced in nearly every single interview. While the students never answered any formal questions regarding child care, this theme was linked to numerous discussions. Child care themes were woven throughout the entire interview process and were tied to the following overarching headings: changes in relationships, navigating college, and changes to self. Additionally, when examining the data through the 4 S model (Anderson et al., 2012), child care was linked to self (whether or not the student accessed child care), situation (if the student could afford child care or how a lack of child care prevented the student from campus involvement, employment, or night classes), support (whether or not the student had family, friends, neighbors, or community resources who offered this support) and strategy (how the student coped with or without someone helping to watch her child). The participants each identified child care options when asked about ideas on how to create a more accepting or accommodating campus environment.

Like many other schools which provide child care on campus, FSU gave enrollment priority to faculty and staff members. This philosophy, while a wonderful employee benefit, prevented some students from accessing an essential campus service. Students should have first priority to this resource. Additionally, like at FSU, students should be offered access to campus child care with sliding scales of enrollment costs based on income.

The student participants identified a need for greater access to child care. They spoke about a particular need for evening and weekend care in order to work, complete homework, participate in extra credit options, enroll in evening courses, and attend campus events. Krystal spoke about her desire for fitness and wished she could regularly go to the recreation center on campus. Because she could not access child care, however, it was very hard for her to exercise regularly. She suggested babysitting options at the center, similar to what many community or private fitness centers often provide. Students also suggested child care services they could provide to one another. They suggested creating an organized babysitting initiative in which students who are mothers could elect to participate and where the students could watch each other's children when needed.

Additional access to more flexible child care was a topic of concern for each of the eight participants. This theme repeatedly surfaced throughout the interview process. It was evident there is a need for better access. According to Gonchar (1995), on-site child care is "essential to the education of college-student mothers and to the academic mission of the college" (p. 226). Students who do not have access to this child care and other nonacademic resources are negatively impacted and less likely to persist. If university personnel could help connect students to these campus and community resources or assist with the organization of a student

babysitting program, the needs of this demographic would be better met. With more flexible child care options, students would have additional opportunities to connect, work, and engage in healthy lifestyles.

Suggestions for Further Research

In this section, I provide specific suggestions for further research as a result of the study. The suggestions include the following topics: married or unmarried, contemplation of pregnancy termination, child versus children, campus ecology, the racialized experience of motherhood, and emerging adulthood. Future exploration of these topics could further benefit this student population.

Married or Unmarried

I intended to recruit participants for this study who were both married and single. All eight participants were unmarried, and their support structures (for seven of the students) were rather similar among the group, with no formal support from the child's father. While none of the participants were married, only one of the students was in a committed relationship with the father of her child. The main difference noted for this student, in addition to overall support and companionship, was a greater ability to work more hours than her peers without partners. Future research could include a strategy to recruit only partnered or married students to gain a clearer understanding of their specific lived experiences. Further understanding of the differences between single and married college students who are mothers could increase the overall knowledge of this population.

Contemplation of Pregnancy Termination

Another topic for further research involves the students' decision to keep their baby versus terminating their pregnancy. The women in this study all reported their desire to keep their (first) child with no hesitation. The participants, though anxious, were happy to eventually give birth. Understanding the experiences of students who contemplated their decision to have a child may suggest different life circumstances, support, strategies, needs, and dispositions about their futures.

Child Versus Children

The experiences of college student mothers with one child versus multiple children varied. Studying only mothers with multiple children or only students with one child may also provide more focused results. No formal questions were asked regarding the experience of having multiple children, but because a student with more than one child may have experienced motherhood at a different time in her life, with potential access to different support options, her college experience, needs, and transition may differ as a result.

Campus Ecology

More exploration is needed related to campus environments, also referred to as campus ecology (Strange & Banning, 2001). Creating campuses with all students in mind is a universal way to create the most inclusive campus settings. Student mothers should be included in the conversation when administrators contemplate campus improvements to design, renovations,

new construction, and general function and structure. Conducting research with this concept in mind may lead to additional new findings related to needs, acceptance, and connectivity.

Racialized Experience of Motherhood

As previously discussed, an unanticipated outcome of this study included a majority of students of color, with 7 out of 8 participants identifying as women of color. Recognizing that motherhood is a racialized experience, further exploration of how a mother's cultural, ethnic, and/or racial background influences her approach to and experience with motherhood is necessary. Gaining a better grasp of how motherhood is experienced as a woman of color could provide additional insight into the lived experiences of this population.

Emerging Adulthood

A final area for additional consideration is the concept of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004). People between the ages of 18-25 experience a significant period of time filled with uncertainty, excitement, self-exploration, and independence (Arnett, 2004). Since the women in this study fell within that age span, learning more about emerging adulthood and how and when women with children experience this time period would be beneficial. It is possible that the women experience an accelerated version of this development. Additionally, it is possible, that for some college students who are mothers, their exploration is delayed as a result of motherhood.

Conclusion

In this study, I considered how students who are mothers experience various transitions as they move in, through and out of college. This qualitative study was significant because it allowed opportunities for eight college students who are mothers to share their lived experiences about their transitions throughout college motherhood. While each participant had a unique experience to articulate, they all shared many commonalities which can lead practitioners to create improved educational environments. Their important perspectives provided new findings and themes and led to recommendations which allow for better understanding and, ultimately, improved support structures for this unique student population.

Chapter 6 concludes this research study's report. The findings support many of the themes found in the current higher education literature for this population. This study also extends the literature and offers new concepts to consider. These new findings are related to changing relationships with family and friends, including participants' significant dependence on their friends and the concept of being single by choice. Another new finding included the impact the timing of the women's childbirth(s) had on their academic progress and its relationship to their ability to persist as college student mothers.

The new ideas which emerged and the recommendations provide university educators with opportunities to further develop educational environments which better support college students who are mothers. My intent in conducting this study was to give voice to a student population oftentimes unheard on college campuses. My hope is that higher education administrators consider their duty to support the needs of all college students when improving college campuses.

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APPENDIX A

STUDENT INTRODUCTORY EMAIL

Dear Student Mother,

I am writing to invite you to participate in my dissertation study on the needs and experiences of college students who are mothers. After reviewing the information below, please email me at zambito@niu.edu if you are interested in participating in the study.

If you agree to help me, I will contact you to schedule a face-to-face interview (no more than 90 minutes in length) at a time that is most convenient for you. After the first interview, I will schedule two additional follow-up interviews with you when possible. To be a part of my study the following criteria must be met:

- Currently enrolled as an undergraduate college student
- Currently a mother
- Is between the ages of 18-24 years old

Please know that all data (participant, people, locations, etc.) will be confidential. Feel free to contact me via email at zambito@niu.edu or by mobile phone at 815-751-2384. In addition, you may also contact my advisor, Dr. Carrie Kortegast at ckortegast@niu.edu. Additionally, please feel free to contact NIU's Office of Research Compliance at 815-753-8588 regarding information pertaining to participants' rights.

Thank you for your consideration,

Jill Zambito

APPENDIX B

INTRODUCTORY COLLEAGUE EMAIL TO SEND TO STUDENTS

Dear Student Mother,

My name is Jill Zambito. I am a doctoral candidate at Northern Illinois University (NIU). The purpose of my dissertation is to obtain the stories of *College Students Who Are Mothers*. Its focus is to describe the experiences of college student mothers and the ways in which support structures can assist in their success. I write you today hoping you will assist me in contributing to this research by sharing your knowledge and experience with me as a college student mother.

To be a part of my study the following criteria must be met:

- Currently enrolled as an undergraduate college student
- Currently a mother
- Is between the ages of 18-24 years old

If you agree to help me, I will contact you to schedule a face-to-face interview (no more than 90 minutes in length) at a time that is most convenient for you. After the first interview, I will schedule two additional follow-up interviews with you when possible. Please know that all data (participant, people, locations, etc.) will be confidential. Feel free to contact me via email at zambito@niu.edu or by mobile phone at 815-751-2384. In addition, you may also contact my advisor, Dr. Carrie Kortegast at ckortegast@niu.edu. Additionally, please feel free to contact NIU's Office of Research Compliance at 815-753-8588 regarding information pertaining to participants' rights.

Thank you for your consideration,

Jill Zambito

APPENDIX C

EMAIL INQUIRY REMINDER

Hello,

This email is to follow-up on an email I sent you last week requesting your consideration to participate in my dissertation regarding *The Needs and Experiences of College Students Who are Mothers*. Its focus is to describe the experiences of college student mothers and the ways in which support structures can assist in their success.

I hope you can find the time to support me with this important project. Please contact me via email at zambito@niu.edu or by mobile phone at 815-751-2384 if you have any questions.

Thank you for your consideration. Your input is much appreciated.

Jill Zambito

APPENDIX D

PARTICIPATION EMAIL CONFIRMATION

Hello [insert name of student participant],

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. This email confirms our interview regarding my dissertation study titled *The Needs and Experiences of College Students Who Are Mothers.* We are scheduled to meet at DATE, TIMES, at LOCATION. Each interview should last no more than 90 minutes. Please contact me via mobile phone at 815-751-2384 or email me at zambito@niu.edu should you have any questions or need to reschedule at a more convenient time.

Thank you for participating in my study,
Jill Zambito

APPENDIX E

CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in the research project titled *The Needs and Experiences of College Students Who Are Mothers* by Jill Zambito, a graduate student at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to explore the lived experiences of students who are mothers at a large, Midwest public research university. Using a feminist theoretical perspective the focus of the research is to better understand how students who are mothers experience college.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to do the following: participate in three 90-minute face-to-face, digitally recorded interviews that will be conducted on my campus (unless otherwise specified) at my convenience; including a follow-up interview to provide further clarification to the initial interviews or to answer any questions regarding my experiences. The total time I will be asked to volunteer for this study will not go beyond 4.5 hours.

I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice, and that if I have any additional questions concerning this study, I may contact the investigator at zambito@niu.edu or by cell phone at 815-751-2384. In addition, I may also contact her advisor, Dr. Carrie Kortegast, at ckortegast@niu.edu or by telephone at 815-753-9200 if I have any questions. I also understand that if I wish to obtain further information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at 815-753-8524. I understand that the intended benefits of this study include contributions to the literature regarding the needs and experiences of college students who are mothers. I have been informed of the foreseeable risk of being identified by others as a participant in this study and understand that all information gathered during the research project will be kept secure by the investigator. Pseudonyms will be used for all persons and places mentioned.

I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

_____	_____	_____
Print Name	Signature of Participant	Date

I consent to the digital audio recording of my interviews by the investigator.

_____	_____	_____
Print Name	Signature of Participant	Date

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview 1: Introduction and background interview focused on motherhood

Part 1: Review informed consent document with participant

1. Send informed consent document to student participant via email prior to Interview 1
2. During Interview 1, discuss the form and inquire about any questions the participant may have.
3. Review the interview process (including all three interviews) and the topics involved with each meeting.
    a. Interview 1: getting to know the participant, including demographic information and motherhood.
    b. Interview 2: discuss support structures involved, or not involved, as a student who is a mother.
    c. Interview 3: review the transcripts from Interviews 1 and 2. Participant offers edits, observations, and recommendations on how the lived experiences for college students who are mothers could be improved.
4. Ask participant if they have any questions about the process or the study.
5. Sign consent form and provide copy to the student participant.

Part 2: Collect demographic information from participant:

Participant: _____(pseudonym)

Demographics:

Age
Number of child/children
Age of child/children
Marital status
Social class
Race and ethnic background
Year in college
Major of study

Part 3: Open-ended questions about motherhood:

1. Becoming a Mother

- Tell me the story of when you learned that you were going to become a mother?
- What were your initial thoughts? How did that change over time?
- What were your support systems at the time?

2. Motherhood and College

- How did becoming a mother influence your college aspirations?
- Tell me a story that represents what it is like to be a college student and a mother?

3. Changes to Self

- What, if anything, has changed since becoming a student who is a mother?
- Tell me a story of a time you realized you changed as a person as a result of motherhood? As a result of college?
- If you were to use one word to describe motherhood, what would it be? Why?
- What one word would you use to describe college? Why?

Part 4: Wrap up

Do you have any questions for me?

Schedule next interview.

Interview 2: Support and student motherhood

1. Daily Routine
- Walk me through a typical day for you.

2. Experience on Campus
- Describe for me, an experience that has impacted your college career as a student mother.
- Are you involved on campus? If so, how are you involved? If not, why are you not involved?
- Describe your peer group on campus. Who are you friends with? Why?

3. Academic Experience
- Describe your experience in the classroom.
- What is your relationship with faculty? Do they know that you are a parent?
- What are your professional aspirations?

4. Support Systems
- As a mother, what support systems do you rely on?
- As a student, what support systems do you rely on?
- As a student mother, what support systems do you rely on?

5. Strategies to Negotiate College
- What are some of your strategies that help you be successful as a student?
- What are some of the challenges you experience as a student mother?
    - How do you manage those challenges?
- Tell me a story about a time that you experienced a challenge at college. How did you manage that challenge? How did motherhood influence that challenge?
- Tell me a story about a time that you felt successful at college. Why did you feel this way?

6. Changes to Self
- How have you changed between when you first were a college mother and now?

7. Participant questions:
- Are there any questions you wished I would have asked you about your experiences as a student who is a mother?
- Do you have any questions for me?

Interview 3: Review of the transcripts

Open-ended questions and opportunities to clarify information.

1. Review of transcripts
- What reactions or comments do you have about the first two interview transcripts?
- What have you learned about yourself through this interview process and reviewing the transcripts?
- What recommendations would you give colleges to better support college mothers?
- How are college mothers assets to college campuses?
- Is there anything that you left out of the interviews that you would like to add?
- Are there any topics that you want to further address?
- Do you have any edits to the transcripts?

2. Interviewer comments
- After reviewing the transcripts, I have some clarifying questions for you (I will provide these questions upon review of the transcripts).

3. Recommendations
- What are some ways in which university administrators could do to improve the college of experiences of students who are mothers?
- What do you wish university administrators and educators knew about students who are mothers?
- What do you wish your college peers (with or without children) knew about your experience?
- What types of support structures would you find helpful to access that you do not currently access or have access to?
- What recommendations do you have to make Northern Illinois University more accepting of or accommodating to students who are mothers?

4. Participant questions
- Do you wish I had asked you anything additional today or throughout the interviews?
- Do you have any questions for me?

5. Closing
- Thank student participant for their time, contributions and involvement.
- Ask if I may contact the student for any further clarification.
- Ask if they would be willing to be contacted for any future studies.
- Present student participant with thank you gift card.