

Single Mothers' Experiences As College Students: Exploring Role Conflict  
Among Single Mothers In College

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SINGLE MOTHERS' EXPERIENCES AS COLLEGE STUDENTS: EXPLORING  
ROLE CONFLICT AMONG SINGLE MOTHERS IN COLLEGE

This research examines the experiences of single mothers as college students, especially as they pertain to the dual role of mother and student. With the rising number of single parent households and increasing numbers of nontraditional students enrolled in college, it is important to understand how the experience of single motherhood impacts the college experience. Using role theory and mothering ideologies, this research describes the challenges that single mothers who attend college face as well as the resources and strategies utilized by single mothers to help them succeed in college. The study consisted of 6 semi-structured, qualitative interviews with single mothers who attend a Midwestern, urban university campus. After transcription, interviews were coded by the author. Coding consisted of identifying key concepts that related to challenges of dual role status and strategies to overcome these challenges. Mothers were asked to describe their experiences relating to their dual role as parent and college student and to elaborate on the resources and strategies they use to overcome these challenges. Results suggest that there are many challenges single mothers encounter include: time management, role conflict (for instance, feelings of guilt from losing time with their child), feelings of stress and anxiety, and a lack of self-care. Several useful resources aiding in college success were identified, such as strong social support from family and friends, and campus resources such as health services. Research also found that single

mothers experience financial strain while attending college and rely heavily on financial aid for assistance. The research presented here provides valuable insight to university administrators in their efforts to assist their single mother students.

Peter Seybold, PhD., Chair

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## **Introduction**

Single parent households have more than tripled their share of American households since the 1960s. While the majority of children live with two parents, the second most common type of household is children living with a single mother. Single mother families account for 23% of American households- an increase from 8% in the 1960 (Census Bureau, 2016). More women are taking on parenthood alone, yet parents are more likely to leave college without a degree than their nonparent peers (Institute for Women's Policy Research [IWPR], 2013) While there has been extensive research regarding the success of single mothers in society in general little is known about the experiences single mothers have as college students. Single mothers encounter many challenges in everyday life that require them to rely on a variety of resources. Single mothers who attend college may rely on many resources, both on and off campus, to overcome a variety of challenges. The goal of this research project is to identify and understand the resources single mothers use to overcome difficulties they encounter as college students. The roles of mother and college may often overlap and conflict with each other as well as the other roles mothers may occupy. Additionally, mothers may often be faced with simultaneously juggling their roles. This project seeks to understand how single mothers work through this role conflict and overload and remain successful in both their role as mother and college student. Further, what kind of strategies do single mothers use to overcome challenges as both college students and mothers? This project looks to describe resources, both on and off campus, that single mothers who attend



college find helpful. What on campus resources do single mothers find helpful? By describing resources, or lack thereof, available to single mothers who attend college, this study will help colleges identify and understand what resources are important to single mothers and other nontraditional students and help them be successful in their college careers.

Specific aims of this study included:

- 1) To describe the challenges that single mothers face who attend college, especially as they pertain to the balancing the dual role of mother and student along with other roles they might occupy.
- 2) To identify, describe and understand the resources and strategies (i.e. on campus resources and help from social networks) utilized by single mothers to help them succeed in college.

## **Background**

The literature reviewed for this project was valuable in providing background on single mothers and the college experience as well as the theoretical background on role conflict and mothering ideologies. It was important to understand the views of single college mothers in order to understand how the role of college student and single mother overlap with and interact with each other as well as other roles they might occupy. It was also important to understand the role of single mother households in relation to the general population as well as the underlying theories of role conflict and mothering ideologies.

### Single Mother Households

More than sixty percent of families where moms are considered the “breadwinner” are single-mother families (Wang, Parker, & Taylor, 2013). Single mother households account for 23% of American households (Census Bureau, 2016). While the majority of white, Asian, and Hispanic children live in two-parent households, more than half of black children live in single parent homes – usually with a single mother. Further, those with less educated parents are more likely to live in a single parent home (“Parenting in America”, 2015).

In order to accommodate busy schedules associated with family life and college responsibilities, women are more likely to choose jobs that have more flexible hours, but lower pay (Shelton and Firestone 1989). Being a single mother is often linked with having less education, a lower income, and therefore fewer opportunities (Goldberg & Kremen, 1990). It is also suggested that many women

also work in “either low paying or part time jobs”. These jobs, known as “pink collar jobs” are typically female dominated due to their nature.

### Single Moms in College

The number of non-traditional students enrolled in college has been increasing over the past several years. The percentage of nontraditional students is expected to continue to grow (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016). These nontraditional students are typically balancing school with jobs and families. As such, they face a unique set of challenges that traditional college students may not experience. These non-traditional students include many parents who have the additional burden of a family. According to the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR) (2014), parents make up approximately one quarter of the undergraduate student population. Of these parents, approximately 43% are single mothers (IWPR, 2014). The number of single mothers in college more than doubled from 1999 to 2012. Among these single moms, women of color enrolled in college are especially likely to be single mothers (IWPR, 2017). The increasing number of single mothers in college clearly demonstrates a need for more research on this understudied population.

The literature on single moms in college is limited and the majority of the literature focuses on the low socio-economic status of single college mothers and their reliance on the welfare system, a point of view not all single college mothers identify with. Single mothers are seen as a disadvantaged population in a general sense. Haleman (2004) states that this disadvantaged position in society increases the need for single mothers to obtain a college degree and “earning

potential it represents” (p. 775). Haleman’s article is limited by its focus on single college mothers who are welfare recipients. In their article *Welfare Reform: Can Higher Education Reduce the Feminization of Poverty*, Tiarniyu and Mitchell (2001) examine the effectiveness of college education as a means of escaping poverty for women. Tiarniyu and Mitchell (2001) acknowledge the fact that income is directly associated with level of education. Zhan and Pandey (2004) also acknowledge the importance of a college education for single mothers stating “A college degree is critical to exit poverty, especially for single women with children (p. 108).” Tiarniyu and Mitchell (2001) acknowledge the fact there are still many barriers in post-secondary education for single moms who attend college. Goldrick and Sorensen (2010) note that “Although rates of college attendance have increased substantially among unmarried parents, their college completion rates are low (p. 179).” Single parents are also more likely to delay entering college and when entering are more likely to be inadequately prepared with low standardized test scores, fewer college preparatory classes, and many enter without a high school degree (Goldrick and Sorensen, 2010).

Further elaborating on the barriers affecting low-income single mothers, Austin and McDermott (2003) examined the strategies these women use to overcome these difficulties. Many women relied on faith in the benefits of a college education, social networks, faculty relationships, university services like child care and financial aid, choosing flexible academic programs, and support from community and family (Austin and McDermott, 2003).

## Improving Life Chances

Single mothers face many difficulties including low economic status and financial challenges associated with single income households. In addition to these difficulties, single mothers also face other societal disadvantages such as the inequality in the education system, inequality in job opportunities, unequal pay for women, as well as a lack of resources and services necessary to raise a family with only one parent. Because they are stigmatized and even discriminated against not only for their gender but for their status as a single mother, their chances for advancement are reduced more than most (Gatmaitan 2006).

Obtaining a college education is seen as one of the most effective ways to reduce economic hardships and decrease inequalities. Attending college allows women, including single mothers, to not only expand their knowledge, but to broaden their opportunities for employment and increase their earning potential. On average, women with a bachelor's degree earn more than \$800,000 more in their lifetime compared to those with only a high school diploma (Carnevale, Rose, and Cheah 2011). Potential earnings increase even further with a graduate level degree. Research suggests that receiving a college degree from a four-year university makes single mothers "twelve times as likely to live above the poverty line as their counterparts without a high school degree" (Zahn and Pandey, 2004). These higher paying jobs tend to include other benefits that are especially useful for parents such as health and life insurance or retirement plans (Trostel,

2015). This is especially important for single parents who are the sole source of income for their families.

Getting a college degree is also beneficial to the family of the college graduate. The children of college graduates tend to be better off both socially and economically. Children whose parents did not attend college are less likely to attend college themselves as well as and are less likely to continue to pursue a graduate or professional degree (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2001). Thus, a single mother obtaining a college degree sets a pattern of success not only for themselves, but for their children as well.

#### Role Conflict, Overload, and Juggling

Most importantly, this research builds on role theory originally developed by symbolic interactionist George Herbert Meade and later developed by many other theorists. This theory asserts that each role has a set of rights, duties, expectations, norms, and behaviors associated with it (Meade, 1934). The symbolic interactionist approach to role theory gives attention to the way individuals understand and give meaning to their own roles and the roles of others. Thus, norms serve as a sort of framework and provide individuals with a broad set of expectations in which they are able to negotiate their role. This emphasis makes the symbolic interactionist approach useful for understanding the relationships between multiple roles as well as stress related to occupying multiple roles (Biddle, 1986).

A person rarely occupies only one role. When the obligations and responsibilities of one role a person occupies begin to conflict with that of another

role they occupy, role conflict can occur (Goode, 1960). In addition, a person may experience role overload in which they feel overwhelmed by the demands of the multiple roles they occupy. This results in an inability of the person to meet the demands of one or more roles they occupy (Goode, 1960). While not all experiences of role conflict, role strain, or overload are inherently negative, they can result in negative feelings of stress and anxiety for an individual (Biddle, 1986).

Additionally, this research builds on the concepts of role juggling and role spillover. Role juggling refers to managing many different roles at one time and can cause stress and has an immediate negative effect on task enjoyment and mood (Williams, Suls, Alliger, Learner, & Wan, 1991, p. 664). Role spillover refers to the effects that work and family have on one another. Experiences from work may spillover into the family domain or experiences from family may spillover into and have an effect on work (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). Spillover helps to explain the directional influence of one role on another. While spillover is typically applied to work and family roles, it can also be useful when considering the experiences of single moms in college.

The increase in single mothers occupying multiple roles (i.e. work, school, and family roles) means there has also been a concern for the psychological well-being of these mothers. Single college mothers experience this type of role conflict and the psychological stresses that are associated with occupying multiple roles at once. In fact, research has proven that unlike most adult social

roles such as employment, parenthood is negatively associated with wellbeing (Evenson and Simon, 2005).

Research indicates that role strain among women who are employed and also have household and childcare responsibilities has been associated with increased stress (Williams, 1991). In the context of this research, single mothers who attend college occupy multiple roles much like employed mothers. They are not only a student and a parent but often occupy an employee role and a role as a significant other. The duties and responsibilities of any one of these roles may not be compatible with another role they occupy. Thus, it is likely that role conflict or role overload may arise for single parents who attend college, resulting in feelings of stress and anxiety.

Thus far, the majority of the research examining role conflict and role juggling among single parents examines parent and work related roles. However, there is a growing body of literature which suggests that single parents who attend college may experience unique challenges in regards to role conflict. The existing literature suggests that while college students may occupy many roles at once, the student and family related roles were generally the ones that contributed the most to role conflict (Giancola et al., 2009). Evidence suggests that the unique demands associated with the role of college student and that of parent contribute to the experience of role conflict among parents who attend college (Home, 1998).



## Mothering Ideologies

Related to the idea of role conflict, the development of extensive and intensive mothering ideologies informs this research. In her 1996 book *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* Sharon Hays develops the concept of “intensive mothering” The “intensive mothering” ideology asserts that mothers should be the central caregivers in a child’s life. Thus, the mother should be the one who spends the most time with her children. It is also important that this time is emotionally involved and happens regularly and that mothers always put their children’s needs before that of their own. Such expectations often lead mothers to feel inadequate and pressured. Further, women used their children to justify their employment, stating that they benefit from their employment as well (Hays, 1996). However, this framework is not useful for all women which led to the development of the “extensive mothering” ideology.

In her 2012 article, *Extensive Mothering: Employed Mothers’ Constructions Of The Good Mother* Karen Christopher developed a second ideology in which she reframes the ideas of motherhood as they were previously defined. She finds that for some mothers, the “intensive mothering” ideology can be problematic. She says that instead, some mothers reject the ideal “intensive mothering” ideology. Instead they rely on other caregivers for their children while they work outside of their home. While mothers who embrace the “intensive mothering” ideology define good mothering as being the primary caregiver for their child and making sacrifices for their children, mothers who embrace “extensive mothering” redefined good mothering as having a sense of control

over their children's wellbeing and being able to justify their employment as beneficial to their children (Christopher, 2012).

While these particular ideologies have been explored in terms of employed mothers, there is very little research which explores how these mothering ideologies may apply to mothers who occupy a student role along with their mothering role. This research hypothesizes that single mothers who attend college may find the "intensive mothering" ideology especially problematic, and may experience role conflict because of the expectations associated with this perspective on mothering. This project seeks to understand how these single mothers navigate a society in which the "intensive mothering" ideology is the social norm. Further, this research explores how the "extensive mothering" ideology may be useful for single mothers attending college.

## **Significance**

While there is a great deal of research exploring work-family conflict, role conflict, and role juggling, the majority of this research focuses on the way in which parents juggle work and family obligations. Less is known about how the addition of school responsibilities contributes to role conflict, overload, and juggling. Additional research is needed in order to understand how role conflict, role overload, and role juggling happens for those who occupy the role as student and parent. With the number of single parent households, especially single mother households, continuing to rise, it is especially important to understand how this role conflict affects single parents. Additionally, research is also needed to understand how the “intensive mothering” and “extensive mothering” ideologies may be applicable to moms who occupy both a student and mother role. Further, with increasing numbers of non-traditional students, including single parents, attending college this research will be especially relevant for college administrators and faculty as well as policymakers wishing to provide a more supportive and welcoming educational environment for non-traditional students such as single mothers.

## **Research Design**

Qualitative methods were utilized in order to best describe the experiences of single mother college students and understand the strategies they use to be successful in college. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were ideal for this study as this allowed the participants to talk openly about their experiences in their own words. Using semi-structured interviews also allowed for each interview to be altered slightly to accommodate for the experiences of each participant while allowing common themes to emerge. Additionally, using an interpretive approach (Merriam and Associates 2002), allowed for further exploration in order to analyze the experiences of single mothers on college campuses in order to better understand how their dual roles as both single mother and student affect the parent and college experience.

## **Reflexivity Concerns**

Qualitative research raises the importance of reflexivity as the researcher is the data collection instrument; reflexivity means that it is important to reflect on who the researcher is and how that may affect the quality of the project (Esterberg 2002). I have insider status within the population I chose to study because I completed college as a single mother and had prior knowledge and experiences which informed my research. I was interested in the experiences of other women and how those experiences influenced their roles as parent and student.

Conducting insider research increases the concerns for bias due to concerns regarding reflexivity. While having insider status may help give insight into

participants' lives and experiences, it can also be a source of bias (Esterberg, 2002). Due to my insider status I may have been more likely to focus on certain situations I find as more important or ask leading questions. My ideas about single motherhood may be significantly different than others' experiences. To allow for many different experiences to emerge, I will let mothers self-identify as single moms as my definition of single may be different than others. I will also use open-ended questions and probes that allow the women to share their experiences in their own words. Every effort was made to ensure that my insider status did not affect the quality of the interviews or the findings. I did not share my personal views with participants. My insider status was shared with participants only to establish rapport but I did not elaborate on my experiences unless prompted by participants.

### Participants and Recruitment

The study participants were recruited via social media and email fliers. The fliers were posted in a local mom support group as well as groups for undergraduate students who attend IUPUI. Email fliers were distributed to various listservs throughout the IUPUI campus. Additionally, the fliers were distributed to several undergraduate classes. While the initial goal was to recruit 12 participants, only 6 participants were identified who met all the criteria. In order to participate in the study, participants needed to meet the following criteria:

- Self-identify as single mothers, regardless of living arrangements or relationship status, and consider themselves "single". This allowed for a variety of views on single motherhood.

- Are aged 18-30.
- Attend and are currently enrolled at IUPUI, an urban university campus, and are seeking their first degree.
- Have at least one child who is 12 or younger as mothers with younger children may be more likely to use more resources than those with older children or teenagers who are able to care for themselves.

Compensation was provided to participants in the form of a \$10 Target gift card at the time of the interview.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected via in-depth, semi structured interviews which varied in length. Prior to completing this interview, participants completed a brief demographic survey in order to collect background information such as age, number and age of children, race, college class standing, and employment status. The demographic survey was used to inform data analysis and allowed for an overview of the sample. The semi-structured interviews included questions related to the specific aims. Specifically, participants were asked questions pertaining to the challenges that single mothers face who attend college, especially challenges related to the dual role of mother and student. Participants were also asked to identify, describe the resources and strategies they utilize in order to be successful in college. Participants were asked to talk about five main topics: general experiences, successes and challenges, strategies and resources, role overlap and conflict, and on campus resources and experiences. While an interview guide was used, the semi-structured nature of the interviews

allowed for each interview to be adapted to the individual participant. It also allowed for exploration of other related topics and themes. The interview guide is provided in Appendix A. Each interview was conducted in a place of the participant's choosing. While some participants chose more open public spaces such as the campus food court or library, others chose private spaces such as reserved study rooms. Each interview was audio recorded and was transcribed either by myself or a third-party transcription service. All identifying information was removed during the course of transcription. After transcription, the data was coded and analyzed in order for common themes to be found. These themes are discussed in depth below.

#### Improving Data Quality

The quality of findings is directly related to the quality of interviews. For this reason, it is important that the participants match the intended sample and were able to provide quality interviews which give insight into the intended topic so that it resulted in information rich data (Kvale, 2008). Audio-recording the interviews also insured that the participants' experiences are accurately captured in their own words. Further, this allowed for interviews to be coded and analyzed accurately to look for common themes that may emerge within the interviews.

To further insure the quality of this study's findings, the findings were peer reviewed (Merriam and Associates 2002). The research findings were reviewed to guarantee quality. Thesis committee members were be able to provide feedback on the methodology and the quality of the findings. Using this feedback

for changes helped to improve the validity and reliability of the findings as well as improve the overall study quality.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

There were few risks associated with participation in the study, however all potential risks were taken into account. The study received IRB approval. A study information sheet was provided to and reviewed with all participants before the interview began. The voluntary nature of the project was emphasized and participants were assured that they could skip any question they were uncomfortable answering or leave the interview at any time. Verbal consent was obtained at the beginning of each interview. Any identifying information was removed during transcription such as names of participants and their children. Each participant was assigned an alias during analysis in order to further protect their identity. Lastly, the recordings were deleted immediately after transcription.



## Findings

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 6 participants. Interviews ranged in length from 24 to 54 minutes. A brief overview of their demographic information can be found below in Table 1. Aliases have been assigned to protect privacy. It should also be noted that half of the participants were first generation college students. All participants worked at least part time in addition to attending school. All but 1 participant were enrolled full time, meaning they took 12 or more credit hours in the semester in which they were interviewed. All the single moms interviewed had different experiences and each interview was unique. However, several common themes emerged during the interviews. The findings of these interviews are described below.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Characteristics

<b>Alias</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>No. of Children (Ages)</b>	<b>Race/ Ethnicity</b>	<b>First Gen. Student</b>	<b>Class Standing</b>
Aria	30	1 (11 yrs)	White	No	5 <sup>th</sup> Year +
Bonnie	22	1 (2 yrs)	White	Yes	Sophomore
Charlotte	19	1 (19 mos)	White	No	Sophomore
Darla	28	2 (6 yrs, 4 mos)	White	Yes	Junior
Emily	23	1 (6 yrs)	Jewish	No	Sophomore
Fiona	24	1 (6 yrs)	White	Yes	5 <sup>th</sup> Year +

### Role Overlap and Conflict

A common theme that emerged among participants was role overlap and conflict. Moms talked about how their dual roles as both mother and student often overlapped or conflicted with one another. One of the most common ways that this theme appeared in interviews was moms experiencing frustration, interference, feelings of guilt, and even feeling that their relationship with their child had become distanced. For example, Aria talked about how she

experienced frustration while studying. Further, Aria believes this led to some distance in their parent-child relationship.

There was interference and there was frustration and it was something we just got used to. I don't like to think that it kind of brought us apart but I think it did. Maybe that's just part of her growing up. At the same time, I think she got used to me being in the books a lot so it did distance our relationship a bit.

Aria continued to talk about her experiences, stating that she shared a very close bond with her daughter before she began school. She spoke about her conflicted feelings about returning to school and how the thought of losing time with her daughter resulted in negative feelings.

[It's been] negative because of the guilt. Like you said " Is this really worth it?" I had her when I was 19 and I didn't really think I was ever going to get to college because of the situation at the time but 3 years after she was born I moved back in with my parents. We got resources together to make it possible. I was driven at that point to get it done and make a better life for her. But at the same time, I resented it because it took away from our time together. It was a double-edged sword. And then the fact that I'm applying to grad school. [My daughter is] like "Don't do it." She doesn't want me to go.

After school began, Aria found that she was unable to spend as much time with her daughter as before, which caused her daughter to become upset. However, she acknowledges that it has helped her daughter to become more independent.

We were really close up until starting school. We would do everything together. Concerts, museums. We had a close bond. It was kind of hard in the beginning when I would have to study because she would come out and bust through the door really excited and want to play. And I can't so she would get really upset. There was a lot of that in the beginning... Maybe it's turned her into who she is now. I mean the independent part. It just depends on

how you look at it. Positive or negative. But it did have an impact I think.

Darla also experienced feeling that she was missing out on her time with her kids because of school. She worried that she would regret the loss of time with her kids someday.

I'm just conflicted. I feel like I don't always spend enough time with my kids, so emotionally some days it's hard. I don't know [What] if one day they're like you don't spend enough time with us? And I'm trying to finish school and I can't. Like right now during finals. Last weekend and this weekend I have found someone to watch the kids. Actually, my daughter went to her dad's and my son went to his dad's but that's my only two full days that I get to stay with them and then I had to come here to study for finals [instead]. So, it's like just no time left for them anymore. Will I regret it later? Watching them grow up and missing out on little things?

Charlotte had similar experiences and feelings of loss of time with her child. She talked about how in addition to her school obligations, she also loses time with her son while she is at work.

I feel like being a college student part time and working takes away from the experiences I get with my son... I just feel like having that extra stress of working and doing my school work it takes away from stuff that I would be able to do that with him... I just feel like he is missing out on having all of me or having time with me. He doesn't get as much time with me as he should. I have to complete my school work on time and go to work to pay financially for him and stuff. I feel like I don't get as much bonding time with him as I want. It kinds of makes me jealous that my mom gets to be with him pretty much every day. Like when we leave [my mom's] he cries.

Emily, much like the other moms, said she also experienced feelings of guilt and not spending enough time with her child. She elaborated on these feelings by talking about how at times she feels like she is not grounded in her life because of her concerns about school work.

The biggest challenge, aside from the time management issue, is managing any guilt feelings that I get for not being able to spend as much time with my son. That goes along with the territory of just being in college and being a single mom. There are things that I can do better obviously to help alleviate the problem, but a lot of it isn't entirely within my control or something I have to deal with. There is a lot of stuff to do. Being a college student impacts my life as being a mom in that regard. It also is kind of crazy because when you are in school, you study a lot and you find yourself carrying on about these things [you study about] and then you come home and it's like this has nothing to do with [real life]. [But you] keep thing about these far-off objects. It makes it seem as though sometimes you are not grounded.

Additionally, Emily spoke about how experienced sleepless nights due to this guilt and worry.

What keeps me up at night isn't my homework, it's worrying about other things. I'm worried about [my son's] behavior and I also have paper due tomorrow morning. It's hard and that is where the guilt can come in because it feels like you are not spending enough time with your children or just thinking about them, considering everything because you are just so wrapped up. That is definitely my biggest challenge.

Fiona also felt this type of guilt. She discussed feeling like she had to choose between her schoolwork and her child which resulted in feelings of stress.

I feel like I'm choosing between my school and [my child] and obviously [my child] wins but when you start missing [classes]... you can only miss twenty percent or they fail you in the class. So, it's really stressful.

Further, Emily described similar feelings of guilt. She described her day to day experiences and how she feels guilty for not spending as much time with her child.

There is also a little sense of guilt as it feels like I am not spending a lot of time with him because I am working on projects. Usually I go to school in the morning, two days during the week, I work from noon to 5pm and on those day, my mom picks him up from school and when I get home after sitting in traffic for an hour, he is at home

eating dinner. Then I sit with him and we watch a show and sometimes. If it's still light outside, we play and we read and I put him to bed. I don't get to spend a lot of time with him during the week.

While participants experienced feelings of guilt regarding losing time with their kids, they often reported not feeling the same type of guilt for not dedicating time to their school work. While participants said they sometimes felt bad for not completing assignments, it was not the same guilt they felt for not taking care of parenting obligations. Participants often reported that they prioritized their child and family above their school obligations. While they recognized the importance of maintaining their grades, they were more likely to sacrifice time for school work in order to spend time with their child but not vice versa. Emily, for instance, talks about how she doesn't feel guilty in her role as a student.

I don't feel guilty [as a student]. I might feel bad, but it's not the same sort of thing. I don't feel guilty as a college student if I don't get an assignment done on time because I was dealing with [my son] because in my opinion, that is a perfectly good excuse. So I don't feel guilty for that one. I don't know how good of an excuse it is to not pay attention to something that he's doing at school that day because I am paying attention to my own school.

Charlotte also talks about how she would rather sacrifice time for her school work in order to spend time with her son.

There are sometimes time when I am just like "I'm not doing this [assignment]" because I want to spend time with my son. I am just going to take a lower grade or I am not going to complete the assignment to my full potential because I rush it so I can go spend time with him. I feel like if I didn't have him I will take more time to study, or take more time to thoroughly read that chapter. I feel like with having him, I still complete my school work and have good grades. It's just I feel like most times when I want to do things, I choose him over my school work.

Additionally, Fiona shared her experiences. Fiona stated that she feels like she is a good student and always puts her best work forward. However, she doesn't necessarily feel bad when she needs to prioritize her family and child before her school work.

I'm usually not too worried about the school work. I feel like I'm generally a pretty good student when my family is not falling apart around me. So, with the exception of this last semester, no, I have really never had the problem feeling like academically I'm taking something away from my best by spending time with my family. They are the more important factor and they always win any sort of battle when it comes to who needs my attention and who needs my time. Now if that's "Mama play Barbies with me", that may have to wait until I'm done with this quiz or something but if it's anything important I don't worry about it.

While participants felt guilt and struggled to balance their roles as student and parent, many participants reported that they felt their college education was worth the sacrifices they were making or reported feeling that their experiences in college were beneficial to raising their children. Bonnie for instance talks about how even though she is losing time with her child in order to obtain her degree, she feels as if it is a sort of tradeoff in order to give her son a better life. Further, she elaborates on how she sees college as an opportunity to set a higher standard for her son than her parents set for her.

It's a tradeoff but it's the greatest tradeoff you can make because you're giving that kid a better life than what you would lead [if you were] working a minimum wage job... The way that I see is a fair tradeoff. You're giving up how many hours to be with your kid and even though you know you never get those hours back. At the same, time you're putting those hours towards better use. You're putting them towards every assignment you turn in and every exam that you do is putting a better step towards a better life for your kid. I know that my parents both never went to college so if I didn't go to college my kid would end up just the way that I did. I might as well go to school get my degree and I know that I have capabilities it's

just making the way. Just paving the path basically. I'm setting a higher standard than what my parents set for me.

Emily talked about how her learning experiences in college better equipped her to help her son, especially with his learning.

It is also been really helpful with teaching my son now that he is in school. I have better ways of teaching him some of the learning skills. Just like with reading and learning English... I think that just opened up a door for me to be able to teach him in different ways so that he might understand things. Just being in college just really helps because you are learning how to think.

### Difficulties With Time Management

Among the participants, difficulties with time management was one of the most common themes that was discussed. All participants found time management to be difficult and often stated that it was their biggest challenge. Each participant had different experiences when managing their schedules. Emily discussed her difficulties managing her school assignments while also making time to help her son with homework.

It just has to do with time management. I am awful. I still have not figured [time management] out. I have to improve on it somehow because it's hard to get assignments done on time. Especially when you've got a kid that is also in school. He needs help. He is learning to read and I spend a lot of time with him... So of course, I am helping him do his homework and I am doing my own, as well as other things, so I am exhausted all of the time.

Most participants stated they struggled to balance their school life with their work and family responsibilities. Each participant had different strategies for time management. Charlotte, for instance, emphasized the importance of remaining organized and setting specific goals for herself in order to better manage her time.

I have always been organized. My mom calls me OCD... I am really organized, so, I will at the beginning of the week look at all of my assignments that are due for that week and I will break them up into days. So, Monday I will have a list of goals that I plan on getting completed that day. So, I have that for each day and most of the time, I try to complete my homework work if it is possible.

Charlotte continues by talking about how even with planning and organization, things are not always easy to manage.

Sometimes it doesn't always work out because I am over here setting daily goals, [but] I am a star procrastinator. So, I kind of wait till like the last second to do stuff. Sometimes I feel motivated and get stuff done in advance but most of the time I wait until the last week or couple days even to the last hour to do stuffs.

Many participants stated that they simply did things when they were able. A common theme was difficulty completing homework assignments or finding time to study. Participants stated they waited until the last minute to complete assignments, had to ask for extensions, stayed up after their kids went to sleep, or in between classes. Another quote from Charlotte shows how she finds time to complete school work.

If all of my assignments are completed at work, my work stuff is completed, we are allowed to work on homework assignments. So, I try to get the majority of my school work done at work if I can. If I can't get it done at work then if I get home I will either ask my mom if she can keep him for a couple of hours longer to do my homework or I bring him home and he goes to bed around 8pm, so once I get him in bed and asleep then I do my homework. It usually runs until around midnight. It does makes it a little stressful because I don't go to bed until like around 12 or midnight and then I am getting up the next morning at 7am to get up for work.

While some participants said they preferred to take in person classes, other participants also stressed the importance of online courses to their



schedule and time management. A quote from Charlotte shows how they helped her balance her schedule.

I take mostly online [classes]. Which is really nice so I can do my work at the convenience of when I have time... The online classes help me manage my time better and they help me get to experience being in his life. I honestly don't think I'll be able to like work like I do and attend class, in person class, and juggle all of the responsibilities of being a mom. So, I'm really fortunate to be able to take online classes.

Much like Charlotte, other participants briefly site how they were better able to manage her time when taking online courses. Online classes let them set their schedules.

A sub-theme that emerged regarding time management was the idea of balance. The idea of balance addressed how the mothers who were interviewed balanced their conflicting roles. Some moms described how they balanced specific tasks associated with their roles, others mention balance in a less specific way. While all of the moms occupied the role of mother and student, they all also occupied other roles such as daughter and employee. Most of the moms cited that finding balance was difficult. Others thought they had a better handle on balancing their roles as student and mother. Others cited that they felt no real sense of balance. However, balancing their many different roles was important for each of the mothers that were interviewed.

For example, Fiona talked about her lack of balance in her life. Rather than any real sort of balance, Fiona instead prioritized tasks which needed to be done immediately. She further acknowledges that this may not be the best way to

find balance and says that she hopes to be able to find more balance in the future.

I have no balance in my life. I do what needs to be done immediately. That's the only way I have figured out. Like when it comes to big assignments, I really have to plan ahead of time. When it comes to things that have to do with my son... He is not doing anything in school yet that requires us to be thinking far about the future that much yet. So, doing it earlier, that's not really going to happen for me. I will think about doing it earlier, but I will not have time. So, it's the only way I am down with balancing what needs to be done. It's not probably the best way, because it doesn't always work out. So, I would like to figure out how to get more balance.

Another example of the theme of balance emerging comes from Charlotte. Charlotte talked about the importance of time management in maintain balance in her life. She spoke briefly about how organization has become an important part of balancing the roles she occupies and the many tasks associated with these roles. In this quote, she describes using lists to prioritize her school work in order maintain some balance.

A big way I balance is I have always been organized. My mom calls me OCD. I have never been diagnosed with that but she said that I am OCD. I am really organized so I will at the beginning of the week look at all of my assignments that are due for that week and I will break them up into days. So, like Monday I will have a list of goals that I plan on getting completed that day. I have that for each day and most of the time, I try to complete my homework work if it is possible.

Additionally, Charlotte talks about the difficulties of trying to maintain this balance in her life and how it results in a sense of guilt when she experiences difficulties balancing her roles.

Sometimes I feel like really optimistic. I feel like it is easy to balance my financial situation and spending time with the baby. There are other days where I am pessimistic and have it at the back of my

head that what if I just went to school full time or just worked full time [things would be easier]. I feel like juggling both is just really stressful. I guess it is one of those like mom guilt [things] where I feel like am taking away from him with school and work so I don't want to take away more from him by doing stuff by myself.

Bonnie also mentions balance in her interview. In this quote from Bonnie, she discusses how she feels like she has a pretty good handle on balancing her roles. She discusses specific tasks associated with both her role as a mom and her role as a student. She acknowledges that her specific set of circumstances is not typical and that she is grateful for balance she has achieved in her life.

For right now I feel like I balance it pretty well. I only go to school two days a week so that's a little bit of time that he's socializing with kids. Then I get three nights a week with him and I don't have to miss any of that. We do a lot of activities in the day but then he goes to bed. He's Avery easy baby everyone's always jealous because he goes to bed at eight thirty and he doesn't wake up until nine thirty. So, he sleeps all night so I spend that time with him until he goes to bed. The best part of my day is rocking him to sleep so I get to rock him to sleep and then he goes to bed and then I do homework so I really feel like I have a better balance on things than maybe other people just because of my circumstances. I only work two days a week. I only go school two days a week and the rest of the week with [I spend] with him. I feel like a lot of people don't get that opportunity. Now, if I had to work forty hours a week and I had to do everything on my own life would be a lot more difficult. But, for now I just do schoolwork when he's in bed and devote a couple hours a night to do that and I think we're saving the time that I can spend with him tomorrow.

These quotes are great examples of how balance appeared in various ways throughout the interviews. While each mother had a different experience with balancing their roles and tasks associated with each role, they all acknowledged the importance of balance in their life.

## Stress and Anxiety/Lack of Self Care

Another commonly appearing theme in the interviews was feelings of stress and anxiety and related to this a lack of self care. Moms experienced these feelings for many reasons. It often was the case that moms experienced these feelings as a result of attempts to balance their roles as a student and a parent. When asked about their general experience as a single parent attending college, moms often described it as stressful, difficult, or hard. For example, Charlotte simply stated

It's very difficult. It's very stressful and it's not easy. It's just a lot of time management and a lot of needing support. It's just stressful, hard.

She elaborated on this by describing her day to day experience. She concludes by stating that she is exhausted and stressed but feels like it will be worth it.

[It's] stressful. This semester I wake up at 6 o'clock, drop my daughter off at school then I drive to drop my son off at daycare, go straight to school and I'm done by like 4:15 at the latest. I go get my son then pick up my daughter we're finally home by 5:30 and you got to feed them dinner. You've got to cook and let the dogs out and then give them their bath so they're in bed by 8. By then a lot of times I'm exhausted so I'll try to stay up an hour to study and if not I just get held back until the weekends or if I have time in between classes to do homework. I just don't know. It's stressful and it's hard but I guess in the end it's worth it.

Another example of the theme of increased levels of stress and anxiety emerged in Aria's interview. Aria reflected on having panic attacks which were attributed to her increased stress levels. Aria states,

There was a point 2 years ago where I would have these, panic attacks but they were like inward panic attacks during class. I had to ask for a couple of paper extensions just because I was dizzy 24/7 and I couldn't even read.

As seen in the quote above, the stress had an effect on her ability to meet deadlines. Later in the interview Aria began to elaborate on how her lack of self care led to her high stress and anxiety levels, and eventually led to a need for medications in order to manage her high stress levels. Aria states,

My doctor said 'What do you do to decompress throughout the day?' And I'm like 'What do you mean? I don't.' Since then I've been medicated for anti-anxiety. I finally got weaned off that [medication] the past three months. It's highly addictive. [Weaning off of it] would make me feel like crap and I'd keep going back on it. Now I take something else. [The doctors have] been really helpful too, understanding.

Charlotte talked about how she did not talk about her stress. This lack of self-care and increased stress ultimately led to her feeling unhappy, especially in regards to her body.

That's why I am so stressed out is because I don't talk about it, I bottle in. I guess that's how I handle it. It also adds stress and then I gain weight and then I am not comfortable with my body and I don't feel happy.

### Reliance on Social Support

In their interviews, the moms talked quite a bit about the sources of support that they relied on. These sources of support varied from mom to mom but each mom emphasized the important of this support to their success in college. Many moms cited their family as the primary source of support. Others cited significant others as important supporter in their lives. The moms felt that this support helped them to overcome the challenges they were facing. They provided many resources for the single moms such as financial support, emotional support, and childcare.

Support from family, friends, and significant others was one of the most common types of support the moms talked about receiving. Emily talked about the positive support she gets from her family and boyfriend:

I consider my situation as a single mom to be very lucky. My family did not just like abandoned me and it's not like I am not getting any help. My family has been tremendously helpful. They have been extremely supportive and they want me to graduate from school. So, what really added to my success is having the support of my family and me being allowed to sort of be a college student. My family has allowed me to have the time to be just a college student. My boyfriend as well, I have been with him for three years and he's filled the gap there.

Charlotte also talked about her parents as a source of support. Charlotte's parents provided childcare free of charge which she found especially helpful.

First and foremost, my parents because they help me out tremendously especially my mom she watches [my child] for me free of charge. She doesn't charge me to watch [my child] and things like that so she is my number one support.

Fiona also talked about her family and significant other as her primary sources of support.

I have my mom and my boyfriend. He's actually a student and he just graduated last week from my [program]. So, we've always had very interesting schedules. We've been together for three half years so he's very aware of how our routine works and comfortable with [my child] so he helps me out when he can but when he can't help and my mom can't help and I have no one to get my daughter on or off the bus when I have to return back to school the next day that can be challenging. I wind up calling you know all my family members and my dad has actually driven all the way from [out of state] before and spent the night to get [my child] on and off the bus.

She further stated she sometimes needs to reach out to extended family for support, especially when scheduling problems leave her needing someone to care for her child.

If it is a scheduling problem, obviously first usually my mom, then my boyfriend, then if by those don't work out, I don't really have any other resources besides just going to family and kind of picking up grandmas, aunts, uncles, cousins, all that kind of stuff. No real assistance other than just family in terms of scheduling problems when I need somebody to watch my daughter.

Fiona continues by talking about her family, specifically her dad, as a source of financial support.

My budget is just super tight. I have a lot a lot of help from my dad financially to stay put where I am right now. His deal is "You keep your grades up. You basically kick ass in school and I'll help you with your bills" is essentially what we have going on right now.

Another source of support some of the mothers talked about was campus support. The majority of the moms felt that the campus, in a general sense, was supportive of single parents. They felt supported by professors and advisors and felt that the campus offered some resources which helped them to be successful as college students. For example, Bonnie, who previously attended another university states:

I feel [this campus] a lot more supportive of single moms than the environment that I was subjected to at [my previous college]. This campus I see parents walking around with their kids, and you see them walking the stroller through. We didn't see that at [my previous college]. To me it was like a big culture shock. I was like "Oh my gosh!" I feel [like I can have] a stroller on campus here. And it made me feel like really more a part of the community here.

Bonnie elaborated on her sense of belonging by comparing her experiences to her previous campus. She stated that she felt that even though she lived off campus, she still felt like a part of the campus community.

I feel like it's a lot easier to be a part of the campus when you're [living] off campus here than it is at [my previous college]. I felt very isolated [at my previous college]. It was like if you're not [on campus] then you don't even have a clue of what's going on. So,

even though I live off campus I still feel like I'm part of the community [here].

The support Bonnie felt from campus contributed to her sense of belonging on campus. Additionally, Fiona spoke positively of her professors and the support they provide stating:

As far as like teachers, as long as they know what's going on. They know [if you have a] kid that I know you say this is a no cell phone classroom but I have to have it. So, you're going to have to live with that. As long as you tell them and you're not being disrespectful, they are usually really good about letting you leave class to answer phone call or leave to go deal with a family emergency.

While many of the moms talked about the support they felt from campus in a general sense, many moms also talked about the support they felt from professors and advisors. Bonnie talked about her experiences at a previous college where her professors were not supportive of her choice of major. However, even though her professors here were strict, she felt they were more supportive than those at her previous college.

I actually have a professor at [my previous college] who told me that I was unable to do [my current] major because I have a child so that was a setback. So that kind of brought me out but then I switched [majors]. As far as my professors go, I would say for the most [they are] supportive but a lot of professors [in my program] are very strict. "I don't care what has happened to you, you get your stuff done". Which is okay because that's how they should be.

Emily also talked about the support she received from her professors. She stated that they were able to provide support by allowing her to have extra time on assignments.

I really do [feel like this college is supportive of single parents]. I have professors give me way too much leniency. But it is because they are parents too and I think it's because I have proven myself to be a good student. So, if I need extra time to do an assignment,



they are willing to give that to me just because of my circumstances and because I am not obviously trying to ask for it because I am a lazy student...They understand that I am a single mom. So, I have got a lot of faculty here that are very supportive of me being a single mom here and are willing to give me a little bit of leniency when I need it.

Additionally, Charlotte talked about her experiences with her advisors. They were able to provide support by helping her find resources that she needed.

So I applied this semester to hopefully get accepted into [a program]. So I've talked to advisors in [that program] that have actually given me really good resources on how to get assistance if I were to need assistance with the utility bill one month or if I was \$50 short on my rent that month. [They suggest] resources that could help me pay my rent and utilities and stuff like that. So yeah, I feel supported for the most part.

Many moms also talked about the support they got from their coworkers or work environment in general. The moms found that a work environment, coworkers, and supervisors who were understanding of their specific circumstances to be helpful in balancing the many roles they occupied. Emily talked about her job on campus and their ability to accommodate her schedule.

The people I work for here on campus [have been supportive]. My bosses have let me be flexible with my schedule. Obviously, it is a student job. In addition to that, me being a single mom, they have been lenient with me because I have had to switch my schedule around. The people I work for have been helpful. I worked a job before where I was really uncomfortable and I was there for four years and dealing with this.

Charlotte also spoke about the support she receives from her coworkers. Unlike Emily, Charlotte's job was not on campus. However, her work environment was still supportive and accommodating.

My co-workers have been really helpful. Some of my supervisors are really supportive in my decisions and they are really flexible with my work schedule. So, if there was ever a time my mom could

not watch [my child] or anything like that, they will let me off and not make a big deal about me needing a day off. Or, if I need to call off because he is sick or something like that, they were really understanding. So, they are there for me.

Lastly, another common source of support for the moms who were interviewed was community resources. There were a range of resources that the moms mentioned. For example, Charlotte spoke about several community resources she utilized such as WIC and the Healthy Families program.

I've actually reached out to places like the neighborhood alliance for child safety and they helped me find resources that I could potentially need, [such as] clothing resources, food, stuff like that. I have applied for different types of government assistance like food stamps and WIC. I've also reached out to Healthy Families. They come out and do different things with my child and I to just kind of help him develop mentally and help me like emotionally.

Fiona also spoke of some community resources that she found helpful such as food stamps and a free preschool program which reduced her childcare costs.

I try as hard as possible to get it for free or as inexpensive as possible is my goal. A lot of the time if it's not free I find another alternative. I do get food stamps but that's really like the only government resource I get. She did get into that early start kindergarten program at the preschool program last year. She did actually go [to preschool] for free for an entire year and we didn't pay for anything. Which was amazing because preschool is not free so she did get that. School technically started last year for her so.

### Financial Strain and Reliance on Financial Aid

Another theme which emerged throughout the interviews was financial strain and reliance on financial aid. While all of the moms worked in addition to going to school, they still experienced some financial strain. In order to attend school they relied heavily on financial aid. Many of the moms stated that without the financial aid they received, they would be unable to attend school. For

example, Darla stated that receiving financial aid allowed her to work less so that she was able to also attend school. She mentions that it has been especially helpful for paying for daycare expenses.

I get financial aid [and] without that I wouldn't be able to work as little as I do and go to school. A lot of my financial aid pays for my books and whatever is left helps pay for daycare because I need them in daycare to go to school. It's just the grants. I have not had to do a loan and I am thankful I am part of this children disabled [veterans] thing so you get free college.

Fiona also spoke about Financial aid and how it has helped her to get through school. She elaborates by stating that she has mostly been able to utilize grants and scholarships but recently felt the need to take out loans to pay for the extras her program requires. Fiona also talked about how she was able to apply for and receive merit based scholarships to help with her financial needs.

Financial aid is my best friend. It's how get through school. I actually hadn't had to take out anything that I would have to pay back like loans and I had been loan free, until this last year but there are just so many extra things you have to pay for in [my program]. So, I managed to do all grants and scholarships up until last year. Some of [the financial aid was] state calculated or something based on my income and the fact that I'm a single parent. Most of them though were merit based so I wrote a paper and they liked my essay or I keep a really good GPA and I take more than 12 credit hours this semester and I got a scholarship every year that requires me to take at least fifteen credit hours which is kind of how the double major came about.

Additionally, Fiona also spoke about how she was able to use the refund she received from her financial aid to cover extra expenses such as rent for their apartment and her child's birthday present.

Up until this year every time I got a cashback for it, so that was always nice. So, I bought I bought a new laptop and another year [it paid] for our apartment and [my child's] birthday present or something like that. If you earn it, there's no like legal reason why

you can't use it for whatever you want past your books and your tuition if you get a scholarship.

Emily also talked about financial aid and its importance to her getting through school. Interestingly, Emily states she had in the past signed up for more classes and later dropped them to maximize the amount of financial aid that she could receive. She talks about the refund from financial aid as being a sort of cushion. It was especially helpful during the school year when she couldn't work as much.

I have definitely utilized financial aid. I have in the past signed up for four classes and then dropped one later because I got more financial aid. That is something that has now popped into my head [now that I am taking fewer classes] is I'm not going to get as much financial aid, because there is spillover from it. And it's helpful to have that cushion there especially nice when I'm starting school because my hours go down at work when I start school and so I'm not going to be making as much money. So, if I'm able to have that cushion there that's provided by that financial aid maybe it's ok that. I'm not working as much as ours and making that much money because this [financial aid] money's here.

In regards to financial aid, another topic that was that often came up in the interviews was loans. The mothers often cited that they felt like they needed to take out loans in order to supplement their income or the money they already received from financial aid. Further, some moms felt that taking out loans helped them to cover unexpected expenses. For example, Bonnie, who had previously attended another college, talked about needing to take out a student loan in order to cover the unexpected expenses she had after buying a car that had several problems.

When I started college I had a scholarship that paid for my books and tuition but they ended up giving me some allotment of money for things. Like a thousand dollars a year. So I had that money and then I had a Pell grant and then whenever I went to [my previous college] the tuition was [more] so I really had only a little bit [of a loan] that I had to take out but I ran into a problem with a car that I got... There was a point when I was just really struggling and I had to take out student loan for it to be able to pay it so I would just I took the amount out and I would just make that monthly payment because that's all I could afford.

Bonnie continued by elaborating on the importance of the student loans she has taken out. She knows that without the student loans she would be unable to complete college. However, she states that it's a difficult decision to stay in school knowing that the student loans will continue to add up. She says she wishes she knew more about scholarships so that she could minimize her student loan debt.

I think of student loans in the sense of "If that's what it took to get through college, that's what it takes." And that sucks because college tuitions really expensive and on top of that if you take more than what you need it's like it can really add up quick. It's been hard but, like I said, if I knew about more scholarships I would be applying because I know it's hard to through school and knowing that you have to keep taking money out. I've really never had to do anything besides the regular [subsidized loan].

Emily also talks about how she has utilized student loans in order to help her not worry about finances. The loans provide her with funds for emergency situations and extra expenses. She speaks briefly of feeling like taking out loans for these unexpected expenses may be "cheating the system".

I think I have taken out two loans. They are the federal, like, subsidized loans. Sometimes I would, I find myself to having to take one of those just because of that worry of not having enough money I feel bad for it sometimes like I'm wondering if I'm cheating the system sometimes by taking that financial aid and then it kind of just like sitting in my bank account for emergency situations. But

they're just like giving us tools for school and like just giving it to me, especially, if especially, since I'm taking those loans because they're loans, it's my money and I am going to have to pay them back.

While each of the moms relied on financial aid in a different capacity, it was important for all of them. While they mostly relied on grants and scholarships, they also relied on loans. Additionally, while student loan debt in general often has a negative connotation, these moms talked about student loans in a more positive light. They spoke about student loans as allowing them to complete school without the worry of financial strain. All of the moms stressed the importance of this financial aid to them completing school.

#### Other Campus Experiences and Resources

Another theme which emerged during the interviews was on campus experiences and resources. Moms talked about their experiences with on campus resources in many ways. Some moms spoke about the resources they found most helpful or resources they would have liked to see on campus. Other moms stated they were unaware of the resources available to them on campus.

Charlotte was a great example of the mothers who spoke about specific on campus resources. Charlotte talked about some of the on campus resources she used during her time on campus. She spoke about her experiences bringing her child to campus with her. In this quote, Charlotte talks about her experience bringing her child to campus and mentions the usefulness of the nursing mothers' rooms available on campus. She also spoke about a parents' club which she took part in on campus.

I actually used to bring him to campus a lot. I have used the nursing mothers room which I feel like was a life saver and I actually used it a lot, not just when I brought my son to campus but also when I would pump. There is not just one location, they are like spread out around the campus. That was very nice and convenient. I had a quiet place I could go to pump or breastfeed so that was very nice. I am not really as active anymore as I was at first, but it was called a mothers' club. It was really for parents, like men come as well, there was like monthly meeting where we would come and just talk about the stresses of being parents and juggling school and stuff like that so that was really nice. I actually made friends from there that I still keep in touch with. I am not as active anymore because I have gained some responsibilities since I first started going.

Additionally, Charlotte mentioned some programs she was aware of but hadn't taken advantage of on campus. Charlotte felt that these resources may not be useful to her now but may serve her in the future. She felt comforted knowing the resources were available to her if she should need them.

I know there is free legal services on campus that you can reach out to. I have always had that at the back of my mind if I would ever take my son's father to court or if he were to try to take me to court. So, I always know there are that resources available. I haven't really reached out anywhere on campus just because I have so many off campus resources I have never really had the need. I know like financial aid, if I was to ever need like an emergency loan am positive they offer those, if I am to ever need anything, I know that they offer types of like loans in emergency situations.

Fiona also mentioned campus resources she found particularly helpful. She talked about using on campus tutoring and learning services which were provided free of charge.

Academically, I used to spend a lot of time in the learning center back when I was taking anatomy and physiology and microbiology and in math center when I had to take actually take calculus. It was pretty bad. So, I spent a lot of time in the math center. I'm all about the free resources. Anything that I can do that is going to cost me I can usually figure out how to get that on campus [for free].

Aria also spoke of on campus resources. However, Aria experienced a bit of frustration when an important resource was taken away. Aria had utilized the student insurance program which had provided her an affordable option for both health insurance and healthcare. After losing his health insurance she was faced with a frustrating experience of finding a new doctor which was accommodating.

Before [the college] got rid of their insurance program I would go to the campus center for 15 bucks. I forget that lady's name but she's young and I went to her for a lot of things. And then they ended the [insurance program] last year and I've been on Anthem individual program and I had to get a new doctor but she's really supportive. So yeah, it's a practice is a family practice. The 2 people I see are the physician assistants. They are thoroughly understanding. I would go to the campus doctor or nurse and then I would switch over and kind of go back and forth between my old doctor when I wasn't getting things from them because they can only do so much with things. I was going back to the one I had been seeing for the past 25 years. With this new insurance, I had to switch but they're still good.

Fiona also spoke of on campus resources she knew were available. She talked about a daycare center on campus. However, she emphasized that due to cost, this resource was inaccessible to her. She continues by talking about how daycare and the associated cost is a major concern for moms. She knows many people who cannot afford the cost. This is a major barrier to them returning to school.

I know we have a daycare center [on campus] but I looked into it and it's super expensive, so that's not happening. My child wound up getting into that preschool program and she went to for a year now [my child is] actually in public school in kindergarten. As far as the day care resources, I know that's usually a really big problem for most people. I have a lot of friends who are single moms that want to go back to school. I guess it's lucky to have family that can drop everything to watch your kid for you when you need them to.



Because they have the resources to go back to school but it's just so expensive to send their kids to daycare. It's really expensive

In contrast to Charlotte and Fiona, other moms spoke about not knowing about resources available to them. In this quote, Darla spoke about not knowing what resources the campus offered. She stated that she doesn't use any resources but that may be in part because the campus does a poor job of letting people know what is available to them.

I am not even sure what is available. But, no, I really can't think of anything of like, in terms of, on-campus resources that I do utilize or what would be helpful, I guess I still don't really know what's there. [The campus could do a better job of] actually letting people know. because I've never heard of [any resources]... That's a problem.

Bonnie cited a similar experience. When she mentioned in the interview that she didn't use on campus resources. When some possible resources were suggested to her, she stated she didn't even realize that those resources were available to her.

I don't use any [on campus resources], No. I've never been to the clinic. I don't even know where it's at, I never even knew that we had counselling services. I don't know how that works with insurance and what not. Yeah. I've never even heard of that before so like when you say resources I'm like I don't really know.

## **Summary of Findings**

Despite each mom having unique circumstances, the moms interviewed shared common experiences which appeared within the interviews. Most notably, the moms all experienced role conflict and role overloading. This theme most often appeared as a sense of guilt for not spending enough time with their children. Interestingly, this sense of guilt did not exist in the same capacity as related to school work. Further, these moms juggled their many different roles simultaneously. While they all occupied multiple roles, it seemed that their roles as mother and student were the most prominent roles in their lives and thus seemed to cause the most role conflict in their lives. Another common experience that the moms shared were increased feelings of stress and anxiety which often related to the conflicting roles of student and parent, the role overload they experienced, and their attempts to juggle these roles. The moms also talked about the many different resources and strategies they relied on to overcome these challenges. The moms all talked about their reliance on financial aid. While they primarily relied on grants and scholarships, some moms discussed their use of student loans as well. Unlike the traditional negativity surrounding student debt, the moms seemed to see student loans in a more positive light. They were a necessity they used in order to get through school. The moms also talked about on campus resources they found useful and their general on campus experience. While most moms spoke positively of the on-campus resources that were available to them, others spoke about how the campus doesn't do enough to make students aware of the resources available to them. Lastly, the moms

also all relied on some type of social support. The moms most commonly talked about their reliance on support from family, friends, and significant others. However, they also talked about support from campus, coworkers and supervisors, professors, advisors, and their community. These various resources helped the moms to overcome challenges and frustrations that were often related to the stress and anxiety that resulted from the role conflict and role overload that the moms experienced and their attempts to juggle these roles simultaneously.

## **Discussion**

There were two purposes for this research. First, drawing upon the ideas of role conflict, role overload, and role juggling, this research aimed to describe the challenges that single mothers face who attend college, especially as they pertain to the dual role of mother and student. Secondly, this study aimed to identify, describe and understand the resources and strategies (i.e. on campus resources and help from social networks) utilized by single mothers to help them succeed in college and successfully balance their roles as student and parent. While previous research has explored role conflict, role overload, and role juggling among single parents, much of this research has focused solely on work-family conflict rather than focusing specifically on balancing the student and parent roles.

### Role Conflict, Role Overload, Role Spillover, and Other Challenges

Overall, results indicated that the single moms attending college who were interviewed for this research experienced role conflict associated with balancing their role as mother with their role as student. Building on the ideas of role theory as outlined by Mead, these moms occupied several roles at once. While this research focused primarily on how the moms balanced their role as mother and student, the moms also occupied other roles such as employee, daughter, friend, and significant other. Each role the moms occupied came with its own set of duties and obligations. Often the moms found that the obligations and responsibilities of one conflicted with that of another role they occupied, and thus role conflict often occur. For these mothers, their role as mother and role as

student seemed to cause the most role conflict even though they occupied many other roles at the same time. Further, they often experienced role overload in which they felt overwhelmed by the demands of the multiple roles they occupied. Because the role of student and the role of mother seemed to be the most demanding of the roles these mothers occupied they often felt overwhelmed by the demands of these two particular roles. For example, when the moms felt overwhelmed by the demands of their role as mother they often had felt it was necessary to make sacrifices in their student role in order to continue to fulfill their role as mother to the best of their ability. At times this resulted in an inability of the moms to meet the demands of one or more of their roles. Most importantly, their role as student and mother often seemed to cause the most role overload resulting in feelings of guilt and distress when they were unable to meet the demands of the other role. Additionally, their attempts to juggle these roles resulted in difficulties with time management and additional feelings of stress and guilt. Moms also experienced role spillover in which experiences from one role would spillover and affect another role. This directional spillover seemed to occur mostly between the student and parent roles. The experiences the moms had in their role as mom would often spillover and affect their role as student. An example of this was when moms would feel too exhausted from their role as parent to complete their schoolwork to the best of their ability. They also experienced spillover from their student role into their parenting role; however, it would seem this was not as common.

Further, related to the ideas of role conflict, role overload and role juggling, results showed that the moms felt pressure to adhere to the social norms similar to those outlined by the “intensive mothering” ideology. Interviews indicated that the mothers felt they should be the central caregivers in their children’s lives, even when they were balancing other roles and obligations such as their role as student. Thus, the mothers felt they should be the one who spends the most time with their children and that they should always put their children’s needs before that of their own. However, because the student role was also an extremely demanding role, they were at times unable to be the central caregiver in their children’s lives. The moms in this sample felt that their role as a student often negatively impacted their ability to fulfill the duties associated with their role as mother and vice versa. Such expectations and the inability to live up to these expectations often led to feelings of guilt and inadequacy in their parenting role and resulted in the mothers pressured. Further, much like the women using their children to justify their employment, stating that they benefit from their employment as well (Hays, 1996) these mothers often justified their time spent fulfilling the obligations of their student roles stating that it would benefit their children in the future. Because their role as mother is seen as the priority, they did not experience the same feelings of inadequacy associated with the inability to fulfill their duties and obligations as students.

Social norms define the roles and expectations associated with each role a person occupies. Further, social norms have created an expectation of “intensive mothering”. Because mothers often occupy multiple roles in addition to

their mothering role which often result in role conflict and role overload. These single mothers who attend college experienced both role conflict and role overload, especially related to their role as student and mother. Attempts to juggle these roles in order to adhere to the “intensive mothering” ideology resulted in feelings of stress, inadequacy, and guilt. Thus, the “intensive mothering” ideology can be problematic for single mothers attending college.

### Resources and Strategies for Success

Results indicated that the single mothers relied on many resources and used many different strategies in order to be successful in college. First, one resource the single mothers relied on was social support from several sources. One source of social support was from friends, family, and significant others, which seemed to be the biggest source of support for the mothers. Family, friends, and significant others often provided cost free childcare and financial support. Some of the moms also lived with friends, family, or significant others which lessened the financial burden associated with housing costs. By caring for their children when they were unable to and providing financial support so that the mothers weren’t further burdened with work, this support allowed the moms to better manage their time and relieve some of the stress associated with juggling their role as student and mother.

A second source of social support that the mothers found to be vital to their success was from professors and advisors. In general, the moms found that their professors and advisors were understanding of the demands associated with being a single parent and were able to provide them support by allowing

additional time on assignments, allowing them to take phone calls during class time, or pointing them in the direction of resources they may need. The last source of social support that was helpful for these single mothers was their employers, supervisors, and coworkers. Employers, supervisors, and coworkers were understanding of the many duties and obligations the mothers had in addition to their employment. They provided support by allowing the mothers to have flexible work schedules and not penalizing them for calling off work in emergency situations. In general, social support from these sources allowed the moms to better balance their role as mother and student.

Results showed that another resource that the mothers relied on to be successful in their student role was their campus and the campus resources that were available to them. In general, the mothers felt the campus was supportive of single parents. They felt like they could be part of the campus community if they wanted and felt that they could bring their children to campus without feeling out of place. In addition, they found that there were many helpful campus resources such as mental health services, health clinics, and nursing mothers rooms. They also found the free tutoring and academic resources the campus provided to be especially helpful. While most of the mothers felt that their campus was generally a supportive environment for single mothers, some felt that the college didn't do enough to let the students know about the resources that were available to them or that the resources provided were not ideal. For instance, the daycare associated with campus was too expensive to be an option for these moms. While this may be an issue for all students, it was especially problematic for the



single mothers since they may need additional resources than more traditional students on campus.

Another important resource the moms relied on was financial aid. Results indicated that all of the moms relied on financial aid to remain in college. Not only did the financial aid pay for school expenses and books, it paid for living expenses such as childcare expenses and rent. It also allowed the moms to have emergency funds. While some of the moms allowed only on grants and scholarships, many of the moms also relied on student loans. While there is generally a negative view of student loans and student debt, the moms saw student loans in a more positive light. They saw them as a necessity in order to get through college successfully. The refund they received from these student loans supplemented their income and allowed them to provide for their children financially. Further, having this financial aid refund allowed the moms to work less and alleviated some of the stress associated with juggling their employment along with their role of student and mother.

A last resource the moms relied on was community resources. While not all of the moms talked about using community resources, those who did found them especially helpful. The moms used community resources such as food stamps, WIC, Healthy Families, and a free preschool program. These resources relieved some of the financial strain the moms experienced. Like the other resources the moms utilized, these community resources allowed the moms to better balance their role as student and mother.

The mothers' reliance on these many resources relates to their perspective on mothering. Because the "intensive mothering" ideology was problematic for these single mothers attending college, they seemed to at least partially rely on the extensive mothering ideology described by Karen Christopher in her 2012 article, *Extensive Mothering: Employed Mothers' Constructions Of The Good Mother*. While these moms did not necessarily reject the "intensive mothering" ideology they did use parts of the extensive mothering perspective in order to reframe some of their experiences. While it was clear that they still felt pressure from the social norms of the "intensive mothering" ideology, they did find that they were able to justify their education by it being beneficial to their children. Additionally, they were able to reframe some of their experiences to emphasize a sense of control over their children's wellbeing. They felt they were in control of choosing who provided care to their children in their absence. Additionally, they felt a sense of control because they had many sources of support and resources they could rely upon if needed such as an emergency fund provided by financial aid and the ability to ask for an extension from understanding professors. Thus, adopting the "extensive mothering" ideology may be an especially useful strategy for single mothers to be successful in college.

The moms relied upon several resources in order to be successful in college. Much like the findings from Austin and McDermott (2003), the resources these moms relied on included social support from several sources, a supportive campus environment, on campus resources, financial aid, and community

resources. These resources allowed them to balance their role as student and mother and relived some of the stress associated with juggling these roles. Having these resources at their disposal allowed the moms to have a sense of control in their mothering role and begin to embrace an “extensive mothering” ideology.

## **Limitations**

This research has several limitations. The generalizability of this research is perhaps its greatest limitation. In regards to generalizability, the sample size makes it difficult to generalize to a larger population. It is difficult to generalize this research since it is primarily based on the personal experiences of this small sample. The applicability of these results may be limited because they are based on the unique experiences of this small sample of women. This research only surveyed individuals who attended a specific university. It may be difficult to apply these results to single mothers who attend other universities or other education institutions such as community colleges. Additional research is needed which surveys a larger group of individuals from multiple universities. Future research should also explore the experiences of women who attend other types of educational institutions. Future research might also explore differences based on discipline, major, or schools within universities or other institutions. For example, it might explore whether mothers pursuing a liberal arts degree have different experiences than those pursuing degrees in the school of business.

The small sample size also contributed to the lack of diversity. First, this research only interviewed white women. This research only surveyed women who were age 18-30 with children 12 years old and younger. Thus, it cannot give any insight into the experiences of non-white women or older mothers or of mothers who have older children. Because non-white mothers are most likely to pursue an education, additional research should prioritize exploring the experiences of a more diverse group of women. Future research should also

explore the experiences of mothers who are older than 30 and who have children older than 12.

This research also did not fully explore the working role of the mothers. While all of the mothers were employed in some capacity and mentioned this in the demographic survey and interviews, this research mostly focused on the student and mother role. Future research can seek to understand how the working role impacts the experiences of single mothers who attend college by asking specific questions about work experiences. It might also explore how different types of work impact these mothers. For example, it might consider if those who work on campus jobs have different experiences from those who work off campus. Integrating employment experiences in this research will give a more complete understanding of the experiences of single moms in college

Lastly, this research did not fully consider whether the participants understood mothering ideologies. When conducting future research, it may be important to ask moms how they define and reformulate their ideas of good mothering in order to directly address how they understand mothering ideologies. When addressing this limitation, mixed methods research may be the best approach and allow for a better understanding of the experiences of these mothers.

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, the findings from this research build on prior literature regarding role conflict and role juggling. This research furthers our understanding of role conflict and role juggling among single mothers attending college. Based on the patterns found in the data, it can be said that while each single mom's experience attending college is unique, these moms experience similar challenges and often rely upon similar sources of support and other resources to overcome these challenges. These single moms experienced challenges related to role conflict. This role conflict most often was described as guilt for not spending time with their children and difficulty with time management. They juggled their roles as student and parent which often resulted in increased feelings of stress and anxiety. Additionally, they relied upon various resources to overcome these challenges.

These findings begin to fill a hole in the literature. While there is plenty of literature which explores role conflict in terms of work family balance, there is a much more limited body of literature which examines how the addition of school may affect the experiences of role conflict. Further, this research builds on prior literature regarding mothering. This research also finds that for some single mothers attending college the "intensive mothering" ideology is problematic. Embracing an "extensive mothering" ideology may be a useful strategy to help single mothers be successful in college.

By understanding the challenges that these single moms encounter as well as the resources they utilize to be successful and overcome these

challenges, colleges may be able to provide support for not only single mothers but other non-traditional students as well. Given that earning a college degree can provide economic stability, reduce poverty, and improve the life chances of both the mothers and their children, research such as this can provide insights for developing interventions which can help single mothers complete college successfully. This research can help to inform policymakers by providing insights into the experiences of single mothers attending college so they can create policies and resources which support single mothers throughout their educational careers. Further, this research is relevant to education policymakers who not only seek to provide support for other non-traditional college students who may experience similar challenges and benefit from additional resources as well. With increasing numbers of single mothers and other non-traditional students enrolled in colleges, it is especially important to understand the unique challenges these students may face while attending college so that universities can provide a supportive and encouraging space for all students, especially single mothers. Understanding the experiences of and providing support for single mothers to successfully complete college degrees is important for improving the life chances and well-being of women and families in the United States.

## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### **DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

- 1.) What is your current age? \_\_\_\_\_
- 2.) How many children do you have? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. What are your Children's Ages?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 3.) What is your racial ethnic background?
  - a. African American/Black
  - b. White
  - c. Hispanic/Latino
  - d. Other
    - i. Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_
- 4.) What is your current college class status?
  - a. Freshman
  - b. Sophomore
  - c. Junior
  - d. Senior
  - e. 5<sup>th</sup> year or beyond
- 5.) Are you a first generation college student?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
- 6.) How many credit hours are you taking this semester?
  - a. 1-5 hours (less than half time)
  - b. 6-11 hours (half time)
  - c. 12 or more hours (full time)
- 7.) How many hours do you work each week?
  - a. None
  - b. 1-10 hours
  - c. 11-20 hours
  - d. 21-30 hours
  - e. More than 30 hours
- 8.) Which statement best describes your current living arrangements?
  - a. My child(ren) and I live by ourselves
  - b. My child(ren) and I live with my parent(s) or other relative(s)



- c. My child(ren) and I live with a significant other (e.g. boyfriend/girlfriend)
- d. My child(ren) and I live with friend(s) or roommate(s)
- e. Other
  - i. Please specify

9.) Who cares for your child(ren) the majority of the time while you are at school and/or work?

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## **SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE**

### **General Experience**

1. Can you describe your experiences as a single mother attending college?
  - a. Describe a typical day where you attend college and care for your child(children).
  - b. Silence
  - c. Tell me more about that.

### **Successes/Challenges**

2. Tell me about the successes and challenges you have as a single mother attending college. First let's talk about your successes and then your challenges.
  - a. Would you say there are more successes or challenges?
  - b. Do you feel supported by your professors and/or advisors?
  - c. Tell me more about that.
  - d. d. Silence

### **Strategies/Resources**

3. Tell me about what has helped you to be successful and/or overcome challenges as a single mother and college student.
  - a. Are there any specific people you would identify as being particularly helpful?
    - i. How about your family?
    - ii. What about your friends? Peers?

### **Role Overlap/Conflict**

4. How does being a college student impact your experience as a single mother?
  - a. Can you share any specific examples?
  - b. Tell me more about that
  - c. Silence.
5. How does being a single mother impact your experience as a college student?
  - a. Can you share any specific examples?
  - b. Tell me more about that
  - c. Silence.
6. How do you balance your roles as a student and a mother?
  - a. Do you find it easy or difficult to balance these roles? How so?
  - b. Can you give any specific examples of how you balance these roles?
  - c. Tell me more about that.

d. Silence.

On Campus Resources

7. Can you describe your on-campus experience as a single mother?
  - a. For example, are there specific on campus resources you use? (Such as health clinics or mental health services?)
    - i. If yes, please describe these resources and how you were made aware of them.
    - ii. If no, what on campus resources would you find helpful?
  - b. Did you take out student loans or use any other financial aid?
  - c. Do you feel your campus is supportive of single mothers? Why or why not?
  - d. Silence
  - e. Tell me more about that.

Other

8. Do you have any other experiences you'd like to share or anything else you'd like me to know?

Thank them for their time and provide gift card.

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## Curriculum Vitae

### Ashley L. Vowels

#### Education

- 2019 Indiana University (Degree Earned at IUPUI)  
Master of Arts; Sociology; GPA 3.98
- 2015 Indiana University (Degree Earned at IUPUI)  
Bachelor of Arts, Sociology, Honors College Graduate; GPA 3.66

#### Publications

Latham, K., Vowels, A. L., and Huskins, K. 2016. "Healthy Aging among Black and White Older Men: What is the Role of Mastery?" *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences*

#### *Works in Progress*

- Latham-Mintus, K and Vowels, A. L. "Neighborhood Disorder and Preventative Healthcare Utilization: Do Social Relationships Buffer Adverse Neighborhood Conditions?" Manuscript in preparation
- Vowels, A.L. "Gender, Parenting, and Mental Health: Exploring the Role of Quality of Work, Parental Stress, and Parenting Attitudes" Manuscript in preparation

#### Awards and Honors

- 2017 Graduate Office Travel Fellowship  
Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis
- Selected as a recipient of a competitive travel fellowship
- 2016 Sam H. Jones Community Service Scholarship  
Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis
- Selected as a recipient of Service Learning Assistant (SLA) Scholarship for participating in community-engaged scholarly research through Goodwill Industries and the Nurse Family Partnership
- 2015 Top 100 Nomination  
Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis
- Nominated for Top 100 which recognizes students for academic excellence, campus leadership, and community engagement

- 2010-2015 Chancellor's Scholars Program  
Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis
- Recipient of Chancellor's Scholarship for commitment to academic excellence
- 2010-2015 Honors College Valedictorian Scholarship  
Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis
- Awarded Valedictorian Scholarship for graduating first in high school class
- 2011-2015 Dean's List  
Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis
- Recognized for 9 semesters for maintaining a GPA above 3.30
- 2010 Sam H. Jones Freshman Service Scholar  
Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis  
Recipient of first year community service scholarship in recognition of exemplary service within the community

### Research Experience

- 2017 Research Assistant  
Indiana University School of Medicine, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis
- Assisted faculty in conducting community-engaged research on first-time fathers whose partners participate in a nurse home visitor program
- 2016-2017 Research Assistant  
Department of Sociology, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis
- Assisted faculty in conducting research with community partners on mothers of young children participating in a nurse home visitor program meant to improve child health and development
- 2016 Service Learning Assistant  
Department of Sociology, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis
- Assisted faculty in conducting community-engaged research with Goodwill Industries on a nurse home visitor program which seeks to improve Maternal-Child Health in disadvantaged communities



- 2016            Research Intern  
Department of Sociology, Indiana University-Purdue University  
Indianapolis
- Assisted faculty with mixed methods data collection, analysis, and reporting on mothers participating in the Nurse Family Partnership (NFP); community engaged research with Goodwill Industries
- 2015-2017    Research Assistant  
Department of Sociology, Indiana University Purdue University  
Indianapolis
- Assisted faculty in research on neighborhood disorder, social support, healthcare utilization, and mental and physical health among older adults

### Conference Presentations

- 2018            Vowels, A,L. "Single Mothers' Experiences as College Students".  
Graduate Student Regional Research Conference, March,  
Louisville, KY
- Vowels, A. L. "Single Mothers' Experience as College Students".  
Sociologists for Women in Society Winter Meeting, January,  
Atlanta, GA
- 2017            Vowels, A. L. and Bell, D. "Social Support, Confidence, and Sharing  
in First-Time Mothers". Midwestern Sociological Society's (MSS)  
Annual Meeting, March 2017, Milwaukee, WI