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A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF THE NEEDS OF MOTHERS IN COLLEGE
IN THE RURAL SOUTHEAST

by

DANIELLE BOSTICK

(Under the Director of April M. Schueths)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of my study was to understand student mothers that attended college in the rural southeast by using an ecological framework to examine the barriers and challenges that they encounter on college campuses. Additionally, the study identified support and the lack of support that the mothers received. The theoretical concepts of intensive mothering, role strain, and role conflict were also used to comprehend how parental obligations can conflict with the expectations of being a college student. In total, 14 participants that attended a mid-size university in the rural southeast agreed to be a part of the study. The criteria to participate was that a college student had to be at least 18 years of age, currently enrolled or last enrolled at a university or college within the last five years, parent to at least one child that is 18 years or younger. They all identified as mothers from various demographic backgrounds. A qualitative study was then conducted using a thematic analysis to compare the narrative experiences of the participants. The four primary themes that emerged from the data analysis included accommodations, campus restrictions, events and activities, and feeling uncomfortable. In summary, the results of the study may be used to develop programs and services to assist the needs of mothers that attend colleges and universities in rural communities. However, the study does have limitations such as no males agreed to participate and the sample size of the participants is too small to make the results generalizable

INDEX WORDS: Mothers, Student Parents, Nontraditional Students, Childcare, College, Higher Education, Child Friendly Campus, Rural Southeast

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IN THE RURAL SOUTHEAST

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M.Ed., Georgia Southern University 2010

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

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A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF THE NEEDS OF MOTHERS IN COLLEGE
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Electronic Version Approved:
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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my thesis to the mothers that participated in my study. Thank you for your time and sharing your stories with me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge everyone that has supported and encouraged me to complete my thesis. First of all, special thanks to my thesis committee members, especially Dr. Schueths for agreeing to be the chairperson. I greatly appreciate your advice, patience, and words of encouragement throughout this entire process. Thank you to Dr. Cohen for sharing your own personal experiences concerning the subject matter. Also, thank you Dr. Brimeyer for always asking me how I was doing on my thesis every time I saw you in passing. Furthermore, I would like to thank my colleagues, family, and advisor for inspiring me to finish my thesis. Lastly, thank you to the mothers that agreed to be a part of my study. This thesis would not be possible without you all. I valued your openness and honesty in sharing your stories with me. I wish you all much success and happiness in the future.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

College Students in Higher Education

The demographics of the college student population in the United States has changed substantially compared to previous decades. Historically, institutions of higher education have served a “traditional” population of students, ages 18 to 21, who typically attended school full-time while residing on campus (Hardin, 2008). Beginning in the 1970s and early 1980s, the rate of nontraditional students, that is, students who fall outside of the spectrum of being a traditional student, has grown over the past three decades (Hardin, 2008). However, the National Center for Education Statistics found that since 1995 70% of all students enrolled in undergraduate programs can be classified as nontraditional based on at least one characteristic (Radford, Cominole, & Skomsvold, 2015). Nontraditional students are categorized as those who meet one of the following criteria (Choy, 2002, p. 2-3).

- Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school);
 - Attends part time for at least part of the academic year;
 - Works full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled;
 - Financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid;
 - Has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others);
 - Is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents);
- or

- Does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school).

Most students now fall within several of the categories mentioned above and make up much of undergraduate enrollment, which is about 74% (Radford et al., 2015). In 2014, there were 8.2 million students age 25 and above (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Lastly, nearly 25% of nontraditional students have four or more characteristics such as having dependents, working full time, and being a single parent (Radford et al., 2015).

Consequently, there has been an increase in the number of students with children in college as well. About 26% of U.S. undergraduate college students now have dependent children (Gault, Reichlin, & Román, 2014). Gault et al. (2014) also estimated that 43% of the student parents are single mothers and 11% are single fathers. These demographics signify that the population of mothers in college is substantial. Yet, the overall graduation rates for student parents are lower than non-parent students despite the rising enrollment numbers of mothers in college (Nelson, Froehner, & Gault, 2013). According to Nelson et al. (2013), being a student parent decreases a person's prospects of completing a degree at a rate of 53% in comparison to 31% for non-parent students. This is discerning because of the financial importance of a college degree.

Significance

A college degree directly benefits mothers and their families. For example, a person's earnings have the potential to increase exponentially over a lifetime if he or she obtains a bachelor's degree. Hershbein and Kearney (2014) reported that the overall earnings for a person with a bachelor's degree is \$1.19 million, which is twice as high as a high school

graduate. Also, Nelson et al. (2013) observed that a college degree for low-income parents has a long-lasting effect on their children generationally.

The attainment of a college degree also benefits society. According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2016), the unemployment rate for recent college graduates was only 12.6% compared to 20.7% for high school graduates. Baum, Ma and Payea (2013) reported that federal, state, and local governments received higher tax revenues from college graduates and were less likely to spend money on federally funded programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) compared to federal spending on high school graduates. However, the Institute for Women's Policy Research [IWPR] reported that 40.2% of student parents receive SNAP (Gault et al., 2014). Therefore, institutions should understand the specific needs of the student parent population in order to assist them in completing their degrees, which will subsequently profit society as a whole.

Lastly, universities and colleges have an incentive to invest in assisting mothers in college to complete their degree. Twenty-six states are moving towards performance based or outcomes based funding to ensure that the graduation rates at their public universities and colleges are meeting stipulated standards (Complete College America, 2014). Some examples of states that use performance or outcome based funding are Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Florida. What is more, public postsecondary institutions in states may receive limited or no funding if they are not meeting their targeted attainment, retention, and enrollment rates (Complete College America, 2014).

Purpose of the Study

Prior literature on student parents in college has focused on the factors that make their situation unique and challenging (Brooks, 2013; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Estes, 2011; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Holm, Prosek, & Godwin Weisberger, 2015; Katz, 2013; Robertson & Weiner, 2013; van Rhijn, 2014; Wilson, 2011; Wilson & Cox, 2011; Yakaboski, 2010). These studies help explain why the graduation rates of student parents are lower than non-parent students. In summary, studies explored issues concerning finding balance, support, and the different demographic attributes of student parents. However, none of the current studies take an ecological approach by examining the enrollment of mothers in college in the rural southeast. This paper uses the theory of developmental ecology as applied to college student development (Strange & Banning, 2015), in order to decipher how environmental factors, affect mothers attending college in terms of role conflict and role strain. Furthermore, the purpose of my study is to understand the perceptions of what an ideal child friendly campus would be based on the narrative perceptions of mother college students. Therefore, a qualitative thematic analysis was used in order to examine the mothers' experiences in college. The research question is what are the institutional environmental needs of mothers in college in the rural southeast?

Rural Southeast

The rural southeast can be considered unique in comparison to other rural parts of the United States because of its racial diversity. According to Johnson, Showalter, and Lester (2014), the three states with the largest minority populations living in rural communities are congregated in the south, which include Texas, North Carolina, and Georgia. Additionally, both

North Carolina and Georgia are located within the southeast. Therefore, it can be expected the student parent population in the rural southeast may also be racially diverse.

Mothers in college that reside in rural areas may encounter socioeconomic challenges. For instance, residents in the rural southeastern part of the country are the least likely to complete high school and have a higher rate of unemployment (Johnson et al., 2014). Furthermore, the teen birth rate in 2010 was almost 35% higher in rural counties compared to non-rural counties (Johnson et al., 2014).

Another fact is that finding quality childcare is a challenge in rural communities due to low wages for childcare workers (Colker & Dewees, 2000). Additionally, there is a smaller number of childcare centers in rural areas compared to urban cities, which results in limited choices for welfare recipients to use childcare subsidies, and fewer qualified childcare providers due to educational attainment in the rural areas. The participants in my study also dealt with some of the same issues concerning childcare.

Lastly, finding and renting affordable housing in rural communities can be challenging. The Housing Assistance Council (2012) found that over 30% of renters' income in rural areas goes towards paying rent, housing in rural areas are also more likely to be substandard, and likely to be overcrowded. Similarly, some of the mothers that partook in my thesis study struggled to find adequate, safe, and affordable housing in the rural southeast.

Defining a Child Friendly Campus

There are no scholarly criteria for dictating what constitutes as a child friendly campus. Currently, a Google Scholar search yields no academic definition, but U.S. News (Hopkins, 2011) reported that a child friendly campus should include:

- Comprehensive women and children programs that include residential, social, and academic programs.
- Family housing
- Daycare and facilities such as lactation rooms
- Support systems such as a social support group, mentoring networks, or counseling services
- Parenting skills courses
- Online and blended degree programs

The U.S. News (Hopkins, 2011) definition of a child friendly campus was used as a guide for comprehending how mothers may perceive a campus to be accessible for them and their families.

The literature about student parents focused on the challenges and barriers that this particular group of students tend to encounter in college. Some of the barriers and challenges that are consistent throughout the literature include time management, campus support and services, and paying for college (Goldrick-Rab, & Sorensen, 2010; Marandet, & Wainwright, 2010). Additionally, the literature examined how these challenges and barriers affect student parents based on demographic differences such as marital status, racial identity, and socioeconomic background (Robertson & Weiner, 2013). Although some of the literature provided information concerning the best practices for assisting student parents in higher education, there is limited literature about intentionally establishing a child friendly environment for student parents on college campuses.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Various theoretical concepts were used as a framework for exploring the perceptions of a child friendly campus for mothers attending college. The theories that were applied to my study included developmental ecology, intensive mothering, role conflict, and role strain. The intent of this section is to provide an overview of each theoretical concept.

Developmental Ecology

An ecological approach called developmental ecology was used as the framework for my study to comprehend how the campus environment impacts mothers in college. The theory is also known as bioecology (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). Developmental ecology was first conceptualized by a psychologist named Urie Bronfenbrenner (1995) to explain child development. Renn and Arnold (2003) later applied the final version of Bronfenbrenner's theory of bioecology to create an ecological model for observing the formation of student culture on college campuses. The theory was selected as my theoretical framework to decipher how campus culture impacts the experiences of mothers because they may be considered to be outliers in traditional collegiate settings.

Developmental ecology posits that the environment is made up of five different types of systems that college students interact within (Renn, 2003). The five systems are the (1) microsystem, (2) mesosystem, (3) exosystem, (4) macrosystem, and (5) chronosystem (Renn, 2003). The microsystem consists of direct environmental interactions that occur daily in the life of a college student. Some examples are the day-to-day interactions that students encounter in classrooms, labs, clubs, work, and at home. In addition, students interact within different

multiple microsystems on a daily basis. In comparison, the mesosystem is when microsystems intersect with one another (Renn, 2003). An example is when a university has an event which allows a mother to bring her child from home to participate in a family friendly activity. Next is the ecosystem, which are environments that students have no interactions with, but are directly affected by the agency that occurs within the system (Renn, 2003). Examples are the office of the Provost, Chancellor, Board of Trustees, or the U.S. Department of Education. These governing boards and offices create institutional policies and practices that directly impact college students access to postsecondary education, financial aid, scholarships, family housing, and childcare on campus. In regards to the macrosystem, it involves time, place, and cultural settings (Strange & Banning, 2015). College has now become more attainable to students from marginalized backgrounds, although issues of inequality still persist within its systematic structure (Renn, 2003).

Lastly, Bronfenbrenner added chronosystem to his theoretical model, which involves a person's development throughout their lifespan that is influenced by an individual's environmental interactions (Strange & Banning, 2015). An example is a mother taking a break from school to focus on raising her children, but returns to school later in life to complete a degree, yet finds the university's services to be unsupportive. The individual's interactions within these environmental systems are known as Process-Person-Context-Time [PPCT].

In regards to a college campus, Renn and Arnold (2003) explained that PPCT consists of an individual's development and their interactions within it. For instance, the "process" for my study are the interactions that mothers have on their college campus. Next is the "person," which involves the demographic attributes that make up a mother's identity (Renn & Arnold,

2003). For instance, my study involves mothers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, ages, marital statuses, levels of education, and socioeconomic statuses. Then there is “context” and “time,” which encompasses the interactions that transpire within the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. In my study, the theory of development ecology was used to explore how the college environment can create barriers and/or provide support to mothers.

Intensive Mothering

Another theory that is explored in my study is the phenomenon of intensive mothering. One of the premises of intensive mothering is that mothers are primary caregivers and must be self-sacrificing (Walls, Helms, & Grzywacz, 2014). Therefore, the theory is applied to this study to comprehend the intrinsic motivational factors and agency that mothers experience in college. Intensive mothering was first theorized by Hays (1996) in her book *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. Hays (1996) explained that intensive mothering is a feminist theory that seeks to comprehend the contemporary cultural model of mothering. The theory has been applied by Estes (2011) in understanding how mothers attending college dealt with the dilemma of feeling like a bad parent and bad student. Additionally, intensive mothering views good childrearing as requiring all of a mother’s time, resources, and energy (Hays, 1996). In the context of college, parents who are college students may struggle to put their children’s needs first before the demands of school (Estes, 2011). Furthermore, Hays (1996) implied that the time required to meet the expectations of intensive mothering leaves little time for other obligations such as full-time work (Walls et al., 2014). The same can be said about mothers trying to attend school full-time, since some of the participants in my study viewed school as

their current place of employment. Lastly, the ideologies of intensive mothering may differ depending on the intersection of a parent's other identities such as their socioeconomic class, race, and gender (Estes, 2011).

Role Conflict and Role Strain

Another theoretical concept that clarifies the complexities of mothers balancing school and family obligations is role conflict and role strain. Roles are defined as the social statuses or multiple positions that a person has in society (Shepard, 2002). In the case of my study it is the role of being a student and mother. Role conflict occurs when the performances of two or more roles conflict with each other (Shepard, 2002). For instance, a mother in college may have to sacrifice spending leisure time with her children to focus on completing school work. Consequently, role strain may occur when the expectations of a roles' statuses becomes incompatible. In addition to being a parental figure, mothers in college have the same pressures of any other student attempting to complete a degree such as committing time to do assignments, studying, and perform well academically.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

As previously reviewed, college completion rates for student parents are lower than non-parent students largely due to issues concerning time-management, lack of campus support and services, educational funding, demographic differences, and the need for institutions of higher learning to implement best practices for parenting students (Nelson et al., 2013). Previous studies have concluded that individuals, families, institutions, and society benefits from having a college-educated population (Baum et al., 2013; Complete College America, 2014; Hershbein & Kearney, 2014). Thus, strengthening mothers' attainment in degree completion by creating a child friendly community is a worthy endeavor.

Time Management

Although, time management is a challenge that all students may encounter, the situation for mothers in college may be more demanding because of the overlap of their multiple roles such as being a parent, working, and caregiving. For instance, Nelson et al. (2013) found that over half of student parents spend 30 hours per week on caregiving and over 40% of them work full-time or more. If the demands of college level schoolwork are added, then it should be of no surprise that mothers attending college may experience role strain. For example, qualitative studies have found that student parents find meeting the demands of family and school as challenging because both of their responsibilities take up a considerable amount of time and attention (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Estes, 2011; Holm et al., 2015; van Rhijn, 2014). Furthermore, student parents may sacrifice time for school, family, and other obligations. For instance, a qualitative study conducted by Robertson and Weiner (2013) found

that their participants felt challenged in maintaining full-time study, family life, and having a reduced income while being enrolled at a research institution. Additionally, Deutsch and Schmertz (2011) found that their participants felt stressed by the financial burdens, household responsibilities, and the need to complete schoolwork. Lastly, student parents may deal with role conflicts between being an ideal student and parent. For example, the themes in Estes' (2011) qualitative study demonstrated the dual complexity of being a good parent versus being a good student and concluded that university support can help alleviate this tension. Besides the demands of school, student parents were also frustrated with the lack of support given by their post-secondary institutions.

Campus Support and Services

In the literature, student parents dealt with several problems related to receiving support from the higher education institutions that they attended. Some of the most consistent difficulties discussed in the literature included inaccessible childcare on campus, inflexible campus policies, and inadequate support from faculty and staff. In regards to childcare, Nelson et al. (2013) suggested that the caregiving needs of low-income adults must first be resolved, in order for other policies to be effective regarding student parents. As previously stated, this is important since 40.2% of student parents receive SNAP (Gault et al., 2014). Moreover, the participants in several studies shared their concerns with being unable to access childcare on campus (Brown & Nichols, 2013; van Rhijn, 2014; Yakaboski, 2010). Some reasons as to why childcare was difficult to access on campus include the availability of child-care space, cost, and hours. Also, many campuses do not offer an on-campus child-care center exclusively for student parents because it may also be open to faculty, staff, and the general

public. Additionally, Eckerson et al. (2016) reported that childcare access on campus has been in decline since 2012 and currently only 45% of community colleges and 50% of public four-year institutions have a childcare facility.

Another concern with campus policies is that they may be unaccommodating for mothers. For example, the participants in Brown and Nichols' (2013) study discussed barriers that pregnant and parenting students encounter when they attempted to access financial aid, schedule classes, use campus transportation, denied housing on campus, and the absence of lactation rooms on campus. Yakaboski's (2010) also focused on student parents' frustrations about being unable to live on-campus with their children, student fees for traditional student programs, the lack of family activities, and child restrictions to campus facilities. Lastly, van Rhijin's (2014) participants described their college experience as isolating because there were no family programs and events on campus for student parents. Besides structural barriers, student parents experience problems receiving support from faculty and staff too.

The experiences in receiving support from faculty and staff varied in the literature about student parents. For example, Yakaboski (2010) specifically studied the narrative perceptions of single mothers and discovered that they felt underserved by faculty and staff because of their unwillingness to provide accommodations in the classroom, strict attendance policies, and inability for their family to access campus events, facilities, and housing. In contrast, Robertson and Weiner (2013) surveyed both male and female student parents from different ethnic and racial backgrounds and suggested that institutions of higher education should develop a web-based resource page, create child-friendly spaces, establish an administrative position for helping student parents, and implement supportive policies and practices.

Funding College Education

Emrey-Arras (2014) reported that from 2003 to 2012 the burden of funding institutions of higher education, including public colleges and universities, have increased for students while state funding has decreased. Additionally, Huelsman and Engle (2013) looked exclusively at how budget cuts and policy changes at both the federal and state level affects student parents and found that it decreased access to public programs like the Pell grant, the Childcare and Development Fund, and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program [TANF]. Additionally, some student parents have relied on financial aid to cover tuition and living expenses. According to Huelsman and Engle (2013) about 57% of student parents and 66% of single student parents have applied for financial aid compared to non-student parents. As a result, student parents are more likely to graduate with higher debt from college compared to non-student parents (Huelsman & Engle, 2013). This is also anecdotally confirmed from student parents struggle with financial strain in other studies (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Wilson & Cox, 2011; Yakaboski, 2010).

Demographic Differences

It is important to note that student parents also have a multitude of marginalized identities (Nelson et al., 2013). Nelson et al. (2013) concluded that student parents, especially single parents, are more likely to be from an underrepresented racialized minority groups, first generation students, and from a low socioeconomic background. In the literature, some studies focused on a particular demographic of parenting college students. Wilson (2011) did a case study on low-income single mothers at a community college and found that many of the participants were uninformed about their eligibility for public assistance programs. In

comparison, Katz (2013) did a longitudinal qualitative study of 64 women on welfare to examine the difficulties that the mothers had in meeting basic needs such as food, clothing, and housing for their families while enrolled in college. In addition, Goldrick-Rabi and Sorensen (2010) researched the literature on single parents in college and found that campus support is limited in terms of providing economic resources and as a result student parents over rely on student loans, which may have long term financial consequences.

In contrast, some studies specifically investigated the diverse experiences of parents in college and noticed that they shared commonalities concerning degree aspirations such as the hope that it will increase their access to higher paying careers after graduation (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Robertson & Weiner, 2013). In comparison, some studies observed the dissimilar experiences of diverse student parent groups. For instance, Estes (2011) looked at both mothers and fathers in college and found similarities in how they constructed their parent student identity as being good students that are capable of managing family obligations successfully. Additionally, Wilson and Cox (2011) examined low-income students at a rural and an urban community college in the mid-west and discovered connections between the participants regarding similar life experiences and aspirations as single mothers in college. Furthermore, a study conducted by Brooks (2013) compared gendered differences in the UK and Denmark and determined that there were cultural variances in parental expectations. For instance, Brooks (2013) found that in Denmark there were flexible policies such as extending leave time that made school and family life more accommodating for student parents in comparison to the United Kingdom. However, none of the current studies are set exclusively in the context of the rural southeast. This is important to

understand because student parents in rural southeast are more likely to commute from off-campus. For example, Marandet and Wainwright (2010) found in their study that 63% of their student parent respondents chose their school based on its close proximity to their house. As a result, student parents may choose a university based on convenience and not necessarily the campus culture and services, which traditional college aged students value over location.

Best Practices

Lastly, some of the literature provided best practices for colleges and universities to follow when assisting student parents. This is important because it will enable colleges and universities to develop family friendly spaces and policies for student parents. As previously discussed, the U.S. News (Hopkins, 2011) provided some examples of best practices for a child friendly campus. Also, Schumacher (2013) suggested guidelines for best practices in serving student parents in higher education based on research conducted by the IWPR. First, it is suggested that outreach and transitional student support services are set up to help student parents feel welcomed to the campus community (Schumacher, 2013). Second, specialized academic services such as academic advising, flexible scheduling, and online courses are offered to prevent barriers in degree completion for student parents (Schumacher, 2013). Third, is providing affordable on campus childcare and if unavailable then offer resources for affordable off campus childcare centers (Schumacher, 2013). Fourth, it is recommended that institutions of higher learning offer financial and educational resources, besides just financial aid, such as an emergency fund, food bank, and scholarships for books and supplies (Schumacher, 2013). Fifth, it is advised that there is specialized counseling for student parents concerning mental health, domestic violence, mentoring, stress reduction, parenting education, and life skills.

Sixth, is that colleges and universities should give information concerning off campus community services that student parents may benefit from such as how to obtain TANF and SNAP (Schumacher, 2013). Finally, it is suggested that universities and colleges offer on campus family housing or partner with an off-campus community that has affordable housing for students with children (Schumacher, 2013).

Child Friendly Environment

There is limited literature on creating a child friendly environment on college campuses, specifically for student parents. However, current literature about constructing child/family friendly communities mention implementing policies and practices involving student services, student fees, and student spaces (Yakaboski, 2010; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Robertson & Weiner, 2013). For example, Yakaboski (2010) conducted a focus group with single mothers and student affairs practitioners and it was suggested from the results of their study that the campus community develop services specifically for student parents. Some suggestions included the women studies program initiating a single mother's support group, the campus reassessing child restrictions from campus amenities by making it family friendly, and using a portion of student fees to facilitate family friendly programs and events. Also, Robertson and Weiner (2013) made recommendations on how to build a child friendly campus by developing a student parent resource center, offering financial literacy and healthcare options for student parents, creating living learning housing communities for families, and having academic policies concerning situations that student parents often encounter. In addition, Brown and Nichols (2013) advised that some of the same practices and policies previously mentioned, but it was also suggested that university and colleges assess the number of student parents on campus by

reviewing how many reported having dependents on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). It was also mentioned that postsecondary institutions implement a small student fee to fund resources for student parents like subsidies for childcare and maternity leave.

The gap in literature is understanding the perceptions of a child friendly college campus, specifically in the rural southeast. Framed by developmental ecology, role strain, and role conflict, my study will add to the current literature by focusing on the narrative experiences of mothers attending a university in the rural southeast. Furthermore, my study expands upon the literature by exploring the matrix of marginalized identities that affect how mothers in college view the campus culture. My research question is how do mothers living in the rural southeast perceive their college or university campus to be child friendly?

CHAPTER 4

METHODS

Research Design

The idea for studying mothers came about in the summer of 2015 when I was working as an academic advisor at a college campus. I advised for various student populations, including mothers in college. Anecdotally, I experienced several advisees that were mothers leave the institution or programs for various reasons. After talking to several faculty members and colleagues I learned that others shared similar concerns about the retention and support of college student mothers on campus. Therefore, I decided to delve deeper into the challenges of being a mother and college student by conducting a qualitative study for my thesis.

My research question explores how mothers, living in the rural southeast, perceive their college or university campus to be child friendly. To better understand the complexities within this population, I chose to use several theoretical concepts including developmental ecology, role conflict, and role strain to explore how environmental factors influences an individual's narrative.

Participant Recruitment

My study was approved by Georgia Southern University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) # H16013. All of the participants that were recruited attended the same institution in the rural southeast. However, none of the participants in the study were students that I advise due to any conflict that may arise from being a part of my study. Also, there were no incentives given to the participants. The recruitment process took place in the fall of 2015 between the months of October to December. Flyers (*Appendix A*) were posted throughout the campus in

different academic and student service buildings. Additionally, an email was sent to the Dean of Students Office requesting for an announcement to be made as part of their weekly informational email that is sent to students about numerous opportunities to participate in activities and events, including research projects, on campus. Lastly, I used a snowball technique by giving participants flyers about my research project for them to disburse to other eligible student parents.

In order to be eligible to participate in the study a person had to be at least 18 years of age and be the primary or joint caretaker of at least one child under the age of 18. Furthermore, the participants had to be currently enrolled or previously enrolled in a degree program within the last five years. A total of 14 participants were recruited. Out of the 14 participants only one of them had no children under the age of 18, however when she was enrolled in undergraduate school within the past five years both of her children were in high school. This was used as justification for her data to be included in the study. It is important to note that the study was open to both mothers and fathers, but there were no fathers that consented to being a part of my study. Although, one potential participant that identified as a father initially contacted me, he did not follow up with me after I emailed him about scheduling a time and place to conduct our interview. At this time, I am uncertain why students that identified as fathers did not volunteer to be part of the study.

Data Collection

Participants made requests to be a part of the study by either emailing me at my student email address or calling a temporary Google cell number that was created specifically for the study. An interview was then scheduled that took place at a location at the discretion of

the interviewee and interviewer. Before the interview each participant had to complete a consent form (*Appendix B*). The interviews occurred on campus in a private reserved space in the library or in an empty room at an academic building. Only one interview took place off campus at a coffee shop near the university per the request of the participant. The interviews ranged from 18 minutes to an hour and 26 minutes. The mean time for the interviews was 33.38 minutes.

A semi-structured interview was conducted to collect data (*Appendix C*). I asked open ended questions about family, being a parent in college, goals, ambitions for obtaining a degree, years of formal education, and anything else the interviewee had wanted to mention. After the interview participants were asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire (*Appendix D*). Table 1 below provides a summary of the participants' demographics.

Table 1

Demographics of Study's Participants

(N=14)	
Age	23-44 (Mean 31.43)
Gender	All Female
Race	4 Black and 10 White
Highest Degree Earned	57% Some College and 43% Bachelor's
Major's College	3 in College of Education, 5 in College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, 2 in College of Public Health, 2 in College of Health and Human Sciences, 1 in College of Science and Mathematics, and 1 in College of Engineering and Information Technology
Major Level of Study	10 Undergraduate students and 4 Graduate students
Marital Status	50% Single, 7% Widowed, 7% Divorced, and 36% Married
# of Children Live in Household	29% (one child), 50% (2 children), and 21% (3 children)
Became a Parent for the First Time while in College	57% (Yes) and 43% (No)
Household Income	31% (Under \$10,000), 23% (\$20,000-\$29,999), 15% (\$75,000-\$99,999), 8% (\$10,000-\$19,999), 8% (\$30,000-\$39,999), 8% (\$50,000-\$74,999), 8% (\$100,000 or higher), and 8% (Not reported).
Employment Status	43% Unemployed, 21% Part-time, 14% Full-time, and 21% Not Reported.
Public or Private Assistance	50% Yes (6 received SNAP, 3 Child Support, and 1 Medicaid) and 50% No

The interviews were recorded using an audio digital device and uploaded into a program called Sony Sound Organizer on a password-protected laptop that only I was able to access, in order to store the audio recordings until they were able to be transcribed. All the interviews were then transcribed on a password protected website called Transcribe (<https://transcribe.wreally.com>) that requires a paid subscription to use. In addition, any identifying information such as the names of people or places were removed from the transcriptions. Pseudonym names were then created for the participants, so their identities will remain anonymous (Table 2). Listed below is a chart of the pseudonym names associated with each participant along with their demographic information.

Table 2

List of Study's Participants, including Pseudonym Names

Pseudonym Name	Age	Race	Marital Status	Education Level	Employment Status	Number of Children	Age(s) of Children
Aaliyah	25	Black	Single	Bachelor's	Unemployed	1	2 yrs.
Anne	30	White	Married	Some College	Unemployed	2	7 yrs. and 5 yrs.
Ava	23	White	Single	Bachelor's	Part-time	2	6 yrs. and 18-month old
Claire	35	White	Married	Bachelor's	Full-time	2	14 yrs. and 12 yrs.
Emma	41	White	Widowed	Some College	Part-time	2	7 yrs. and 11 years' old
Isabel	23	White	Single	Some College	Unemployed	1	2 yrs.
Leah	26	White	Single	Some College	Unemployed	1	5 yrs.
Mya	35	White	Married	Bachelor's	Unemployed	3	13 yrs., 18 months old, and 5 months pregnant
Natalie	24	White	Single	Some College	Unemployed	1	3 yrs.
Nora	34	Black	Single	Bachelor's	Part-time	1	2 yrs.
Olivia	44	White	Married	Bachelor's	Full-time	2	22 yrs. and 20 yrs.
Samantha	39	Black	Single	Some College	Unemployed	2	17 yrs. and 15 yrs.
Sophia	26	Black	Divorced	Some College	Unemployed	2	7 yrs. and 10-month old
Zoe	35	White	Married	Some College	Unemployed	3	14 yrs., 6 yrs., and a 9-month-old

Data Analysis

After transcribing the interviews, they were then uploaded into Nvivo 11 Starter edition for analysis. The transcripts were reviewed several times using a line by line coding method. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was used as well. According to Braun and Clarke (2013) a thematic analysis is a flexible approach in qualitative research that does not specify a certain method or theoretical framework for collecting data. I used a complete coding process to create nodes in Nvivo for information that was relevant to the phenomenon being studied. In total, I had 47 nodes, however the codes were later collapsed or disregarded to create five themes that answer the research question from a constructivist standpoint. As a result, the method of data analysis was inductive. In addition, I compared contrasting perspectives to check different explanations of the same phenomena as a form of validity. I compared the findings with existing literature to see if the narrative experiences were similar or different. Table 3 list the themes and sub-themes that were identified using the theoretical framework of developmental ecology:

Table 3

List of Study's Themes and Sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Accommodations	Class availability, support of faculty and staff, commuter, and housing.
Campus Restrictions	Childcare, recreation center, and breastfeeding.
Events and Activities	Connecting with others, family events, and family spaces.
Feeling Uncomfortable	Feeling cautious, feeling judged, and feeling safe.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

Accommodations

Accommodations was the most salient theme in my findings and includes the sub-themes of academics, campus restrictions, commuting, and housing. The theme about accommodations is relevant to this study because it emerged from the participants' perceptions of their experiences of being a mother in college. Interestingly, the best practices outlined in the literature are services that some of the mothers in my study also requested.

Class availability

For class availability, some of the mothers were adamant that the university can be more accommodating by having less restrictive absentee policies. Several participants lamented that if students are able to comprehend the material then attending class lectures is not a necessity. Going to lecturing sessions was seen as a waste of time by some mothers in comparison to spending time with their families. Olivia a 44-year-old undergraduate student who is married with two adult children explained that:

If I know how to study, I know how to read my book. If I know what I need to know for the class I don't see why I have to sit in a two-hour class every other day. You know? When I could be home with my kids helping them with their homework or cooking dinner for them or whatever.

Another participant, Mya who is a 35-year-old married pregnant mother with two children had similar sentiments:

If I can do the work and if I can get all my assignments turned in, and I am showing through my work and through my assignments and papers and exams that I am getting the material, then it shouldn't matter if I miss that third class. I shouldn't lose the 15 points that they are deducting from your final grade if you missed more than two classes.

Also, some of the mothers discussed having to bring their children to class because of the strict absentee policies. For example, Emma is a 41-year-old widowed mother with two children shared her experiences in dealing with the attendance policies:

Good Friday my kids were off from school. I missed an assignment that was in class that was worth like five points. So, that day I hadn't been able to make it. And after that I was like that...I don't care my kids are coming with me. I don't care if they are throwing up in a bucket. I am bringing my kids. They can sit in the corner in the class and they can puke their guts out. But, I am not going to miss another assignment.

Another issue about class availability dealt the times they were offered. Some of the participants wanted online courses. In addition, some of them wanted more sections of classes to be offered too. There were also requests to teleconference classes, do independent study, or exempt from certain courses. However, there was no consensus about what was the best type of accommodation for student parents in general. The reason may be due to their personal circumstances independent from school such as balancing other important obligations. For instance, Claire is a 35-year-old married mother in graduate school who also works full-time. Her biggest struggle in school has been balancing time between family, work, and classes. Claire stated:

I would have to say that again going back to the course offerings that's the biggest struggle that I face is trying to fit in my work schedule, my school schedule, and having a family life. I think that balancing all of that was probably the biggest struggle that I have faced in general, aside from the course schedule stuff.

Support of Faculty and Staff

Besides class availability there was also issues with getting support from faculty and staff. Some felt there was no extra support given to student parents. Emma explained how a professor responded to her complaint about the time constraints for completing assignments online. Emma said that the professor retorted to her that, "I never had a parent or anyone get so personal about how parenting interferes with their schoolwork." In contrast, other participants were able to find faculty and staff that were extremely helpful. For example, Zoe a 35-year-old married mother with three kids described two professors that made accommodations for her. One of her professors also had a baby.

She had a baby at the time and she was the one that told me to come to class with my baby. She was the one that did after hours' chemistry tutorials with me. If I missed stuff...she would make sure to give me what I missed.... Also, you know...it's funny because [another professor's] as much as I did not like his teaching style he was very accommodating.

There were also conflicting views about receiving support from campus staff members. An example of a student service professional that came up repeatedly in various narratives were academic advisors. For example, Claire, now a graduate student, discussed how her academic advisor in undergraduate school was helpful:

As a matter fact, my academic advisor when I was going through my undergraduate program was phenomenal. She was great. She always knew, you know, that I had a job and that it was hard for me to get over to talk to her, so she really would do a lot by email. So, I think she made fantastic effort to be very supportive of me.

In contrast, Natalie a 24-year-old single mother described her frustration that her academic advisor did not understand how class scheduling can conflict with caregiving hours. Natalie stated, "It would help if he understood it because he's just telling me to take these classes and some of them are at like 6 o'clock at night and I can't do that." The reason why she was unable to take night classes was because there were no available childcare services at night on and near campus.

Lastly, one the mothers shared her experience with using the counseling center on campus. Zoe explained how she felt after the counselor was not able to assist her with a personal matter. She felt that the counselor was not competent in handling crisis situations that older students may have compared to a traditional aged college student.

I was just so disgusted by the whole counseling thing. So, if the school is going to have counseling services to help then they need to make sure that they have people in there that can really freaking help nontraditional people. Their circumstances are different than teenagers. You know? We have adultery, children dying, we don't know how to feed our family. All this type of stuff going on. Divorce. Things that can really just ruin your life and you can't get out of bed. Not, I am going to fail and my GPA is low and my mom and I are fighting or whatever.

Zoe continued to explain that “All these problems are very significant to the teenager, which make them feel they need help. But, we need qualified counselors that can handle our problems too.” It should be noted that the same counseling center that she is referring to offers services for nontraditional student groups such as veterans, but none specifically for student parents. Lastly, Claire explained how she wanted to see systematic changes in the way the university works with student parents and other nontraditional student populations. She explained that:

In directly in relationship to [university] because I don't know about other college campuses, but I just feel like they could do a better job of catering to a variety different students. We live in the age where we have every diverse population. I think they do a really good job of relating to the traditional college student from whatever background they come from. But, I think really lack in relating to the nontraditional student who has a family, who has a job, and yet is trying to seek higher education and I think they should try to do a better job of including those students making them feel welcome.

Commuter

The participants also discussed accommodations for their commute to campus from distant towns and cities. Some drove over an hour to come to the university. A few also mentioned the lack of higher education opportunities available in their immediate residential areas and how the university was a preferable choice between other schools in nearby cities. For instance, Emma mentioned the different types of educational opportunities that were available near her parents that live in another state, but she found the educational opportunities to be limiting in her current state of residency. Emma clarified that, “You have so

many education opportunities back home. And so here it has been the biggest determinant that in [different city] you have [another university] and [technical school] and from there you have to drive.” Another participant discussed concerns about the expense of gas to not only commute back and forth to campus from home, but to other towns to do her teaching practicums. Furthermore, the education program does not reimburse students for the required commutes or provide public transportation. Nora explained that:

So, gas is like really tough but like being in the education program we have to go to the school and it's an hour away or it might be in town. The last time it was an hour away and so having to go every day that cost.

Housing

A few of the mothers also mentioned an interest in seeing family housing available on campus. Some were familiar with similar programs at other universities and colleges. Mya mentioned when she first learned that family housing existed on college campuses. Mya explained:

I initially looked when I was in undergrad (for family housing). My undergrad was in history and when I looked at a master's program for history I was looking at [another university] and they have family housing, they got campus childcare for students, just for students. At least at the time. This was probably six years ago.

Additionally, a few of the participants suggested that if their university does create family housing then it should be restricted to student parents. For example, Leah refused to live on or near campus because of the party scene. Furthermore, some of the mothers reported finding

off campus housing to be difficult. Sophia shared her difficult search for an apartment in a safe neighborhood. Sophia stated that:

So, it's like you have to live on the outskirts or right here in campus wise. Then in campus wise everything is catered to students. So, everything is roommate style. You buy a room and you either have a roommate in there with you. Two, three, or four. And there is not a lot of regular apartments here.

Other participants commuted from distant towns, lived with family members, or already had a place of residency prior to enrolling at the university.

Campus Restrictions

The participants also had concerns about restrictions to campus facilities. This theme is divided into sub-themes about childcare, the recreation center, and breastfeeding.

Childcare

In my study, the mothers discussed needing extended childcare hours in the evenings, accessible childcare on campus, and affordable caregiving. Additionally, several of the participants complained about their interactions with the childcare center on campus. For instance, Isabel a 23-year-old single mother explained how she was discouraged from even trying to apply for her child to be admitted to the center on campus. Isabel said that:

Whenever I tried to get...when I wanted to put him in the development center...I called them and she said they were pretty full for that age range. She's like the only thing that you can do is try to get on the waitlist. She's like but I am going to tell you now to don't apply. I was like why do you say that? She like for one it's...I can't remember how much she said, but it's somewhere like between \$75-\$100 dollars just to apply. Yeah, and she

said and even then, you probably won't get in. Anyone who is already in here we offer them first renewal to re-enroll their children.

Isabel also disclosed how she met students that worked in the campus childcare center. Some of her friends told her that faculty and staff were not supposed to have priority, although their children discretionally are given preferential enrollment into the center. In addition, Isabel's frustrations with trying to access the childcare center were similar to other mothers that looked into enrolling their child there as well. In spite of the center being inaccessible there was one participant that was able to get her son enrolled. Unfortunately, the same participant was not able to get her second child enrolled in the program. However, it is also important to note that not everyone was interested in childcare.

Some of the participants did not believe in using non-family childcare at all. Sophia a divorced mother of two mentioned not using childcare and received support from her family instead. Sophia explained that, "I don't have to put my son in daycare. That is one thing that I am adamant about because I didn't allow my daughter to go to daycare either because so much stuff goes on in daycares. It's ridiculous."

Another mother expressed that childcare is not the responsibility of a college or university.

Anne a 30-year-old married mother with two kids from a lower middle class background suggested that:

It's a college campus. I don't expect there to be childcare. It would be great. I know that it would never be something free. For college students like for me to have to pay for it would be almost impossible because I don't have a job. What my husband makes. We make bare minimum to pay for everything. So, to have to pay extra for care that

wouldn't really work out. Like I said I don't expect there to be something or if there were something.

Anne also exemplifies how some of the mothers did not know a childcare facility existed on campus. Similarly, Maya noticed that:

I had no idea that they had a child care center until I was on campus the first day driving around trying to figure out where in God's name where I was supposed to be because this campus is not directionally friendly. So, I think that administrators should...I would think they would want...or try to make it more evident. I don't want to feel like I have to work so hard to find information about things or not made aware of what is available on the campus.

Also, the cost of the childcare was uncertain amongst the participants. Despite these varying views the majority of the participants were in favor of having an affordable and accessible childcare center on campus.

Furthermore, a few of the participants with older children wanted programs for their children on campus when primary and secondary schools were closed for holidays and the summer. Emma worked part-time at a recreation center and gave advice about how easy it is to set up a day camp. She stated:

You got early childhood majors...whatever having worked at the [recreation center] you can put together a four-hour camp. That's inexpensive. Very inexpensive. Soda bottles with vegetable and water dye. And alcohol seltzer tablets. They make lava lamps. They are not expensive to make. So, the programs don't have to be 100 dollars. They don't need to run all day long. You turn around and charge me \$50 dollars a week per kid and

say hey this is open and just let them play with Legos and erector sets. Get the engineering students involved. Get a little STEM camp day. Do a science day.

Nevertheless, for those that were not able to find childcare on campus they found alternatives such as babysitters, off campus childcare, and assistance from relatives, spouses, and friends. However, some of the mothers encountered unreliable childcare off campus too, including with family. For example, two of the mothers disclosed possible child maltreatment at different off campus childcare centers. Leah a 26-year-old single mother disclosed a bad occurrence at an off campus childcare facility:

I went and took [child] to daycares and I didn't like any of them, but I chose one and put her in it and she ended up being abused. It was very affordable. I was happy about the price, but I had no idea that that was going to happen. She was there for two days. The first day was fine and then the second day she came home with a cut on her face and bruises on her arm and things like that.

Nora also had a bad experience with an off campus childcare center. Nora is a single 34-year-old mother. She mentioned that:

Well, when I moved her back to my parents I took her to childcare...it was like a church daycare and I don't know what happened there, but she got to the point where she was scared to go to the bathroom and close the door. And like later on she would tell us that.... Because she was acting out they would take her and close her in the bathroom.

Recreation center

Participants also disclosed difficulty gaining access for their families to the on-campus recreation center. The cost of using the recreation center is included in their tuition, however

there are additional fees associated with bringing guests to the recreation center. Some of the participants complained about paying an extra fee for their children to use the recreation center. Samantha a 39-year-old single mother of two teenagers suggested that:

I would want to take my kids to promote healthy living and stuff, but it's not accommodating and I don't want to pay \$7 every time I go or for them to go to the gym.... When it would be cheaper for me...to have an option to purchase a membership for them to go and we all can go together.

Another complaint was the restriction of hours for children being able to enter the facility. Emma's children enjoy swimming and she would like the opportunity to take them to one of the movie in the pool events at the center, but is unable to because the events are scheduled late at night, which conflicts with her children's bedtime. Emma lamented that:

There's a lot of stuff that goes on up here that will be really fun, but not at 7 o'clock at night. You know? I would love to bring them up for like a movie in the pool. My kids are swimmers.

Additionally, the participants discussed being unable to have their child enter the recreation center to use the classrooms. Sophia had attempted to bring her child to a required fitness class one day because her daughter did not have school, but was not able to. Sophia explained that:

They didn't have school one day and she wanted to come to school with me. So, I did. She was able to come to all my classes except for one. I had an aerobics class and they wouldn't allow her on the inside of the [recreation center], which was crazy.

Another mother, Isabel, was meeting her student club in one of the classrooms at the recreation center. She was unable to enter the facility with her child although she did not intend to use any of the gym equipment. Isabel stated that:

They only allowed minors in on the weekends. I understand the liability they would face, but they wouldn't allow a parent to sign off waiving it. They won't let parents do that. I have a club that meets on Mondays and Wednesdays in the multi-purpose room upstairs, but they won't let me in just for it. Yeah, and so it's stressful when I first came across that situation because I wasn't aware of it at first.

Breastfeeding

Another issue with facility restrictions concerned breastfeeding. However, the issues regarding breastfeeding were only brought up by two of the participants. Sophia disclosed that she had to find a secluded space in the library to use her breast pump. Another participant expressed frustration about the lack of single bathroom stalls on campus. Emma stated that:

Like I breastfeed both of my boys. When I was working, I took the pump to work. You know those rights are protected as an employer...employee. But, there's nothing in place here. You tell me where's there is a single bathroom on this campus? I know one. That's the only bathroom. There's nowhere if I was a student that was breastfeeding I could turn around and go pump. It's protected under federal law as an employer. An employee they have to provide you that, but not as a student.

Events and Activities

Some of the participants also considered a child friendly campus to mean having events and activities that are accessible for the entire family. There were three sub-themes that emerged which included connecting with others, family events, and family spaces.

Connecting with Others

None of the participants knew of any student parent organizations available on campus. Some of the mothers wanted to connect with other student parents and form a parent interest group, parent night, a mother organization, and playgroups. Ava a single 23-year-old mother with two kids shared her own personal experience trying to find a mother interest group. Ava said that, "I know there's like a collegiate mothers like thing, but they're not really active. So yeah, it's like an organization, but it's not." Another participant, Emma, was particularly interested in connecting with other students that were veterans on campus. Emma suggested that:

I think putting more stuff during school hours for the student that attends here because as a parent I can't...technically I could be a part of veteran's student association. They meet in the evenings. I am not driving back. There's not that many of us really here. And most of us are all nontraditional and parents. So, instead of having the meetings at 7 o'clock at night maybe noon on a Wednesday. Or you know 10 o'clock. Because the thing is this is very select group of people. It wouldn't be that hard to turn around and say "What works for more people?"

Lastly, it should be noted that two of the mothers in the study identified as being military veterans.

Family events

Some of the mothers in the study described how being child friendly meant being able to attend events as a family. Some of the participants shared the positive experiences they had bringing their children to on campus events such as an international festival, art festival, graduation, planetarium show, movie night, music program, theatre play, and an athletic event. For the most part the mothers had positive experiences. For example, Zoe had the chance to visit the music department with her children. Her son was interested in getting tutoring from the music program. Zoe mentioned that:

Being able to walk on campus in the afternoon and go into the music department. All of the music students are sitting in there talking. I got my thirteen-year-old and five-year-old and they are talking to them. And showing them their instruments and then we get taken up into the environment and my son is able to use the rooms. The tutors are like look at this instrument and look at this one. That to me is like a learning environment. Kid friendly. I felt safe bringing them.

The participants also acknowledged that bringing their children to campus was a way to encourage their children to obtain a college degree. Mya mentioned bringing her oldest child to her undergraduate graduation. She hoped that the experience had a positive influence on him. Mya stated that:

So, it was really awesome with him getting to see me graduate and what have you. I think it's important. I think when kids see their parents going through its like yes we understand the struggles going through school. It sets a really good example for them too. I would love to bring them if it was feasible and appropriate things for them to

participate in. If there were family events. I would bring them to campus if it was possible.

However, some of the participants were wary about bringing their child to events on campus. Samantha discussed her own hesitations about her children being on campus.

Samantha suggested that:

I think child friendly to me would be...not that we're going to have a daycare all over campus, but for the atmosphere to be such that if I needed to bring my kids to campus it would be like a safe environment. You know? And I have. I have had to bring them to the library so that I could study. And I didn't always feel comfortable with them being on campus. I'm not sure like why. Maybe the mannerism or the lack thereof from some of the students.

Furthermore, being able to bring family into the school environment builds connections between different mesosystems instead of building conflict between them.

Family spaces

Similarly, a few of the participants suggested that child friendly meant having family spaces. For instance, one of the participants informed me that the library had a family friendly center. In this space parents are able to allow their kids to use the computers in the library. The campus lake was another example of a child friendly space. Natalie a 24-year-old single mother recommended that the university should build a playground near the lake as well. Natalie advised that:

I mean campus is pretty. Like if you go out there you'll see kids at the pond feeding the geese and stuff. It would be nice if they had kind of like a playground area. I know they

had one at the [animal] center, but that closes at 6:00 [PM]. So, like if they had a playground center that was just...it doesn't even have to be big just a small thing.

Feeling Uncomfortable

Another theme to emerge from the data dealt with the mothers' feeling about the campus environment and community. The majority of the participants expressed some level of discomfort, however, their reasons varied. The feelings were broken into three subthemes: feeling cautious, feeling judged, and feeling safe. The theory of intensive mothering helped explain how these feelings are influenced by the ecology of the campus environment.

Feeling Cautious

A few of the participants had never brought their children to campus. In addition, some of the mothers only had brought their child or children once or twice to visit the university. Some participants explained that their reason was to protect their child or children from the inappropriate activities and behavior of the traditional college age students. Claire, discussed an inappropriate incident that her family, specifically her daughter encountered at a football game. Claire revealed that:

Last year, during the home game that occurred immediately following the Thanksgiving break...I took my girls and my husband to football game. And I had a buddy pass and then I got another student to give me one of their buddy passes. So, unfortunately we were sitting in the student section at the football game. And that to me when I saw your email about the campus...student friendly...family friendly campus and that immediately came into mind. You know I had a drunk college kid hitting on my 13-year-old daughter during the football game.

Additionally, I noticed that cautious feelings did not vary by the ages of the children. It could be presumed that those with younger children felt more protective, but this was not the case. The participants with older children were just as concerned about dealing with inappropriateness. For example, one mother refused for her child to be a part of the dual enrollment program at the university. Dual enrollment enables high school students to attend a postsecondary institution while still in high school for college credit. Zoe did not want her child to be influenced by bad behavior. She detested that:

I have a son that's about to go to dual enrollment and I don't want him going there.

Because I want him to learn. I don't want him to smell the reeking alcohol in the class. I

can tell you there's kids walking in and out of the class to barf and then come back in the class.

Zoe was also the only participant that had concerns about the current quality of childcare on campus. Zoe stated:

I looked into the childcare on campus. That's a no go. There's too many personalities, exchanges, internships, for me to be comfortable with my child going there. And the city because of the school being here there is too much of that in centers around. So, I don't put my babies in daycare because I am so uncomfortable. I am very...very careful of who my children are exposed to.

This sub-theme helps give insight into an area that has not been explored in the literature before, which is the notion that a college campus is not an appropriate place for children.

Feeling Judged

A second sub-theme that emerged was feeling judged. This theme was unsurprising, since it has been previously explored in the literature (Yakaboski, 2010). Some of the participants had similar experiences with feeling judged. An example is Natalie's feelings about bringing her child to class. Natalie explained that:

I mean sometimes you get a lot of like bad looks. Or your teacher will say like can you try to come at different time, so you don't have to bring your kid. And it kind of just puts a strain on me where I don't know what to do, but most of its pretty good. I mean because she comes she'll sit and it's pretty nice. The negative there's not really one other than just some of the looks she gets. A lot of students will look down on you. Like why are you bringing your kid here? We're trying to learn kind of thing, but a lot of it has been good when she come and the teachers are fine with it and we'll sit in the back in the class in case she acts up.

Another mother, Ava, did not ask for any accommodations in undergraduate school after giving birth before final exams. Instead, she took her finals the following week after delivering her baby as she did not want to be judged for being a single mother in college. Ava said:

I had her and then I was back in class the next week. So, I was just like...you know...it was around...I had her in April...so I was getting ready for finals and presentations and things like that. And I was like, I don't want them to think that I'm trying to use this as an excuse. Or you know...just judge me maybe like I'm this promiscuous like college student.

The experiences and perceptions of feeling judged also relates to role conflict and role strain because the participants want to be perceived as being good students. Instead, they are judged negatively by their fellow students and sometimes the professors when they try to balance their dual identities as a student parent by bringing their child to class or asking for accommodations due to family obligations.

Feeling Safe

The third sub-theme about feeling safe has not been explored in the literature on student parents. The theory of intensive mothering was used to understand the need for some mothers to feel protective about the safety of their children (Walls, et al., 2014). For instance, some of the mothers were concerned about the crime that occurs on campus and in the surrounding community. One participant explained the university has a reputation for being a party school in the community. Zoe stated:

From a parent standpoint, I am not listening to what the school thinks they are. I am listening to what the masses think they are and there's a disconnect there. So, that's why I am not going to listen...there's a disconnect, but I think stuff like this can help them see. I know that sound so mean and so judgmental. I don't hate the school. I hate what's going on at the school.

Another concern is about living in the neighborhoods near campus. Ava and her boyfriend decided to move further away from campus because of the crime. Ava explained:

Well, off campus we lived at [a nearby complex], so I mean I guess that's technically really close. So... but when we had my daughter and like the experiences we had with just like the crime rate over there. And like we each use to get [university crime alerts]

all the time like [alert about our complex], [another alert about our complex] and we were like alright time to go.

Lastly, the participants with older children shared the same concerns about safety. Olivia described how the campus security alerts made her anxious for her kids. She mentioned that:

My kids are out here on campus at night and stuff. You know? Just because they are not students doesn't mean they are out here and getting active with the kids.... It's (a small town) where else is it for them to go? They are college age. You are going to hang out on campus or around campus or where ever. So, that worries me about here when I get the (security) alerts. Oh, there's a robbery at this place. And I am looking like where are my kids. You know, because they are at the age where they are out at that time. They are out at 2 in the morning.

Based on the responses it can be perceived that some of the mothers felt that the campus environment was not safe for children.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

In summary, this study provided an in-depth understanding of mothers' perceptions of what a child friendly campus looks like, or could look like. The theory of developmental ecology was used to understand how the environment impacts perceptions of campus culture. Based on a thematic analysis of the findings it can be inferred from the literature and data that the mothers felt out of place. While previous research has documented balancing time between the roles of being a parent and student, campus services and support, and the different demographic attributes, my study focused specifically on how these issues affect mothers in the rural southeast. The results of the study are supported by the literature in terms of mothers wanting accommodations, events and activities, feelings of acceptance and belonging, financial resources, and additional assistance.

In terms of the accommodations theme, the mothers wanted flexibility to be taken into consideration for environmental interactions that occur daily in their lives such as going to classes. They also wanted to be able to access services on the campus that were needed on a daily basis such as childcare, recreation center, and a breastfeeding area. Lastly, they desired to feel connected to the campus culture whether it was as a commuter or by the university providing campus housing to student parents. In the literature, student parents felt disadvantaged and social excluded by the lack of supportive resources available on campus (van Rhijn, 2014). The reason may be due to role conflict and role strain that the mothers encountered in the absence of these services such as Emma did when she had to decide

between taking her child to class for the day or missing school work because the campus did not provide an alternative like being able to videoconference classroom lectures.

In terms of the events and activities theme, the participants perceived the campus culture to be non-inclusive of parent students because there was a lack of opportunities to connect with those that share similar life experiences and there were no family events. In developmental ecology, it is important for connections to be made by developing environmental factors such as student activities and organizations. For instance, Ava attempted to bridge her life as a mother and student by finding a collegiate mothers group on campus, which unfortunately did not exist. Furthermore, according to Yakaboski (2010) it is important for institutions of higher education to create programs that are supporting of parents in college, in order to help increase their degree attainment.

In terms of the theme about feeling uncomfortable, social climates at colleges based on an ecological perspective influences the campus cultural environment. However, the mothers in the study felt that the social climate on their campus was geared towards the interests of traditional college students. In addition, some of the mothers felt uncomfortable with bringing their child on campus. An example is Zoe when she discussed the university's reputation in the community where the campus is located. In her opinion, it was a party school. Furthermore, the campus community was not perceived as being child friendly by most of the mothers in my study.

Lastly, there was a lack of awareness about the resources available on campus. For instance, Nora mentioned using some of her 401K to cover the cost of tuition. However, the university does provide opportunities for students to apply for student emergency funds

through the Dean of Students Office. Additionally, the mothers encountered a lack of assistance and awareness from campus administrators, including staff and faculty. An example is Zoe's experience going to the counseling center on campus. Other participants had similar narratives with their encounters with staff, faculty, and the different areas of student services on campus. Robertson and Weiner (2013) suggested that postsecondary institutions can provide web-based resources for student parents, offer affordable on campus childcare, develop child friendly spaces, create academic policies specifically for them, and implement initiatives such as financial literacy education for them and their families. Interestingly these are resources that some of the mothers in my study also requested.

In conclusion, the findings of my thesis are supported by the literature in terms of finding balance between the role of being a caregiver and being a student, the need for resources, need for establishing an inviting child friendly campus, and concerns about judgement from peers and faculty. The views expressed about campus safety and feeling uncomfortable when their children are present on a college campus has not been explored in prior literature. Unfortunately, this study does have limitations such as the findings as not being generalize because of the small number of participants for my study. Additionally, it would have been beneficial to use a more diverse group of participants based on race and gender. The majority of the participants for my study were white women. Also, no men volunteered to participate. Lastly, the majority of the literature about student parents is qualitative. In the future, I would like to develop a quantitative questionnaire to survey participants, in order to examine if the results of my study are replicable for other college environments and if the results are deemed significant by quantitative measures.

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APPENDIX A
RECRUITMENT FLYER

Research Participants Needed:

A Qualitative Examination of College Student Parents' Needs in the Rural Southeast

I am a graduate student (Master of Art in Social Sciences) at Georgia Southern University. I am conducting a thesis research project and would like to talk to college students who are also parents, about whether they think their college campus is child and family friendly. I'm interested in learning about what colleges are doing well to support families as well as ways to make improvements.

If you are hesitant to participate, please know that this study is strictly confidential. Furthermore, your name will not be used in the study.

This research project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Georgia Southern University (IRB# H16013).

You must meet the following qualifications to participate:

- ✓ You must be at least 18 years old.
- ✓ You are currently enrolled or last enrolled at a university or college within the last five years.
- ✓ You are a parent to at least one child that is 18 years old or younger.

If you qualify and are interested in sharing your personal experiences then please contact Danielle Bostick. You may email db01781@georgiasouthern.edu or call (678)459-4731 for more information.

This research project is supervised by Dr. April Schueths, email aschueths@georgiasouthern.edu

APPENDIX B
CONSENT FORM

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

A Qualitative Examination of College Student Parents' Needs in the Rural Southeast

1. You are being invited to participate in a research study about your opinions on whether your college campus is child and family friendly. I am interested in learning about what you think colleges are doing well to support student parents as well as ways to make improvements. This study is being conducted by Danielle Bostick, a graduate student in the Master of Social Science program at Georgia Southern University.
2. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is to understand the perceptions of the ideal child-friendly campus based on the views of parenting college parents.

Please carefully read the information presented below to decide if you would like to participate. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision about participating in this research project. You must be at least 18 years old to be eligible and meet all of the following criteria:

- You are parent to at least one child that is 18 years old or younger.
- You are currently enrolled or last enrolled at a college or university within the last five years.

If you do not meet the above criteria, you do not qualify for this particular study and should not proceed with the interview process. If you do meet the interview criteria, you may volunteer to take part in this study.

3. Procedures to be followed: You will be asked to participate in an interview of your choice location either in a neutral community setting or on the campus of GSU. During the interview you will be asked you will be asked open-ended questions pertaining to your education, family, employment, goals, and family friendly needs. Next, you will be asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire about your sex, age, marital status, education, income, employment status, etc.

In order for the researcher to accurately retain the responses that you provide in the interview, an audio recording device will be used. The researcher will also use a paper and note pad to take notes. You may stop or take a break anytime during the interview process, including requesting for the tape recording to stop and/or ask that I stop taking notes. In addition, you may refuse to answer any questions that I may ask of you. Transcriptions from your interview shall be placed in a password protected archives for a minimum of three years. Afterwards, it will be destroyed.

The research will be anonymous and your responses will not be associated with you in any way. Furthermore, your name will not be documented as part of your responses to the interview questions. The results for this data are for a thesis project. However, the results from the study may be presented at conferences and/or in publication.

4. Discomforts and Risks: The possible risks include disclosing personal information that you may find embarrassing or sensitive. However, this will be disclosed in a safe and confidential environment. Additionally, you are waiving any rights that you may have against the University liability and/or injury that results from participating in the interview. In the event of any emotional distress resulting from participation in the study, psychological treatment is available for low cost at GSU's Psychological Clinic. For more information about the clinic's services, please call (912)478-1685.
5. Benefits: There are no direct monetary benefits for participating in this study. However, the results of this study has the potential to benefit society by sharing personal information that may represent the experiences of other parents attempting to successfully complete a college degree.
6. Duration/Time required from the participant: Participation will take approximately 60 minutes.
7. Statement of Confidentiality: Maintaining your confidentiality will be given the utmost concern due to the sensitive nature of this study. Interview notes, questionnaires, and recordings will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the office of the researcher or faculty advisor. The researcher will transcribe the interviews, which will also be kept in the same locked filing cabinet. Furthermore, there will not be any identifiable names associated with the audio files, transcriptions, and the publication of the study. The only individuals that will have access to your interview and questionnaire response will be the researcher and faculty advisor.
8. Right to Ask Questions: Participants have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher named above or the researcher's faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of this form. For additional questions concerning your rights as a participant, contact Georgia Southern University's Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-478-0843.

9. Compensation: There is no compensation for participating in this study.
10. Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may decide at any time that you don't want to participate further and may withdraw without penalty. This will not affect you in any way; including your relationship with the researcher or Georgia Southern University. You may also talk to the principal investigator regarding concerns, questions, or complaints.
11. Penalty: There is no penalty for deciding not to participate in the study and you may decide at any time to not participate further, including withdrawing without any penalty or retribution.
- 12. All information will be treated confidentially. There is one exception to confidentiality that I need to make you aware of. In certain research studies, it is my ethical responsibility to report situations of child or elder abuse, child or elder neglect, or any life-threatening situation to appropriate authorities. However, I am not seeking this type of information in my study nor will you be asked questions about these issues.**
13. You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participate in this research study. If you consent to participate in this research study and to all the terms listed above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records. This project has been reviewed and approved by the GSU Institutional Review Board under tracking number H 16013.

Title of Project: A Qualitative Examination of College Student Parents' Needs in the Rural Southeast

Principal Investigator: Danielle Bostick, PO Box 8051, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA 30460, 912-478-7706, email: dnbostick@georgiasouthern.edu

Faculty Advisor: Dr. April Schueths, PO Box 8051, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA 30460, 912-478-2368, email: aschueths@georgiasouthern.edu

Participant Signature

Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

Investigator Signature

Date

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW

Interviewee Code: _____

Interviewer: _____

Date/Time of Interview: _____

GSU IRB# H16013

1. Introduction

- Introduce yourself
- Review the following:
 - The study's purpose
 - Explain plans for using the results from the interview
 - 18 years of age or older? Note response: _____
 - If no, discontinue interview
- Prior to starting the interview, let participant know:
 - I have several questions to go through, and this interview should take no more than 60 minutes. Please let me know if you need a break at any time. Keep in mind there are no right or wrong answers. Do you have any questions before we begin?

2. Tell me about yourself (and your family).

- What is your relationship status? For example, are you married, single, widow, or divorced?
- If you are a single parent then who helps you take care of your child?
- What college do you attend or have you attended during the past 5 years?

3. Tell me about your experiences being parent in college.

- How have you been able to balance being a parent and completing a college degree?
- What does it mean for a campus to be considered child friendly?
- What sort of support and services does your college or university specifically offer parents and their children?
- What other services can your college or university provide that would support the needs of parents in college?

- Tell me about any experiences that you and your child has had using campus resources or services?
- Tell me about any experiences that you have had finding family housing on or off campus?
- Tell me about any experiences that you have had finding child care while enrolled in school?
- What do you wish campus administrators understood about being a parent attending college?
- Has there been a particular person on campus that has been the most supportive of you? How? If so, did they know you were a parent? What position did they hold?
- What sort of barriers have you faced at school that has made it hard to complete your degree? What sort of barriers have you faced outside of school that has affected your ability to complete your degree?

4. Tell me about your goals and ambitions for obtaining a college degree.

- What are you studying in college and why?
- What motivated you to attend college? Why?
- What would you say is the most important support you have while enrolled in school?

5. Tell me about your years of formal education.

- How many years of schooling do you have, including years in elementary, middle, and high school?
- How do you/did you pay for your college education?
- If you have not finished college then what keeps you from enrolling or completing your degree?

6. Is there anything else we have left out during the interview?

- Do you feel you have given a fair picture of yourself?
- What are your feelings/thoughts about this interview and all that we have covered?

7. Consent

- Review informed consent form – written permission is required; Note response:
- Afterwards, ask participant to complete the demographic questionnaire

APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Perspectives: A Qualitative Examination of College Student Parents' Needs in the Rural Southeast
Demographic Questionnaire

GSU IRB# H16013

1. What is your age ?
2. What is your sex/gender?
3. What is your race/ethnicity?
4. What is the highest level of education you completed?
 - Did not complete high school GED High School Diploma
 - Some college Associate's Degree Bachelor's Degree
5. What is your major program of study in college?
6. What is your current marital status?
 - Single, never married Separated Living with a partner
 - Divorced Married Widowed
7. Do you have any children under the age of 18?
 - No Yes
8. If you have children then how many live in the same household?
9. Did you become a parent for the first time while enrolled in college?
 - No Yes
10. What was your household income range during last year, in US dollars?
 - Under \$10,000 \$30,000 – \$39,999 \$75,000 - \$99,999
 - \$10,000-\$19,999 \$40,000 – \$49,999 \$100,000 or higher
 - \$20,000-\$29,999 \$50,000 - \$74,999
11. What is your current employment status? (mark all that apply)
 - Unemployed Self-employed
 - Employed part-time
(Work less than 40 hours per week) Employed full-time
(Work at least 40 hours or more per week)
 - Student part-time
(Enrolled in less than 12 credit hours a semester) Student full-time
(Enrolled in 12 credits or more a semester)

12. Have you received any kind of public or private assistance from a state or local welfare office, church, or community agency (e.g., food, housing, child support, emergency help, etc.)?

- No Yes

If so, which resources have been the most helpful?