

2022

## Retention of Female Single Parents After the First Year of Higher Education

Victoria VanNest  
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# Walden University

College of Education

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Victoria VanNest

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University

2022

Abstract

Retention of Female Single Parents After the First Year of Higher Education

by

Victoria VanNest

MA, Michigan State University, 1994

BS, Michigan State University, 1992

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

May, 2022

## Abstract

The problem this study addressed is that undergraduate, female, single parent students are less likely than other groups of women to complete college. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore perceived challenges of persistence to degree completion of undergraduate, female, single parent students in a Southern state, at a suburban community college. The research question used in this basic qualitative study determined what perceived challenges undergraduate female single parents in higher education face during their first year as a student in a community college regarding persistence to degree completion. Using Tinto's theory of student integration as a conceptual framework, 10 semistructured interviews were conducted with participants from the study site who met the criteria of being female, single parent students, and completing their first year of higher education with a C or better average. Two rounds of open coding were used to identify codes and themes. The data were synthesized into three major themes: academic integration, financial commitment, and goal commitment. This study found that to be successful, single parent female students depended on academic integration, in the form of teacher and school support, financial commitment to pay for college and life expenses and goal commitment providing a motivation to continue even when confronted with challenges. Recommendations include accessing other single parent female students, and childcare, expanding financial support, and cultivating outside support systems. Positive social change can result if institutions of higher education support students and guide them through the challenges associated with the first year of college.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This study addressed the challenges that contribute to a low retention rate for of undergraduate, female, single parents in higher education during their first year as a student. According to Kruevelis et al. (2017), “The number of single mothers in college more than doubled between the 1990-00 and 2011-12 school year, to reach nearly 2.1 million students, or 11% of undergraduates” (p.1). Single mothers are much less likely than other groups of women to complete college, with only 28% of single mothers who entered college between 2003 and 2009 earning a degree or certificate within 6 years (Kruevelis et al., 2017). There is a gap in literature related to strategies for retaining undergraduate, female, single parent students beyond the first year of college, who currently have the lowest retention rate of any subpopulation of women. Enhancing persistence for this population of first-term students could have strong positive social change implications for them and their dependent children, and through this study, the participates have provided insight into their challenges.

### **Background**

For decades, the issue of retention in higher education has been a concern (Campbell & Mislevy, 2013; Dewberry & Jackson, 2018; Luciano-Wong & Crowe, 2019). The high percentage of students who begin their path in higher education but do not complete their degree within 6 years has implications for the students and the schools. Researchers attempting to explain this exodus and the factors that might influence it began with Tinto (1975) and Bean (1983) and continue to shape the dialogue around retention. Researchers have focused studies on identifying key variables influencing retention of females who enter higher education. When looking at what contributes to the retention of women, researchers have identified such external factors as linguistics usage on admissions essays (Lewine et al., 2019), access to college entrance days

(Fleming & Grace, 2015), and financial aid support (Carpenter et al., 2018; Koh et al., 2017; Young, 2016) to be positive contributors to retention. Findings in Cavnar and Stanny (2018) and Reader (2018) showed that the institute of higher education can play a role in the success of students and affect retention through the use of mentoring programs and academic advising; however, the perceived challenges that female, single parent students experience when they enter higher education is an area that needs exploration.

There are some indications that outside influences may affect overall retention among students, including areas such as parental expectations (Diemer & Li, 2012), whereas other research has shown that internal factors may be predictors of retention (Cox & Ebbers, 2010; Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2017; Wilson, 2016). Each of these researchers has made a valuable contribution as institutes of higher education search for programs and practices that will help keep students in school and working towards degree achievement.

There is a gap in the research related to understanding the challenges that undergraduate, female, single parent students experience during their first year in a community college. The population for this study was females who returned to college for a second year, however many individuals in this population do not return and therefore understanding the experience and perceptions of persisters is important (Kruvelis et al., 2017). Understanding these challenges can help institutes of higher education to provide specific support so that more of the undergraduate, female, single parent students who would not otherwise return to complete Year 2 of their education. This study was needed to allow the undergraduate, female, single parent students the opportunity to share their perspectives so that future students might benefit from their experiences, and institutes of higher education might provide resources necessary to keep this population in the education system.

This chapter covers the problem of retention in higher education as it relates to undergraduate, female, single parent students, as well as the purpose of the research, and the research question that is the focus on data gathering. The conceptual framework choice of Tinto's theory of student integration is explained, as well as the rationale for the selection of the design and key concepts of the phenomenon being studied. Finally, definitions are presented to provide guidance to the information, assumptions, delimitations, and limitations that are reviewed, and a presentation of the significance of this study is provided.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem this study addresses is that undergraduate, female, single parent students are much less likely than other groups of women to complete college. There is a gap in practice related to strategies for retaining female, single parent students beyond the first year of college, leading to the lowest retention rate of any subpopulation of women. In a Southern state, at a suburban community college, the problem to be investigated is the perceived challenges of retention to degree completion of undergraduate, female, single parent students. Local community college officials have made retention a focus since 2018 because fall-to-fall retention for all students was 47%, lower than the retention of students at other community colleges in the rest of the state at 61% (NCES, 2018). According to the deputy chancellor of finance, the college has not collected data or determined a method to track low retention groups within subpopulations of the overall retention rate (deputy chancellor of finance, personal communication, October 30, 2019). As with over 40% of colleges there is no one person responsible for tracking retention (Habley et al., 2010; Levesque, 2018). In Texas specifically, one in four college students

are raising children while attending college; however, most colleges in Texas do not track completion rates for this subset of the student population (Galasso et al., 2018). A recent study by ACT has shown that behavior and personal skills are as important in retention as grades are (ACT, 2016), but there is an absence of documented information at the local level to guide higher education in providing behavior and skill-based support. In Tinto's (1975) integration model, the students who lack integration into the social systems in the college develop a low commitment to continuation in the college system because lack of integration was attributed to disassociation from the college institution and ultimately results in the lack of retention. Higher retention rates were found for college students who engaged in regular attendance, used the college support services, and integrated with college social groups (Mortagy et al., 2018; Salinas & Llanes, 2003). Based on previous research, behaviors can affect the level of retention among students.

The population of students entering college by gender is estimated to remain stable over the next 10 years (NCES, 2018), but a significantly high number of female single parents are currently not completing their educational goals (Semuels, 2017). The surrounding community the college services has 26% female head of households (Town Charts, 2017). In the target state, 68% of low-income families have no college education, and 48% of low-income families are headed by single parents (NCCP, 2017). The largest share of female students attends community colleges (Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019), making this population important when identifying behavior and skills that contribute to the success of female, single parent students at the undergraduate level.



### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate the perceived challenges of persistence to degree completion of undergraduate, female, single parent students. Several researchers have established the importance of purposeful, direct support for female single parent and low-income students (Diemer & Li, 2012; Fleming & Grace, 2015; Lewine et al., 2019), but there is a need for a greater understanding of the challenge's undergraduate, female, single parent students face. Additionally, an abundance of literature about nontraditional students exists, and although female single parent students are considered nontraditional, all nontraditional students are not single parents (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). An improved understanding could lead to behavior and skill-based support that could increase retention of this population.

### **Research Question**

The problem this study addresses is that undergraduate, female, single parent students are much less likely than other groups of women to retain in college. There is a gap in practice related to strategies for retaining female, single parent students beyond the first year of college, leading to the lowest retention rate of any subpopulation of women. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore perceived challenges of retention to degree completion of undergraduate, female, single parent students in a Southern state, at a suburban community college. Therefore, the following research question was used in this basic qualitative study: What perceived challenges did undergraduate female single parents in higher education face during their first year as a student in a community college regarding persistence to degree completion?

### **Conceptual Framework**

To accurately understand the challenges that undergraduate female single parent students who persist into Year 2 of education, Tinto's (1975) theory of student departure and self-

determination was used as the conceptual framework for this study. Tinto (2017) argued that the process of dropping out of college is a longitudinal process of interactions and experiences individuals have within systems, which makes it an appropriate model to support the exploration of the perception of the challenges of female single parent students who persist beyond the first year of college. Although higher education models and program leaders have begun to accept the changing student body and ways to support them, the focus in higher education is still predominately on traditional students, thus making it important to understand the perceived challenges of female single parent students.

### **Nature of the Study**

This basic qualitative study was used to understand the perspectives of undergraduate, female, single parent students who retain past their first year in a community college setting. Qualitative research focuses on generating theory, and it is more commonly used at the initial stages of understanding a phenomenon (Burkholder et al., 2016); therefore, the qualitative approach is most appropriate for understanding the perceived challenges of female single parents who persist, view, and explain their experiences. Qualitative research allows a problem to be viewed in a new way, providing inductive theorizing to generate new theories (Bansal et al., 2018), and the issue of study requires a view of the challenges from the participant's perspectives. In qualitative research, the interest is in the answer to why this phenomenon is occurring (Rosenthal, 2016), specifically, why female, single parent students are having problems with retention and degree completion.

The participants in this study voluntarily self-selected into the participant process as being undergraduate, female, single parent students from a local community college who had completed their first year of higher education. To obtain the interview data, a semistructured

interview with open-ended interview questions was used in the interviews to ensure that each participant was asked the same question but allowing for expanded, individual answers. The target sample size consisted of 10 participants who attended the target community college and meet the specified participant criteria. Data were collected through interviews that were conducted through in-person or face-to-face audio or video platforms.

The data gathered were then transcribed. Thematic analysis was used to identify codes, categories, and themes. This approach maintained the integrity of these data without losing the meaning of the original transcript (see Clark & Veale, 2018). In thematic analysis the researcher reads and rereads the information, establishes the codes and generates and reviews the responses for common themes, and finally defines and names the themes (Guest et al., 2014). Thematic analysis requires involvement from the researcher where the text is viewed by looking for themes in the words (Guest et al., 2014). This analysis was undertaken to examine the meaning behind the information generated from the interviews. Themes were used as a basis of analysis to understand the perceived challenges of female, single parent students.

### **Definitions**

The following terms are defined as used in this study:

*Attrition:* The result of involuntary or voluntary withdrawal from an institute of higher education specifically resulting in the inability to complete the program or degree (NCES, 2018).

*Community College:* A public, post-secondary institution in which the highest degree award is a two-year or associate degree; however, recently a small number of community colleges have been approved to provide bachelor's degrees (Radwin & Horn, 2014).

*Head of Household:* The most recognized definition is the member of the household that provides the majority of income for the family, and the number of female heads of households is growing in Western societies (Khazaeian et al., 2018).

*Non-Traditional Student:* A non-traditional student is defined as a disadvantaged student because of their background and as participants of under-represented groups (Burnell, 2019); the biggest delineator of non-traditional students is age (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

*Persistence:* The continuation of enrollment by a student in higher education until the completion of the program or a degree is obtained (Braxton, 2013).

*Retention:* The portion of students within a school year that completes the qualifications for the program or re-enroll in the program for the next year is a measure of retention (Hutto, 2017).

*Short-Term Persistence:* Continuing through the first 2 years of education is an important benchmark of persistence and is identified as short-term (Elliot, 2016).

*Single Parent:* The most used term for the non-marital birth of a child, or one parent's absence during child-rearing is defined as single parent (Doherty et al., 2016).

*Support Services:* Kinds of services other than coursework rendered by the institution to facilitate student's success within a program or the institution in general these might include financial support, emotional support, or educational support (Essel et al., 2018).

### **Assumptions**

In a qualitative research study, the researcher seeks to explore the meaning of an event or activity in the participant's experience (Richardson, 2018). Qualitative studies establish reality

based on the interpretations of the participants (Arghode, 2012). The assumptions made in this study were that the participants provided honest information based on their experiences, that they were willing to share their experiences, and that the information gathered was relevant to the research questions at hand. It was assumed that any researcher will be respectful of the participant's experiences, and the methodology chosen to interpret those experiences was appropriate (Cunliffe, 2011).

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The delimitations are the limitations consciously set by the researcher, and the justification for why a particular avenue of the study was not undertaken (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). In this study, the delimitations include the choice of the conceptual framework. Choosing Tinto's theory (1987) of student departure and self-determination meant that other conceptual frameworks were not chosen, including the feminist theory. The theory of student departure best fit with the analysis of the challenges of students who retain past Year 1 of higher education and is well established as a conceptual framework nearing paradigm status (Berger & Braxton, 1998). The research question was chosen to explore challenges that female, single parent students who persisted faced within the first year of higher education. This study will not focus on identifying the specific motivations for persisting, although motivation has been used to examine higher education persistence (Rizkallah & Seitz, 2017). Finally, the sampling technique was chosen based on the availability of resources and timeliness of data collection. The participants all came from a local suburban community college due to ease of access and because the community college has had low overall retention rates. The transferability of this study is limited due to the small sample size and choice of a qualitative approach, however, the information gathered would apply to any community college seeking to understand the challenges

of the female single parent student. These delimitations and scope of research were choices made to allow for the perspectives of these participants to be told without the constraints of numerical data collection tools or a wide range of research questions that might provide scattered data that would be difficult to correlate.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are present in all research and are important to identify and acknowledge to shape the understanding of the study. Limitations are items that are out of the researcher's control but may affect the study (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). In qualitative studies, researchers advance critical thinking and provide a different theoretical framework to view a phenomenon (Bansal et al., 2018); however, this method limits the transferability of information. The geographic region may also limit the transferability since all participants came from a single southern state. The quality of research and analysis are dependent on the skill of the researcher and their bias (Anderson, 2010) therefore a researcher's own bias may have a limiting effect on the collection or analysis of data. Because I have experienced the conditions that are the focus of the study, it is important to question the analysis and views of the data received against any expectations. To minimize this bias, I created a responsive interview structure based on the research paradigm, structure research questions to obtain unbiased information, and carefully analyzed the data help to ensure that any researcher bias is minimized in the study. In qualitative data, it is the researcher's responsibility to question their biases and to take every precaution to ensure those biases are minimized to ensure this is occurring, in this study I chose reflective journaling to ensure biases and assumptions were questioned at every stage of the data analysis (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This research study was designed to create a reliable and valid study that

provides new information into the challenges of the female, single parent student and insight into the continuing struggle of retention in higher education.

### **Significance**

Enhancing understanding of retention at the local community college for undergraduate, female, single parent students could have positive social change implications for this population in terms of degree completion, persistence, and the quality of life that could result from degree completion. These potential positive outcomes could affect their educational and economic opportunities thereby strengthening support for their dependent children (Holtzman et al., 2019). Because the high number of female single parents are not completing their educational goals (Semuels, 2017), the need to better understand the challenges of women's experiences as they persist after the first year of college will become important guidance to colleges to aid in increasing retention. The undergraduate female single parent exists as an underserved student population on college campuses, and over half of low-income undergraduate students are single parents (Yakaboski, 2010). The original contribution the findings could provide an improved understanding of the perceived challenges for this population of students related to their success in the undergraduate college program. The positive social change that could come from these findings includes increased financial stability, job opportunities, and stability, and increased educational opportunities for the children of these families. As Pink (2018) noted, "The path to economic freedom is through education and job stability, and community college programs that are designed to provide a pathway to a baccalaureate institution are also important to the local economy" (p.1). Understanding the perceived challenges of female, single parent students will allow institutions of higher education to address the challenges these women face and possibly allow for increased retention of this population.

## Summary

Female, single parent undergraduate students have some of the lowest retention rates among all women in higher education (Kruvelis et al., 2017). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate the perceived challenges of persistence to degree completion of undergraduate, female, single parent students.

Using Tinto's (1975) theory of departure as the conceptual framework, data were collected through 10- semistructured interviews with female participants who meet the criteria described. The current literature provided the context to analyze this phenomenon and possible solutions that can be explored for future cohorts of female, single parent undergraduates in higher education. The scope of the problem addressed is focused on a local community college in a Southern state and is limited in transferability, but the implications of positive social change in this community college setting could inform stakeholders to strengthen the support systems to improve retention for female, single parent students in higher education.

In Chapter 2, I include a review of the literature relevant to retention of female single parent students in higher education including examining persistence and degree completion, factors affecting retention inside and outside the college as well as financial considerations. As well, I provide a knowledge base and build a deeper understanding of the context related to the problem that is the focus of this basic qualitative study. Also included is a description of the conceptual framework related to student retention related to the phenomenon being studied. I describe the literature search, terms, data bases used, and provide a critical review of salient peer-reviewed journal articles and study findings regarding the support of challenges and supports experienced for female single parent students in higher education. Finally, I describe the literature



search strategy, the conceptual framework comprised of Tinto's (1975) theory of departure, and a thorough review of researchers' findings related to the concepts and themes for this study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem this study addressed is that undergraduate, female, single parent students are much less likely than other groups of women to complete college. There is a gap in practice related to strategies for retaining female, single parent students beyond the first year of college, leading to the lowest retention rate of any subpopulation of women. A comprehensive review of the literature including current and past literature is instrumental in exploring and more deeply understanding the current state of understanding with retention in general and specifically with retention among women. Internal and external barriers that may prohibit undergraduate students from continuing their education into Year 2 have been identified (see Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2017). While these barriers are not specifically applied to female, single parent students, it is assumed that some of these identified barriers to completion and persistence may apply to these undergraduate, female, single parent student experiences through Year 1. As the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate the perceived challenges of persistence to degree completion of undergraduate, female, single parent students, exploring the perspectives of this population might provide key decision-makers at the local site with vital information to strengthen the support systems and possibly remove barriers that could affect this population of students. There are three sections to Chapter 2 that include the literature search strategy, a description of the conceptual framework selected for the study, and the integrated review of the current research studies including an analysis of the findings related to the problem being studied. In the first section, I describe the literature search strategy.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

Literature search strategies provide a necessary component to the creation of exploring the information and research findings related to the phenomenon or problem being studied. A

substantial review of peer-reviewed literature including a variety of data bases is important to conduct a comprehensive search. A comprehensive search of databases provided a solid foundation for this study and the literature supports the relevance of retention as a topic of investigation.

Databases used in this research include Gale Academic OneFile Select, Computers & Applied Sciences Complete, ScienceDirect, Education Source, CINAHL Plus with Full Text, Education Source, MEDLINE with Full Text, APA PsychArticles. The key terms used were *single parent female, single mothers, retention, higher education*. These search terms were used alone and in combination. The themes that emerged included: social support, academic support, and financial support.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Tinto's Theory of Student Departure and Self Determination**

To accurately understand the challenges that undergraduate female single parent students who persist into Year 2 of education, Tinto's (1975, 1987, 2017) theory of student departure and self-determination were used as the conceptual framework for this study, originally posited in 1975 and revised in 1987, and 2017. Tinto (2017) argued that the process of dropping out of college is a longitudinal process of interactions and experiences individuals have within systems, which makes it an appropriate model to support the exploration of the perception of the challenges of female single parent students who persist beyond the first year of college. Over the years, Tinto's theory was revised to include more nontraditional students and programs, including 2-year programs (Metz, 2005). Karp et al. (2011) challenged the notion that Tinto's theory of student departure was increasingly irrelevant to community college students. In their study, Karp

et al. found that academic and social integration are still just as essential in the development of networks that enable or indicate persistence.

Institutions of higher learning have struggled with the idea of how to retain students, and in 1975, Tinto attempted to create an institutional-oriented model of retention as a process of interaction between the institution and the individual. When viewed as a process, it is also important to view the individual's educational expectations and institutional components that predispose them toward attending a specific institution of higher learning (Tinto, 1975). The concept of dropping out of higher education as a process of integration was taken from Durkheim's (1961) study of suicide and the implication that a lack of integration led to a higher likelihood of suicide. Specifically, applying the findings of the theory of student departure, the individual characteristics of the student play a role in whether they persist or not. These include such characteristics as an emotional connection to education and flexibility in dealing with changing circumstances. Individuals who drop out of higher education had individual characteristics such as instability, insecurity, and restlessness not seen in their counterparts who persisted (Tinto, 1975). Outside of individual characteristics, another key factor to determine whether a student retains is the commitment to the goal of education. Finally, the individual is only one part of the model, and the interaction with the institution is another factor that affects an individual's retention rate. The individual's experience in the academic and social systems within the college leads to integration or the student leaving the school (Tinto, 1975). The intersection of the individual characteristics and institutional integration is what makes this conceptual framework most appropriate when looking at the female, single parent student's retention within higher education.

Tinto's (1975) theory has been the conceptual framework for many studies specifically related to female retention in higher education. In a study of Black women collegian's relationships, Tinto's conceptual framework specifically related to how integration with the school's faculty members led to a higher retention rate (Williams & Johnson, 2019). Additionally, using the same concept of faculty interaction as an indicator of success based on Tinto's institutional integration theory, researchers found that quality mentorships among women led to higher retention (Allen et al., 2019), and faculty status influenced student's retention (Hutto, 2017). As well personal characteristics have been the focus of retention based on Tinto's theory of departure, including depression and college stress as indicators of retention (Arbona et al., 2018). The use of institutional integration as a conceptual framework for the study of nontraditional student's retention through higher education is well established.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts**

Students who do not integrate into the social systems of the institute of higher education and leave before degree completion carry a significant and real cost with the decision to leave. The cost of dropping out measured in lost earnings is \$3.8B in a single year, and students who leave have an average of \$37,000 in student loans that must be repaid (Bustamante, 2019). The cost to the institute of higher learning in terms of lost state appropriations revenue is substantial as well, resulting in over \$6.2B and over \$1.5B in student grants (Johnson, 2012). Although there has been research on retention in higher education based on the idea of a cost-benefit analysis (Lumina Foundation, 2010; Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1996; Poliakoff & Alabay, 2013), there is more evidence and support for the theory of social integration as a deciding factor in student's ability to continue their higher education commitments. Tinto's theory of integration (1987) is more appropriate and has more support in the research on student

retention and will therefore be the basis of this study (Tinto, 1987). The review of related literature revealed three main contributing factors related to retention among female, single parent students: academic support systems, social support systems, and financial support.

### **Academic Support Systems**

One of the tenants of Tinto's theory of student departure and self-determination is the integration into the social systems at the institute of higher education. A student who integrates into both the academic and social domains are more likely to remain in school and to achieve degree completion (Tinto, 1975). Researchers have shown the importance of academic integration, as it is critical to retention to be able to academically achieve success in the field of study (Juttler, 2020). The process of integration into the social support systems of an institute of higher learning may be the difference between female single parent students being successful in their path to education or voluntarily withdrawing.

The support achieved from the institution may make the difference between female single parent students being able to continue their education and leaving before completion. Mothers want the university to consider their children, for female, single parent students, their daily life involves not just school and homework but also the care of the child (Shenoy et al., 2016). Based on qualitative data, a coordinated approach is necessary to support the family, including access to health care, the ability to find low-cost childcare and help to navigate the college systems (Galasso et al., 2018). Universities and college officials need to consider the needs of both the parent and the child when approaching the problem of single parent retention.

Officials within institutes of higher learning can provide support in the area of academics and skills necessary to be successful in higher education that can assist in connecting students in the academic domain. Some teachable skills that can lead to higher retention include study plans

(Okagbue et al., 2020) or learning strategies (Musso et al., 2020), both of which have been an indication of the ability to be successful in higher education. Supplemental instructional courses that are peer-led and target more challenging courses can help the retention of a college freshman (Skoglund et al., 2018); the resources that assist students in academic preparation are the most successful at promoting retention after the first year (Schelbe et al., 2019). The academic domain is where university or college personnel of higher learning institutions can provide assistance and support possibly leading to higher retention rates after freshman year, and researchers have established that this area should be a focus for female single parents as they navigate their first year of higher education (Okagbue et al., 2020; Schelbe et al., 2019; Skoglund et al., 2018).

Although academic support is critical to provide successful integration into the academic domain, a holistic approach with student support services encompasses the social domain of integration as well and has been successful in increasing retention (Cox & Naylor, 2018). Many school officials have created additional services for female single parent students and researchers have shown that participating in campus services can aid female single parent students and may lead to success in their retention (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). The lack of individualized support is a key contributor to student's decisions to leave an institution of higher learning, making the focus on the social support domain as important as the academic support domain (Russell & Jarvis, 2019).

Other opportunities for social support and integration can be found in the variety of programs and services that assist first-year college students. Previous researchers have demonstrated many of the programs already in place in institutes of higher learning including college introduction days (Fleming & Grace, 2015), academic advising availability (Reader, 2018), and mentoring programs (Cavnar & Stanny, 2018) can all increase retention rates among

students from the first to the second year of education. When institutes of higher learning engage students in peer support programs, the students who participate in these programs show higher retention rates after their first year (Tucker et al., 2020). All of the support services available to female single parents are opportunities to engage in the social and academic domains at an institute of higher learning and may create a stronger connection to the education process and a higher retention rate among students returning for the second year.

### **Social Support Systems**

Females who enter higher education often struggle with support outside of the college to help guide them through their educational journey. The challenges for women in higher education are different than men, from entry into higher education to the journey through higher education (Lorz & Muhleck, 2019). Often women struggle with parental support as they enter higher education (Matherly et al., 2017), or find that the social systems and structures create barriers to their daily engagement with higher education (Khanam et al., 2016; O’Keeffe, 2017). These same issues are important to women in the United States as they work through their journey in higher education. Broadening access to and participation in higher education requires the removal of several barriers. These complex barriers include inequality, exclusion, and misrecognition, as well as cost, motivation, and institutional barriers (Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2017). Ongoing researchers give voice to women’s struggles as they work through higher education, by identifying more barriers that can be removed through the development of support systems for this population of students (Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2017; Khanam et al., 2016; O’Keeffe, 2017).

Social support is important for all students who attend higher education, but for single parent female, single parent students, the need for social support is even more important as they



take on the challenges of both higher education and raising a family. Being a single parent may lead to less positive social support when it comes to higher education (H. Xu et al., 2020), and single parent students in a community college setting were found to have more stressors resulting in twice as many suicide attempts as their counterparts (Shenoy et al., 2016). These stressors are common due to the role strain a female single parent student feels by taking on multiple roles with competing time requirements, leading to a lower retention rate among this subpopulation (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Also, single parents suffer from more depressive and anxiety disorders than other populations of women adding to the emotional toll of role strain and child-rearing, while managing the commitments of higher education (Liang et al., 2019; Nahar et al., 2020). Stressors such as social isolation or everyday hassles of creating a family for a child can result in a higher risk for distress and disruption in parenting (Taylor & Conger, 2017). Additional social support structures to assist in managing the multiple roles and responsibilities these students encounter may be necessary to increase retention and the opportunities for these women to be successful in their pursuit of higher education.

Even more compelling is the fact that low-income students who attend community college are the most marginalized in higher education, resulting in an imbalance of psychosocial factors that have served as sources of community college student departure which included conscientiousness, self-esteem, social support, and life events (Wilson, 2016). The literature supports that a disproportionate population of low-income females attend community college and do not complete their degrees (Wilson, 2016).

The advantages of a college degree are numerous; therefore, the importance of guiding and assisting female single parent students through their journey in higher education is critical to their education and financial future. Single mothers will have a higher quality of life if they can obtain an education, leading to higher earning potential and more professional job potential (Kim

& Kim, 2020). Removing the barriers both inside the institution as well as societal barriers will open opportunities for female, single parent students to be retained through degree completion and allow for higher-earning potentials and greater opportunities for their families (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018).

Social support outside of the institute of higher education can be meaningful for female, single parent students as they attempt to navigate the stressors of higher education and raising a family. Long-running support networks that provide both individual and group support have been shown to positively affect the single parent's depression and stress in the short term, while peer support was shown to positively affect depression at six months (Taylor & Conger, 2017). Although it seems important for female, single parent students to have support from another woman, it is also helpful if they have a male support structure in place, which can lead to lower overall stress (Madhavan et al., 2018). Family and friend support was found to be a help for female single parents as they attempt to manage multiple responsibilities (Widan & Greeff, 2019) and sometimes providing economic assistance (McKenzie & McKay, 2018), including housing assistance was found to provide relief and support persistence (Martin-West, 2019); however, these resources may not always be available. Sometimes, even having online social support among female single parents can prove to increase self-esteem and promote empowerment (Zhao & Basnyat, 2018). Regardless of the type of social support, perception of support is positively related to less psychological distress by the female single parent (Rousou et al., 2019). For female, single parent students to be successful, it is important to have a social support system to address some of the stress issues related to multiple role responsibilities and financial hardships that confront these women.

## **Financial Support Systems**

Retention has been an issue in higher education for many decades; however, certain subpopulations of students struggle more than others. The most recent numbers demonstrate that only 8% of female, single parent students who start college will complete in 6 years, compared to approximately 50% of females who are not mothers (Bombardieri, 2018). One of the issues related to the retention of female single parent students is the financial aid disparity. Female, single parent students who do make it to graduation, end up with over \$30,000 in school debt, compared to \$24,000 for all women graduates (Kolodner, 2017), and women hold over two thirds of all student debt (Miller et al., 2017). In addition to student loan debt, 61% of single parents had additional credit debt adding to the overall debt load for female single parent students (Hinton-Smith, 2016). The implications of accruing this debt have been that the debt will keep some female single parents from ever completing their degree or put them at an enormous financial disadvantage once they graduate. As institutes of higher education implement programs to assist students in persisting beyond their first year, the financial challenges are important to identify assistance.

The cost of childcare and rent continues even while a female single parent student is in college and often, federal assistance that the student may be receiving for their child will be cut due to the increased income from financial aid (Hanford & Baumhardt, 2018). Single mothers are more likely to be in the crisis category regarding income and poverty status (Lu et al., 2019; McKenzie & McKay, 2018), and at community colleges, these women are more likely to be more food insecure than other groups of students (Spaid & Gillet-Karem, 2018). Women provide the main source of income in 40% of all households and 70% of the lowest quintile of households in the United States (Minnesota Population Center, 2018); however, since 1976, the cash assistance

programs from the state level has declined (Parolin & Luigjes, 2019), leaving more female single parents in economic distress. The path to economic freedom is through education and job stability, and community college programs that are designed to provide a pathway to a baccalaureate institution also serve to support this population to move out of poverty (Pink, 2018).

Finding the solutions to keeping female, single parent students in school is an ongoing focus of multiple studies, including this one. Researchers have replicated studies in which the findings were that for students who receive financial support, as well as social support over multiple years in a community college, are more likely to stay in college and not leave (Miller et al., 2020). Financial assistance provided by family members can also help keep female single parent households afloat allowing for these women to continue their education especially when public resources are insufficient or unavailable (McKenzie & McKay, 2018; Pilkauskas et al., 2017). Finally, financial scholarships that have requirements towards completion, including credit accumulation and academic achievement have been successful in assisting the single parent financially, resulting in an increase in retention and degree completion (Carpenter et al., 2018).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Academic support systems (Schelbe et al., 2019), social support systems (Lorz & Muhleck, 2019), and financial support systems (Pink, 2018) are essential to the ability of undergraduate, female, single parent students to persist. Taken together, the barriers are numerous for female, single parent students as they attempt to obtain a degree and improve their lives economically and socially, and to provide for their children (Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2017). The social support both within the institute of higher learning and externally among family and community, as well as financial hardships and individual, personal insecurities can make

retention in a community college a challenge for these women, and unfortunately, the majority of them will not maintain their enrollment, leaving themselves and their families more financially vulnerable (Allen et al., 2019). Identifying key components of the support systems that can assist the female single parent in retention is key to clearing out the barriers and providing opportunities for academic success. This basic qualitative study has been designed to explore perceived challenges of persistence to degree completion of undergraduate, female, single parent students in a Southern state, at a suburban community college and allow the undergraduate, female, single parent students the opportunity to share their perspectives so that future students might benefit from their experiences, and institutes of higher education might provide resources necessary to keep this population in the education system.

In Chapter 2 I restated the problem and purpose of this basic qualitative study on the perceptions of undergraduate, female, single parent students related to persistence and degree completion. There were three sections of Chapter 2 that included the literature search strategy, the description of the conceptual framework, and the literature review of the salient concepts and themes that emerged from the current literature related to the topic of this study. I reviewed the literature search strategy that I used to explore the studies and researchers' findings related to the phenomenon that is the focus of this study. In the literature review, I focused on examining the influencing factors that supported and challenged female, single parent students in remaining in college and completing their degree.

Based on the review of current literature, undergraduate, female, single parent students seem to have a greater likelihood of retaining and completing the college degree when there are support systems in place, including academic support, social support, and financial support. In a review of the current literature, I included an examination of these support systems individually

to identify how these support systems can contribute to a student's retention in higher education. Academic support, including pathways to learning strategies, and departments available to assist students can be provided through the institutions of higher learning and assist in academic integration. Social support is critical from family members or outside sources that help reduce the stress of student and family life. Financial support can be achieved either through financial aid or family support, with both methods providing increased retention. The perceptions of women who have been successful in their first year of higher education reflected these themes and could lead to decisions by university officials at the local study site to address the retention problem among this subpopulation of students. Furthermore, the themes identified supported the interpretation of the findings from the study. The selected conceptual framework of Tinto's model of student retention was also reviewed and connected to the retention and persistence concerns of undergraduate, female, single parent students.

Using Tinto's theory of student departure and self-determination helped explain how connections with the social and academic support systems available motivated female single parents to continue their education past Year 1. There is more research to be considered related to gaining the shared experiences and deeper stories this population of students must share in order to provide insights into the connections between the support systems available and the persistence of these students. This chapter provided an analysis of the literature related to the problem that is the focus of this study on undergraduate, female, single parent students' persistence and degree completion in college programs. In Chapter 3 I present the research design and rationale, role of the researcher, methodology, trustworthiness, and ethical procedures for the study.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate the perceived challenges of persistence to degree completion of undergraduate, female, single parent students. A greater number of nontraditional students are entering college now due to the availability of financial aid and the focus from colleges in reaching out to this target population (Bohl et al., 2017; Swail, 2014); however, the issue of retention remains as a significant number of students still leave higher education before degree completion. The setting for this study is a community college in a Southern state in which college officials have struggled to identify individual population data. The college officials had no organized program specifically to focus on retention for female, single parent students (deputy chancellor of finance, personal communication, October 30, 2019). The methodology used is discussed in this chapter, including the research design, and the role of the researcher as well as how data were collected, analyzed, and stored. Careful thought about the design and execution of the study is critical to achieving the desired outcomes and focusing on the research question.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The study was a basic qualitative design exploring the research question: What perceived challenges did undergraduate female single parents in higher education face during their first year as a student in a community college regarding persistence to degree completion? The study explored the perceived challenges of 10 female single parents in higher education faced during their first year as a student in a community college. Qualitative studies focus on learning about the participant's experiences (see Austin & Sutton, 2014); therefore, the qualitative approach is most appropriate for understanding the perceived challenges of female single parent students. This focus on the subjective viewpoint of the participants provides a clearer understanding of this

life phenomenon (see Fontanella et al., 2006). By using a semi-structured format, with open-ended questions in a one-on-one setting with voluntary participants, the information obtained allowed for an in-depth examination of the participant's views of the challenges encountered during the first year of college.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of a researcher collecting data through interviewing serves as an interpreter to the narratives presented by the participants (Gregory, 2020). Through qualitative research, the participants present their narrative explaining their own experiences, and the researcher then collects those narratives and reviews for common themes (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The researcher must be aware of the power dynamics of the researcher and the participant, where power can be seen as controlling and constraining the non-powerful participant (Anyan, 2013). The researcher is an active participant in the conversation; however, it is important to allow the participants to share their own stories (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) and present their meaning for those experiences without researcher direction or interference.

The researcher should be aware of the active role they play in the conversation, including their own biases and predispositions to the topic and the answers provided (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I experienced college as an undergraduate, female, single parent student in higher education and overcame barriers to continue my degree program. My experiences will not be analyzed or presented to the participants or in this study; however, they helped shape my understanding of the issue and my interactions with the participants. One of the tools for researchers in a qualitative study is reflective journaling where self-reflection can be an active event throughout the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I kept a researcher's journal to ensure that my biases and predispositions are kept separate from the data collected.



The research was conducted at my work site, therefore special care needed to be taken to ensure there was no conflict of interest with teacher and student relationships. My role as a faculty member at the data collection site was disclosed to the participants. I had no supervisory role over any member of the study, and care was taken to ensure that participants were not students of mine, either now or will be in the future. The department that I work in has multiple instructors in my field; therefore, I was not likely to be perceived as a position of authority, nor was I likely to encounter participants outside of the study. I met with Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB) to discuss ethical concerns related to conducting research in my workplace.

Many ethical questions may arise during the process of collecting data, however ensuring each question is addressed at the time is essential even outside of IRB requirements (Dennis, 2010). Reflective journaling can alert a researcher to areas where biases or potential conflicts of interest may arise. I established my role as a researcher using reflexivity in the reflective journaling process. Reflexivity in the journaling process allows the researcher to express inner thoughts, feelings, and insights that become part of the data gathering process (Karagiozis, 2018). Reflexivity provides the opportunity to examine the researcher's own experiences and how these might impact the process, identifying potential areas of conflict of interest or hidden biases (Morrow, 2005). When the researcher understands how their own beliefs and thoughts interact with the structure and presentation of the research, it allows rational and informed decisions throughout the study.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection**

I used purposive sampling to recruit participants at the target community college site for this study. I pursued three avenues for recruitment of the purposive sample. The recruitment

procedures entailed two avenues for outreach, first, through a university-run program, Success Program Services, which provided childcare services to adult students. There was an opportunity to email the participant flyer to female students who were in their second year of study from the student advisor team. The email was sent directly from the marketing team to potential participants identified through the school database. The community college provided approval through the process of team review and legal requirements, and the flyer was distributed to gain initial applicants. A screening questionnaire was used to confirm participants meet the criteria for the study. The participants, purposefully sampled from the study site in this study voluntarily submitted a screening questionnaire to ensure that they met the participant criteria of (a) being female, single parent students, and (b) completing their first year of higher education with a C or better average. The short questionnaire contained specific questions related to the inclusion, ensuring that only participants who met the established criteria were recruited for participation in the study.

Ten participants were obtained from the population of students at one suburban community college, using recruitment emails and flyers. Although the decision to use 10 participants was chosen to reach data saturation, sometimes a researcher takes what they can get (Bernard, 2012). The goal for this study, however, was 10 participants because it has been found that a sample of 10 participants can provide 95% of the most salient ideas (Weller et al., 2018). A target sample of 10 participants was appropriate for this study to reach saturation.

### **Instrumentation**

To obtain the data, I used semistructured interviews with open-ended questions ensuring that I asked each participant the same questions but allowed for expanded, individual answers. The semistructured interview is a commonly used method of data collection for qualitative

research (Anyan, 2013) and allows the participants to share their challenges in their own words. I developed an interview protocol and aligned all interview questions with the research questions as Richards and Morse (2013) noted “methodological congruence” (p.7) is central to qualitative studies and to the quality of the data that is obtained through the data collection process (see O’Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). When using a qualitative approach, the role of the interviewer can affect the interactions with the subjects (Babbie, 2015), and therefore the same interview protocol was used for all interviews to ensure consistency with conducting each interview in a systematized manner. Employing a consistent procedural interview process and using an interview protocol tightly aligned to the problems, purpose and research questions of the study also supported the integrity of the information obtained in the participant interviews. I audio and video recorded all interviews using a virtual platform.

I used a standardized open-ended interview protocol to collect information from participants (see Appendix A). Using a standardized open-ended interview, the researcher follows a very consistent procedure with the interview procedures including both pre-and post-interview and also asks identical questions (see Gall & Borg, 2003) In developing the interview protocol, I focused on creating open-ended questions that would allow for the participant to describe their viewpoints and experiences and supports the solicitation of personal descriptions from participants regarding their viewpoints and perspectives (see Gall & Borg, 2003). McNamara (2009) noted that using the same procedure and same questions for each interview focuses the formal interview process so that the researcher may explore the central tenets in the research study and may use probes or prompts to promote flexibility in obtaining information from each participant. I designed the interview protocol so that it was aligned to the conceptual framework, Tinto’s (1975) model of institutional departure and other alignment components of a study. I designed the interview questions to obtain information related to the challenges of female single

parent undergraduate students experienced in college thereby allowing them to share their perceptions using their own words and stories. A reliable protocol for the interview ensured quality information from the interview (Yeong et al., 2018). Open-ended questions were used and reviewed both before the interviewing process began and during the data collection to ensure that they were not leading or steered the interview toward a research bias (see Roberts, 2020). The questions were focused on the perceptions of the participants and were verified for content validity by ensuring the questions were focused on specific experiences grounded in the phenomenon studied, literature, research questions, and purpose of the study to ensure alignment (see Yeong et al., 2018). Qualitative research questions focus on the experiences that occurred and should elicit an in-depth response from the participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The careful consideration of questions used to obtain the participants' perceptions of the challenges and supports related to persistence and degree completion further strengthened the alignment to the research question. The semistructured interview protocol was reviewed by the committee members for quality and to ensure the information collected is aligned to the research question and purpose of the study so that meaningful information is obtained for this study.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Before a study using human participants begins, the IRB board for each site must be informed and approval provided. The community college site does not have an IRB; therefore, an executive summary was provided for approval by the dean of student services and a team of college officials. Once the site and Walden IRB approval was obtained, I proceeded with participant recruitment for the study. I recruited participants using a self-designed flyer describing the study and distributing the flyer to the onsite childcare center at the community college as well and to the marketing department at the study site. The flyer contained a link that interested

participants could access to review the purpose of the study, consent and short questionnaire that confirmed that interested participants who returned their consent forms met the inclusion criteria of the study. Incentives, small gift cards to a local retailer, was provided to aid in recruitment. The gift card was \$20 but allowed the participants some compensation for their time. The process of data collection began with the recruitment of participants and receiving their informed consent form.

A consent form was provided to each potential participant and included the following information: background of the study, risks to the participants, and rights to privacy ensuring that all participants are aware of the use of data, and their right to provide information. The informed consent form was provided via email before the interview time was set, to allow the participants ample opportunity to read and sign the form, as well as request any additional information. Informed consent is the cornerstone of research ethics and ensures that participants voluntarily enter into research (Xu et al., 2020). I sent an electronic letter requesting to arrange the interview and provided three alternate times for the interview. Once the consent form was signed and returned, I requested that participants indicate their preferred choices in terms of time, and date as well as whether they preferred to use a video or audio platform. I scheduled the 60-minute interview individually with the participant through a video conference platform, although face-to-face interviews are preferred, it was necessary to use a video or audio conference platform to meet due to COVID-19 health concerns. In the individual interview the participant is allowed to speak freely without peer pressures or judgments (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I recorded the participants on my personal computer for all interviews, which allowed me to later transcribe and review the video tape of the interview actively listening to the responses and observing the participant's body language. All participants permitted the audio and video of the recording. A backup voice recorder was used as well to ensure that any technical difficulties with a recording

device could be resolved quickly in order to continue the interview conducted, however there were no technical difficulties. Once the interview was completed, the participant information is stored on my personal laptop that is password protected that is stored in a locked office drawer when not in use.

Building rapport with the participants is important during the interview process; once an acceptable level of trust is established between the researcher and the interviewee, open-ended and detailed responses from the participants are facilitated in the semistructured interview. Trust that is established between the researcher and participant underscores the conversational partnership in which both participants play an active role in shaping the discussion and sharing in a cooperative experience (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The process of having a conversation is to allow for thoughtful inquiry and at the same time to gain information about the experiences of the participants. Merely asking the right questions is not enough to ensure useful information is obtained from the interview process, there needs to be a level of trust between the researcher and the participant regarding the information shared (Colombo-Dougovita, 2019).

Upon completion of the interview, the participant was given the opportunity to ask any questions or voice any concerns they may have about the collection of information, consequently facilitating the continuation of trust in the process and use of the participant's information from the interview. I provided contact information if the participants wanted to follow-up regarding any aspect of the study. I also explained the process of member checking once the draft findings of the study were completed. The interview is not over once the information is gathered; the stories and perceptions collected remain those of the participant, and it is important they feel that they understand that their perceptions will be appropriately interpreted and represented.

The recorded interviews were transcribed over a period of 2 weeks. Thematic coding was then used to analyze the information. Based on the focus of this study and the information sought, qualitative open-ended questions from participants who are aware of their informed consent yielded data that will guide the analysis and create themes that might assist institutions of higher learning in increasing retention among female single parents. Once the overall study findings have been determined, I reached out to the study participants to conduct the member checking process.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The data gathered were then transcribed and coded, proceeding to reduce the data without losing the meaning of the original transcript (see Clark & Veale, 2018). The data analysis began with open coding then the second round of coding. The process of analysis with qualitative data begins during and through the data gathering process. The analysis of data in a qualitative study is a logical process, not a linear process (Mirhosseini & Bagheri-Lori, 2015), meaning that during each step of the analysis further information may be discerned and affect the overall interpretation of data and may require the researcher to go back and look at the previous analysis. Open coding, is the opportunity to review the data with an open mind, looking for interesting information that may be a code in the future (Saldana, 2016). After initial and secondary open coding, themes were developed. The software program, MAXQDA, was used for data analysis. Open coding was performed in the MAXQDA software. As a researcher, I was open during initial data collection and review before determining which coding methods were most appropriate, allowing the data to determine the codes (see Saldana, 2016). Once codes were developed, categories were identified leading to themes. Thematic analysis is the process of identifying, and analyzing themes found from the information gathered during interviews (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018) and was the basis

for data analysis in this study. Thematic analysis, or the analysis of data looking for themes (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018), is appropriate for use in qualitative studies and is ideally suited for this study, where the challenges of female single parent students are the focus of the investigation. The presentation of data is determined by the data received and the themes that are identified from the coding process, which is complete when saturation has been achieved and no further themes emerge from the analysis of data.

The analysis of data must be done with care and an open mind; this is the story that the participants entrusted to the researcher and must be treated with care and respect. Qualitative research can be objective by letting the investigated object speak (Anyan, 2013, p.2). In taking a thematic approach to the data analysis and ensuring that ground theory tenants are being maintained through reflected journaling the process ensures that the analysis of data is trustworthy and valid.

### **Discrepant Cases**

Methods and data collection were used to ensure quality results and identify discrepant cases. Discrepant cases are data that do not clearly fit into a pattern or category (Waite, 2011). Even, so these data should not be thrown out. Discrepant cases ensure adequate data collection because they provide disconfirmation and allows for the reformulation of key assumptions (Morrow, 2005). Discrepant data were not found in the data collection for this study.

### **Trustworthiness**

Although qualitative research is less rigorous than quantitative research, that is not to say that care is not taken to ensure that data from the study is not trustworthy and that the study itself is valid. Trustworthiness can be obtained by using different methods of data collection and analysis (Amin et al., 2020), member checking, and reflexivity. Using these methods, the reader



can find commonality with the writer and confidence in the trustworthiness of the information presented (Stahl & King, 2020).

### **Credibility**

Credibility is the most important concept in ensuring trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004). The credibility of this study was considered by ensuring that questions were used that allow for probes to be used as follow up to elicit rich data. Member checking was used to allow the participants an opportunity to review data collected for correctness and completeness. Each participant was informed that they will receive the completed study for review to provide member-checking. Member-checking is seen as good research practice and as a way for the participants to ensure the accuracy of quotes, providing additional validity to this study (Thomas, 2017). Reflexive journaling allowed for the transparency of the researcher's decisions and revealed any hidden biases or assumptions that may interfere with the credibility of the study (see Karagiozis, 2018). Validity is an important requirement for any qualitative study and ensuring that multiple methods are used to check for validity will ensure that the information collected and presented are an accurate and true representation of the participants' views of their challenges.

### **Transferability**

Transferability has been considered in this study to ensure that the information collected will have an application in the broader concept of retention among female single parent students in higher education. Although qualitative research is generally not seen as generalizable because of the small sampling of data collected, transferability allows the reader to determine the usability of the information in another setting or situation (Maxwell, 2020). A key determination in the transferability of data is whether the researcher has collected data representative of the larger population (Maxwell, 2020). In this study, the information collected was assumed to be

representative of the site being studied. Participants had the commonality of being a single parent in community college. Important to all studies is not just one measure of trustworthiness is taken into consideration.

### **Dependability**

Additional measures of trustworthiness were used as well. Qualitative researchers strive for trustworthiness, or the ability for the reader to understand the focus of the research (Stahl & King, 2020). To create trustworthiness, I ensured that dependability and confirmability are built into the research questions, interview questions, and presentation of results. Dependability refers to the consistency and reliability of the findings, ensuring that the information collected can be followed by an outside observer (Moon et al., 2016). Each step in the process of data collection and analysis were documented throughout the study.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability ensures that the researcher demonstrates how the results will link to the conclusions presented (Moon et al., 2016). Providing clear detail of the data collection instruments, the thematic analysis, and using member-checking to ensure the accuracy of data interpretation will all contribute to the dependability of the information collected and analyzed and confirmability of the conclusions. Because of the subjective nature of data analysis, the use of reflexivity in researcher journaling allowed for documentation of the thoughts and decisions made during the research, providing an understanding of the link from the data to the conclusions presented (see Karagiozis, 2018). Reflexivity creates the ethical process of analyzing the power relationships between the researcher and the subject and is a common method in qualitative research to ensure quality and rigor (R. Berger, 2013). Although qualitative data is a smaller sampling and a collection of experiences from the participants, that is not to say that care is not

taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the data and the usefulness in the overall study of student retention.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Ethical consideration is very important when using human subjects, especially vulnerable human subjects. For this study, procedural ethics were followed by obtaining approval from the Walden University IRB board (# 04-29-21-0426360) and the study site institution's administration. All participants participated voluntarily and received minimal compensation of a \$20 gift card at the end of the interview. The informed consent form from Walden University IRB was used to ensure all participants were aware of their rights and were provided with all relevant information before they agreed to participate. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time.

Ethics were maintained throughout the study by ensuring that all participants were treated fairly, and their information remains confidential. Each participant was assigned a numeric pseudonym rather than using their personal information and the participant were not identified by name in any of the reports generated for the study. One of the key principles of ethics is respect and care for persons (Shaw et al., 2020). Each participant was treated with respect for their time and their answers, the data provided was treated during coding with ethical consideration to the intent of the participant, and member checks were used to ensure the participant has the opportunity to review the data they provide. Data were stored on a personal password-protected laptop and will be maintained for 5 years where only the researcher will have access to the raw data, per Walden IRB policy, after which the data will be destroyed through data scrubbing. Shaw et al. (2020) noted that ethics in practice is the everyday, situational issues that arise when undertaking research, therefore any ethical issues that might

have arisen would have been reviewed by my committee first and then with Walden University IRB, including any issues that might have arisen with using a worksite for data collection, compensation for the participants, or any conflict of interest. For the study to be meaningful the participants are the object under study, therefore care and concern must be taken throughout the study to ensure high ethical standards.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology for this basic qualitative study. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate the perceived challenges of persistence to degree completion of undergraduate, female, single parent students. Interviews of 10 female single parent students were used to obtain information regarding the phenomenon being studied. In this section, I have described how participants were selected as well as the instrumentation used for data collection. The procedure for recruitment, participation, and data collection, including the plan for data analysis has been discussed. Finally, the trustworthiness of the study has been considered, and plans to ensure credibility, dependability, and confirmability have been determined. Concern for the trustworthiness of the study was reviewed throughout the study to ensure that saturation had been reached and the participants were provided the opportunity to review their data. Additionally, ethical considerations have been taken into account, by ensuring IRB approval and administration approval from the site institution were obtained and ethical consideration for the human subjects were at the forefront of the data collection process.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate the perceived challenges of persistence to degree completion of undergraduate, female, single parent students. Using semistructured interviews of 10 participants, the data were collected through individual interviews, transcribed, and then coded. I analyzed the data to identify three emergent themes. As I conducted data analysis, I journaled to help control my biases (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I recruited undergraduate, female, single parent students as the participants for this study. The conceptual framework for this study is Tinto's (1975) theory of student departure and self-determination and was used as the lens to consider the perceived challenges of undergraduate female single parents in higher education. Hence, based on the purpose of the study and conceptual framework, the research question used to guide the study was: What perceived challenges did undergraduate female single parents in higher education face during their first year as a student in a community college regarding persistence to degree completion?

In Chapter 4, I review the setting, data collection, method of data analysis obtained from the interviews. I explain the results as they relate to the research question and provide a discussion of the trustworthiness of the data, and finally I also provide a summary of the findings.

### **Setting**

The setting for this study was a community college in a southern state. The enrollment for the community college study site was over 70,000 students with 735 self-identified single parent students (deputy chancellor of finance, personal communication, January 12, 2022) I recruited 10 participants who met the preset inclusion criteria of (a) being a female, single parent, (b) having a

grade point average of C or better, and (c) being enrolled at the college for at least 1 year. The participant demographics were congruent and met the inclusion criteria.

### **Participants' Demographics**

The demographics of the participants were very similar, as all were undergraduate single female parents; all of the participants had attended the community college for over a year, and all participants had been successful in their classes that was established by meeting the criteria of having a grade point average of C better. About half the participants indicated that they took classes online due to childcare needs, or due to the age of their children and needing to be in the home to care for them. Four participants attended classes at the campus, participating in face-to-face classes.

### **Data Collection**

The interviews were primarily conducted over a virtual conference platform due to the availability of the participants, however, two participants did meet face-to-face for the interview. The method and time for the meeting were determined by the participant's availability and were often chosen to accommodate childcare and school schedules.

The marketing department of the school identified approximately 1,900 female students who met the criteria for grade point average and had enough credits to qualify as second-year students. The flyer was distributed via email to the identified potential candidates for the study, with the contact information provided to ask further questions and the survey link to sign up. Of the total number of female students who received the email, 23 responded either through email to inquire or via the survey to sign up. From that number, due to availability and confirmation of eligibility, 13 interviews were scheduled during a two-week period.

## **Interview Framework**

As the researcher for this study, I was the primary data collection tool. I created an Interview Guide (see Appendix A) to be used in all participant interviews. The guide created a semistructured interview process, where the participants had the opportunity to provide information they felt comfortable sharing, but also allowed me to ask the same questions of each interviewee. In conducting the interviews, the interviewer is engaged in trying to understand the participant's experiences through questions and discussion (Husband, 2020). I had chosen questions that would allow me to understand what challenges the participants had experienced, and I found that the questions did provide insight into their experiences. Having an interview guide has been shown to provide more meaningful, with less irrelevant, information especially for interviewers who do not have experience (Kubinger et al., 2008). Before the process of interviewing began, the questions were reviewed by established qualitative researchers for alignment to the research question, which also contributed to the validity of the process (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Once the participants were selected and the interview guides prepared, the interview process began.

Due to time constraints of the participants, eight of the interviews were conducted using Zoom, a video conference program. We met with our cameras on so I could interact with the participants as well as view their body language. The remaining two participants met me in the local area and those interviews were recorded using the same video conferencing program. Each participant was interviewed once for 22-40 minutes (see Table 1), all interviewees were asked the same questions following the Interview Guide.

### **Table 1**

*Location and Duration of Participant Interviews*

Participant code	Location	Duration
Participant 101	Zoom	20.55
Participant 102	Zoom	30.35
Participant 103	Zoom	22.46
Participant 104	Zoom	40.55
Participant 105	In-Person	20.20
Participant 106	Zoom	24.15
Participant 107	Zoom	22.05
Participant 108	Zoom	28.23
Participant 109	In-Person	26.21
Participant 110	Zoom	20.59

The length of the interview was dependent on the amount of information the participant was sharing. Follow-up questions were used when answers were unclear, or additional information might be provided. Each participant was provided the opportunity to ask any questions or provide additional information at the end of the interview. All interviews concluded and the participants were thanked for their participation. There were no unusual issues that arose during the data collection. Some potential participants had agreed to be interviewed but later determined they could not participate, however, as I was signing up participants, I anticipated there might be issues with schedules, so I had originally scheduled 13 participant interviews, which led to 10 actual interviews.

Follow-up with the participants was completed after the conclusion of the initial data collection through member checking. I achieved member checking by emailing the study to the participants individually and asking them to review and verify my interpretations in the interview data. Members were given 7 days to review the transcript and provide revisions and corrections as



needed. I received no comments or issues from any study participant, which ensured that the participants were comfortable with the data presented and the interpretations of their data.

### **Interview Process**

I emailed the marketing department of the school to request that they email the fliers to identify potential participants, which they did. I also posted fliers at the childcare center on campus. Once the fliers were distributed, 23 potential participants reached out to me over email. From there, I scheduled 13 interviews.

Three people had scheduling conflicts, illness, or childcare issues so they were unable to move forward in the process. Ultimately, confidentiality agreements were emailed to 10 participants prior to the agreed meeting time. I asked them to reply email their agreement before meeting.

I exchanged emails with participants leading up to the agreed upon interview time to provide more information, confirm interest, determine meetings times, discuss confidentiality, and then finally to provide a Zoom link or confirm our in-person meeting. I met with each participant outside of instructional or learning time. Some participants met with me with their children and others did not. I followed the data collection process outlined in Chapter 3 without exception.

Before beginning the interview protocol, I took down participant demographic information. Although demographic information was not analyzed, I noted how many children the participant had and whether they were primarily online or in-person classrooms.

Table 2 displays the demographics of the participants by the number of children and method of instruction. It was found that there were no significant differences among the

participants based on number of children, the instructional method did determine how the participants participated in the classroom, and how they connected to the college through academic integration.

**Table 2**

*Demographics of Participants*

Participant	Number of Children	Method of Instruction
Participant 101	2	Online
Participant 102	1	Online
Participant 103	2	On Campus
Participant 104	2	On Campus
Participant 105	2	On Campus
Participant 106	3	Online
Participant 107	1	On Campus
Participant 108	2	Online
Participant 109	3	Online
Participant 110	1	Online

**Methods of Interview Data Recording**

Interviews were recorded in their entirety using Zoom, a video conferencing software. Each participant was informed their interview would be recorded and was provided the opportunity to not be recorded if they desired. All participants provided their verbal approval for the recording of the interview. Notes were not taken during the interview to allow me to focus on the information provided and to ask follow-up questions if needed. Once the verbal approval was received to allow for recording, the video recording software started recording but audio and visual interactions.

The completed interview videos were stored on a password-protected laptop and backed up on a password-protected storage device. Only the audio files of the interviews were provided for transcription to the transcriptions service, Rev. They were selected based on their confidentiality promise and time to complete the transcriptions. The transcription process is always selective, the process of reflecting on the interviews adds depth to the transcripts that cannot be captured by transcription alone (Oluwafemi et al., 2021), upon receipt of the transcribed data, notes were added to reflect the interactions and impressions of the interview and the participants. These notes allowed me to begin the process of interacting with the data and using reflexive journaling to begin to connect my impressions with the data that were collected. The transcriptions were added to the password-protected laptop, and a backup was stored on a password-protected storage device. According to Walden IRB standards, these data will be stored for 5 years, then deleted using electronic data scrubbing. The process of data collection was complete, but the process of data analysis had just begun. The importance of maintaining a reflexive journal became obvious as the data were analyzed and my interaction with the data created the findings.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis in qualitative research can be a seven-step process including transcribing, defining, sorting and summarizing, integration, generating a theory, and generalizing (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). For this study, based on the conceptual framework I did not generate a theory or generalize so the first five steps were used. Ten interviews resulted in a great deal of data to organize and analyze (see sample Transcripts in Appendix B). I used thematic coding to analyze the data, by first engaging with these data through open coding, and then using the second round

of coding with methodology, and finally, thematic coding was done based on the results of the previous rounds of coding.

### **Transcribing**

Only the audio files of the interviews were provided for transcription to the transcriptions service, Rev. Zoom allows audio files to be isolated, so Rev only received audio files and not visual. This transcription service was selected based on their confidentiality promise and time to complete the transcriptions. Walden IRB was informed of the use of a transcription service. Upon receipt of the transcribed data, notes were added to reflect the interactions and impressions of the interview and the participants. These notes allowed me to begin the process of interacting with the data and using reflexive journaling to begin to connect my impressions with the data that were collected. (See Appendix C for a sample of the sample journal entries).

### **Defining**

After transcribing the transcripts, the process of opening coding began by reviewing all the transcripts twice. I read and reread the transcripts, examining the transcribed interviews for patterns and similarities and examined the transcripts for differences in participants' responses. Open codes were created originally from reading the transcripts, however, once the coding process began, it became clear that the data, or text excerpts, would help me in determining the appropriate codes, rather than relying solely on my own point of view as the researcher.

I used journaling to record the open codes as I discerned the codes from reviewing the participant responses. I used reflective journaling to guide me at this stage of the coding process, and I stopped often to create journal entries (see Appendix C) on my decisions to code certain data, and why the original open coding had been chosen (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The journaling allowed me to go back through the second round of open coding with a broader view

of the data and allowed me to capture more data that were relevant to the codes I had created, as well as collapse codes that were redundant or not connected to a significant amount of data.

### **Sorting and Summarizing**

The first round of open coding resulted in 17 different codes. I read and reread transcripts, reviewing my journal notes and code book to confirm I had consistently coded the text excerpts, and to ensure all data had been coded. These 17 codes represent the initial patterns found in the data. Table 3 presents the original 17 codes and a corresponding text excerpt. This table illustrates the first step in the process where participants' repeated words and concepts helped to form initial codes.

**Table 3***Seventeen Original Open Codes and Corresponding Text Excerpt*

Open Code	Text Excerpt
Academic Services	And the lady, I don't remember her name. I have her in an email, but oh my gosh, she helped me out so much
Academic Support	I did use the textbook lending program and I'm currently using it now for my classes
Attendance	I'm in self-paced composition and I'm a week ahead already because that's the deadline I set for myself
Participation	I'm in self-paced composition and I'm a week ahead already because that's the deadline I set for myself
Schedule	My kids are finally in school I have from 8AM until 3:25
Teacher Support	I feel like I'm annoying, but in no point have they ever made me feel that way.
Financial Support	So it's been a struggle and I'm like, I'll never afford to go back to school
Money from Work	
Money from Others	They'll help you pay a bill if you're behind, even help with your rent, \$600-700 they helped me last semester.
Financial Aid	So I took financial aid, and I took classes.
Family Support	I went to college, and she helped me with papers even now, at 33 years old
Social Support	She's really supportive because she's also in school right now.
Childcare	I was living at home with my parents, so they helped in the evenings
Motivation	I can show people that look like me, that it doesn't matter where you come from and how you sound or what you look like and the things you choose to do, you can still be successful.
Partner Support	So he's not physically here supporting, but emotionally, I have emotional support
Commitment	Last Friday I woke up at seven o'clock in the morning and I spent most of the day studying

Next, I conducted a second round of coding in which I collapsed the original 17 codes into 11 codes that reflected the major patterns from participants' solicited responses. I grouped

similar codes to collapse the codes from 17 to 11. Table 4 is an illustration of the collapsing of the original 17 codes into 11 in the second round of open coding.

Some examples of how codes were collapsed include the original code of “engagement”, that I created to represent engaging with the school proved to more representative of these data through the code “participation.” Original codes of “money from work,” “money from others,” and “financial aid” all collapsed into financial support, as these data indicated that overall financial support was important to the participants. Taking the original codes used for open coding, I summarized them into broader codes that provided a clearer understanding of the meaning behind the codes.

### **Integration**

After ensuring the open coding had captured all relevant data, reviewing my journaling to ensure my process was thoughtful, and choosing codes that were related to the research question (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 192), themes were developed. Table 4 illustrates how I moved from the first round of open coding with 17 codes to the second round, collapsing the original 17 to 11 codes, which led to the development of themes.

**Table 4***Open Coding Rounds 1 and 2, and Themes*

Open Coding Round 1	Opening Coding Round 2	Themes
Academic Services	Academic Support	Participants perceived connections with personnel and college resources supported their academic college success support
Academic Support	Attendance	
Attendance	Attendance/participation	
Participation	Engagement	
Engagement	Teacher Support	
Schedule		
Teacher Support		
Financial Support	Financial Support	Participants perceived financial support received enabled them to attend college and that financial support could be strengthened
Money From Work	Financial support/financial aid	
Money From Others		
Financial Aid		
Family Support	Family Support	Participants perceived goal commitment supported their effort to continue to work toward something meaningful
Social Support	Motivation	
Childcare	Partner Support	
Motivation	Commitment	
Partner Support		
Commitment		

After generating themes, the data analysis process was complete. In the process of data analysis, I stopped at the integration stage based on the conceptual framework, so only the first five stages of the seven-stage data analysis process were used. At this point, a thorough review of the journaling that had occurred during the coding process ensured that I had kept an open mind



and let the data lead me to the themes, rather than forcing the themes on the data. Ample and explicit evidence was present to generate open codes and themes. Journaling was used to verify my thought process and ensure that personal bias was not interfering with the data speaking for itself, the data analysis supported the conceptual framework.

## **Results**

This study was conducted to answer the research question: What perceived challenges did undergraduate female single parents in higher education face during their first year as a student in a community college regarding persistence to degree completion?

### **Theme 1: Participants Perceived Connections with Personnel and College Resources Supported their Academic College Success**

Academic integration included such activities as academic support. The participants found that participation in the academic setting, including the physical classroom and online classroom, was very important to their academic success. All participants had some connection to academic support, whether it was teachers or school offered services, these all helped connect the students to services that supported their academic success.

Through a variety of academic services offered by the community college, single parent female students were able to navigate some of the most significant challenges to their education. Participant 104 used the textbook lending program to alleviate some of the costs associated with classes and the academic studios for homework assistance. Participant 103 has used the library services for writing and homework assistance, and the advising department has been integral to the participant's success. The advising department was noted by many of the participants as being important to navigating the uncertainty of going back to school. Advising provided support to help these participants determine what classes to take and how to determine what mode of

delivery worked best for their situation. As participant 107 stated, “The advising department, there has been so incredibly good as a non-traditional student” in guiding them through their degree plan.

In addition to the services offered by the school, the teachers have been important in the success of the participants. Participant 103 demonstrates a story of how the professor led her to her major:

Then I took my first accounting class and holy mackerel, my professor pulled me to the side, said you are too good at this. You need to make this a major. My professor knew I was trying to fail accounting II and she wouldn't let me do it.

Participant 107 further added, “The instructors that I've had go... In my opinion, go out of your way to help you.” There are further challenges however, that the participants pointed out could be done to assist them, including some leniency to their situation. As participant 103 went on to discuss “It would be nice, if I've got a sick kid, hey, if I message you, I'm not going to be able to get the assignment done.” Overall, the assistance provided by the professors helped the participants feel that they could be successful and provided extra assistance through staying after and answering questions or working with a participant who was pregnant and due before the semester ended.

For many of the participants, academic integration does not just come from outside support but also from the commitment of the participants to be successful in their education. All participants stated that participation in the class was important to their success, whether it was participating in their online course or physically attending class on campus. The participants who take classes online have the opportunity to participate in class on their schedule, and it became clear through their stories that the key to success is understanding that participation is necessary.

Participant 109 stated “going to school is like a job” and the participants have found creative ways to participate and still be involved with their children.

Participant 101 said:

I can do my homework during my lunch break or do it when I put my son to sleep and everybody's asleep, I can go ahead and do my homework or my classes, whatever my assignments and my quizzes and tests and things like that.

Participant 110 added “I wanted to do my schoolwork and I was with my son in the hospital,” noting the importance of continuing classwork regardless of the challenges outside of school.

Participant 108 identified the key to her success “I squeeze in my schoolwork in 30 minutes to an hour intervals.”

Those participants that attended classes on campus stated how important it was to ensure they were physically in class. Participant 105 stated that she does not miss class due to the importance of attending, stating:

Class will be from 9:00 to 10:00. I get out of there and then I have a 40 minute break, so then I'll go to my biology lecture. I'll do that and then right after that is my lab, which gets out at 1:20.

Further statements on the connection to class attendance came from Participant 104 “It is for me because I need to be in class to be able to listen.” It is clear that academic integration is important to the participants, either through using services through the community college, or attending class either online or in person, success has come by treating their education with the same commitment as a job, and using the services offered.

## **Theme 2: Participants Perceived Financial Support Received Enabled Them to Attend College and That Financial Support Could be Strengthened**

Researchers have replicated studies in which the findings have been confirmed that for students who received financial support, as well as social support over multiple years in a community college, were more likely to stay in college and not leave (C. m et al., 2020). Participants in this study provided additional detail on the importance of financial support in completing their college degrees.

All participants in this study qualified and used some form of financial aid, the majority receiving a Pell Grant at a minimum, many participants receiving additional student aid as well. Financial aid served as a way to provide for the participant's education as well as living expenses during their time as a student, however most participants perceived financial aid to be enough to pay for school and living expenses. Participant 104 stated “No, I don't think there's enough set up for single parents. But I don't think there's enough set up for student’s period.” The reality of raising a family and attempting to pay for college and living expenses was best described by participant 104 as she stated: “The real world is, you either pay your bills or go to school. There's no both, so my education has been halted like every other semester because I have to pay bills.” The financial support from financial aid is often not enough to cover all the expenses and outside financial support would be helpful to many of the participants in this study and single parent female students in general as they support families and pay for education. Participant 104 said:

But yeah, definitely the financial aspect was the biggest hurdle and not having a whole lot of support, financially. I had no idea how I was going to pay rent and that was really stressful. I started looking into resources very quickly. So I was behind for a while, but I eventually caught up.

To complete college, the student must be able to provide for their family and their education. Many of the participants found the financial issues to be the biggest hurdle in determining their school attendance, as Participant 104 states: “I knew it was going to be tight, but I knew that I would have to take one course at a time; because I paid for it in cash as I went” and sometimes additional funding for living expenses came from work outside of the classroom, including Participant 108 who continues to work part time while her children go to school, and still ensuring that she has enough time to study and attend online classes. The decision to attend college is often determined by the availability of financial aid, for Participant 105, she waited until she knew she had financial aid available before she committed to attending college, knowing that she needed the assistance to pay for classes. Additional financial support, even outside the school-provided financial aid appears to be important and a potential area of improvement for the college.

### **Theme 3: Participants Perceived Goal Commitment Supported Their Effort to Continue to Work Toward Something Meaningful**

Social support outside of the institute of higher education can be meaningful for female, single parent students as they attempt to navigate the stressors of higher education and raising a family. The participants of this study identified family support as well as internal motivation as being important in their continued college attendance.

Most of the participants had some form of family support, including living with their parents or having help with the children from their families. Participant 101 stated “I had my whole family here that supported myself and my daughter. I was living at home with my parents, so they helped in the evenings when I was trying to get my homework and stuff like that done.” Participant 102 found the same support from her family “my mom had asked me, she goes, ‘Well,

when you have to go on campus for class, you need to just get with me and maybe take those in the summer, so Troy (the child) has somewhere to be.” Participant 103 continued to stress the importance of family support to help her be successful in college, “My mom did everything that she could to help me get to where I am.” Participant 104, stated “I think my dad is probably my biggest cheerleader as far as going back to school” and Participant 105 found her sister to be her family support, “when I thought about going back to school face-to-face is what if I can't pick her (the child) up. And my sister was like: Oh, I got it.” Finally, some participants found the ongoing support of living with a family member to be necessary to assist with watching the child while she attended school, Participant 110 “I moved back in with my grandparents, and they've been helping with the baby.”

Having a support system was very important and found in all but one of the participants. Most of the time, the support came from the family as evidenced from the above quotes, however partners could be important as well in providing support, and for one participant, 107, her grown child was a support system to help navigate the school-related concerns, “She's really supportive, because she's also in school right now getting her master's in public administration. So we're going to school at the same time.” Regardless of who is providing support, it was helpful to the single parent female students, allowing them time to study, or attend classes, or help with financial hardships.

The largest data set for this theme came from motivation, which was the determination of why the participant originally decided to attend college, or why they identified going to college as being important. The participants had something motivating them to start the educational process, and most of the time, that motivation was their children. Participant 101 stated “Now that she's (the daughter) older I wanted to show her that no matter what age that you are, you can

continue your education and be successful in it.” Participant 106 began college to better her life for her children and provide stability, as she stated “I was abused as a child, so I didn't want that for him (her son). So I overprotected him, and he was sheltered.” Children impacted these participants motivation to begin their education.

The other motivation for these participants was their desire to do something better for their community or to inspire people like themselves to take on challenges. Participant 102 said “I can show people that look like me, that it doesn't matter where you come from and how you sound or what you look like and the things you choose to do, you can still be successful.” This motivation was stated by Participant 109 who uses her success to motivate her extended family “I can inspire my family, even my older relatives. Great aunts, second cousins, hitting me up.” This aspect of motivation goes beyond education for themselves and more to inspire others to take on this challenge.

The other large data set in this theme came from commitment, or the participants commitment to getting the work done and completing their education no matter the hurdles encountered. Many participants found that time management was a struggle and as demonstrated in the discussion of the code attendance, finding time to complete work was a challenge every day, the commitment code was generated out of the data from the participants statements that they would find a way to ensure that everything gets done for both their children and their schoolwork even when it seemed challenging. Participant 104 states “So things are, I wouldn't say it's hard, but we have a routine” and Participant 108 agrees “And I schedule my work schedule around my kids' schedule.” The commitment to continue their education while ensuring that they are providing for their children was a large data set in the participant interviews, with the Participants explaining in detail how they overcome the many requirements in their daily lives, yet still ensure they complete their courses.

## **Summary**

The participant interviews of the 10 single parent female students provided valuable insight into the challenges related to their educational journey and the support that has helped them continue working towards their degree. Using Tinto's theory of student departure and self-determination, the participant interviews produced three themes supporting the conceptual framework:

- Academic Integration, the single parent must have a connection or resources to get support
- Financial Commitment, the single parent must have the means to pay and live
- Goal commitment: The single parent must have a reason to continue, something meaningful

## **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research involves the question of can the findings be trusted (Korstjens & Moser, 2018), based on criteria. In this case, care was taken throughout the study to ensure bias was minimized, and to consider issues of validity systematically at various points in the study (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

## **Credibility**

Credibility is the most important concept in ensuring trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004). The credibility of this study was considered by ensuring that questions were used that allow for probes to be used as a follow-up to elicit rich data. Member checking was used to allow the participants an opportunity to review data collected for correctness and completeness.



Before the interview process began, interview questions were designed to focus on specific issues related to the challenges of being a single parent female student at a community college. The questions had probes that would allow for follow-up and were used in each interview to ensure the same data was being solicited. After the questions were asked and the data was transcribed, coding began. Creating the codes from the conceptual framework and interview questions allowed me to stay on track (see Saldana, 2016) and journaling allowed me to reflect on how the data was reflected in those codes.

Member checking is the process of sharing data and interpretations with members of the group (Change, 2014). All members of this study were informed that the data would be shared with them upon completion of the write-up and all participants have the opportunity to review the data for accuracy. Member checking allows participants to assess the interpretations and to correct misinterpretations (Change, 2014). To ensure the credibility of this study, upon completion the members were asked to review the data and provide any corrections.

### **Transferability**

Transferability has been considered in this study to ensure that the information collected will have an application in the broader concept of retention among female single parent students in higher education. Within this study, there is a clear connection to internal generalization, or transferability within the setting or population (Maxwell, 2020). The participants shared similar situations, and the data collected in this study created three clear themes, which would be applicable across single parent female students within the location of the study. The participants were a diverse group from a random sample, but produced similar stories of their experiences, indicating there is some representation of the experiences of single parent female students at this community college.

However, this study and the qualitative data may provide an understanding of the causation of success in a community college setting and the challenges overcome by single parent female students. For external transferability, the study needs to provide enough information about the processes that a reader could determine for themselves whether the findings could apply to their setting and situation (Maxwell, 2020). The information provided on the setting, the interview process, and the data received should allow a reader to determine if the findings of this study would apply to another setting. While qualitative research is not designed to gather large-scale data, the data gathered may be relevant to other settings and situations.

### **Dependability**

To create trustworthiness, I ensured that dependability and confirmability are built into the research questions, interview questions, and presentation of results. Dependability refers to the consistency and reliability of the findings, ensuring that the information collected can be followed by an outside observer (Moon et al., 2016). Data samples are provided to demonstrate the exact information gathered as well as how the data was coded. This information is explained in this section to ensure that any outside observer could determine the consistency of the data coding process and the reliability of the themes that emerged.

During the process of coding, there were 267 individual pieces of data used to develop the themes that emerged in this study. Transparency was created in the presentation of the data by ensuring that a clear trail of steps was presented in this paper to ensure the reader could see the actions taken at each step of the data collection process (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The goal of the data analysis section is to ensure that any reader could follow the steps taken and see the raw data and the results drawn from that data.

## **Confirmability**

Confirmability ensures that the researcher demonstrates how the results will link to the conclusions presented (Moon et al., 2016). Providing clear detail of the data collection instruments, the thematic analysis, and using member-checking to ensure the accuracy of data interpretation will all contribute to the dependability of the information collected and analyzed and the confirmability of the conclusions. In this study, the raw data presented demonstrates how the codes were chosen and how the codes connect to the themes.

Confirmability involves the aspect of neutrality in analyzing the data and presenting the results (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I used reflexive journaling by examining all data collection and analysis steps throughout the research process. Reflexive journaling is used by researchers to support data integrity, thereby helping to make the collected data free of any researcher bias. The views presented should represent that of the participants, not the researcher (Korstjens & Moser, 2018), therefore at critical times in the data coding process, I stopped and journaled my actions and thoughts. This allowed me to go back through and ensure that I was not forcing my themes onto the data, rather the data was creating its themes. The results are presented to ensure that a reader could see how the themes emerged from the data, and judge confirmability for themselves.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the data that resulted from the participant interviews and provided an overview of how the data was analyzed and coded. Initial coding, followed by a second round of coding, provided three clear themes from the participants. Those themes were presented as well as connected to the original research question to demonstrate how the data supported and provided alignment with the conceptual framework and the research question.

Evidence of trustworthiness was discussed as well as how this data may be applicable in other settings. In the next chapter, I provide an interpretation of findings as well as limitations to this study, and potential future research.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The problem this study addressed is that undergraduate, female, single parent students are much less likely than other groups of women to complete college. The purpose of this simple qualitative study is to understand the challenges single parent female students face as they attend community college in a Southern state and overcome those challenges to be successful in their academic pursuits. The findings support the conceptual framework and literature review, identifying three themes that were prevalent in the data from the participants in this study: academic support systems, financial support, and goal commitment. This chapter presents the interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, and implications.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The findings from this study supported the literature review and the conceptual framework used in this study. Tinto's theory (1975) of student departure and self-determination argued that the process of dropping out of college is a longitudinal process of interactions and experiences the students have within the system. The data provided by this study illustrate how important the interactions and experiences with the community college and the departments within that college are in helping navigate the participant's education. Having assistance from financial aid departments, student advising, and even office staff, all helped the single parent female students overcome the challenges of attending community college. In this section, I demonstrate how the information gathered during the literature review was supported by the data gathered during this study.

### **Academic Support Systems**

A student who integrates into both the academic and social domains is more likely to remain in school and to achieve degree completion (Tinto, 1975). This study demonstrated,

through participant statements, how important integration into the academic setting is in overcoming the challenges of being a single parent female student in a community college. The integration involved such activities as attendance in classes, whether online or in-person, as well as teacher and school support. The first theme derived from the literature was that participants perceived connections with personnel and college resources supported their academic college success.

Based on qualitative data, a coordinated approach is necessary to support the family, including access to health care, the ability to find low-cost childcare, and help to navigate the college systems (Galasso et al., 2018). Most participants discussed the importance of childcare as an area that could be improved by the community college to support them academically. Childcare is available on the community college campus, however, according to multiple participants, it is full, and does not offer drop-in childcare for time to study or go to class. It has been shown that students with children have significantly less time for academic work due to the time spent on childcare (Wladis et al., 2018); therefore any access to childcare is valuable to single parent female students.

Another issue with academic support is the connection to resources within the academic domain. Most of the single parent female students in this study used some form of academic support resources, including the library and academic studies. It has been shown that providing academic resources to support student learning directly impacts students' ability to be successful (Abah, 2020; Evans et al., 2020; Yamauchi & Cooper, 2020). The resources provided by the community college were important for the participants in this study; most used some form of academic resources in their studies. The library or tutoring center was mentioned by multiple participants, as well as direct support from the teachers assisting with assignments. These

academic resources were necessary, especially for the participants who had been out of school and come back after years removed from attending school. The academic domain is where the community college has made the most impact in retaining single parent female students and overcoming the challenges of education.

Academic services specifically designed to support single parent female students could still be improved. A holistic approach to viewing both the student and the parent could help these single parent females. Offering access to the available childcare on campus, and flexibility with assignment due dates were all mentioned as opportunities for additional support. Although these students have integrated into the community college academically, there is more that could be done to remove challenges faced by single parent female students.

### **Financial Support Systems**

Financial support was the biggest issue for the participants of this study. A second theme derived from the data was participants perceived financial support that they received enabled them to attend college and that financial support could be strengthened. Tinto (1975) utilized the cost benefit analysis as an indicator of college retention, stating that “Integration into the academic and social domains are themselves a result of the person’s perception of benefits, and the costs (financial) of their attendance” (p. 97). The theory does not address the ability to pay for college as an indicator of retention and posited that social status may not be an adequate measure of retention, however, the literature review on financial support provides adequate justification to include it as an important indicator of retention. The participants were all able to identify academic and social support resources, many struggled with the financial aspects of being a college student and single parent.

All single parent female students in this study had some form of financial support through the school, and qualified for Pell grants; however, often that was not enough to pay for all the necessary living expenses. Among the financial challenges the participants faced involved housing and paying for childcare. Many of the participants found assistance with housing from family members who could also help with childcare. Among single parents across college campuses, housing is a significant concern, and often not family-friendly (Kava et al., 2021). One participant in this study stated that she needed additional housing support from a church in a nearby community to pay rent, indicating that financial support is necessary to provide for the family and remain in college.

The expenses related to childcare were beyond the single parent female students' ability to pay, which led to the need for family support watching the children during school hours. Two participants held jobs outside of being a student and a parent, with children who were old enough to care for themselves, or work was done during school hours only. For some of the participants, childcare expenses drove the single parent female student from the workforce, forcing them to rely on family support or financial aid to provide for their families. One of the participants quit a job to start school because the wages from the job were not enough to provide for her family, and it would limit her financial aid assistance.

Many institutions do not have the funding to support single parent female students' needs, therefore, providing financial resources that are specific to the individual level may serve to increase persistence (Remenick, 2019). As the participants in this study detailed, the financial struggles of single parent female students are an area that could be improved upon and where the community college could provide assistance. Students are forced to make decisions about how to pay rent and ultimately may have to rely on other family members to provide housing so the



student can attend school. Participants in this study would have been helped through financial assistance for housing and childcare. The Pell Grant was designed to aid all students who want to attend college (Remenick, 2019), but it is not sufficient to support the living expenses of a single parent female student.

Academic support was an important part of the single parent student's persistence through their community college education. Academic support created the engagement with the school and departments that directly addressed students' needs were heavily utilized. All participants in this study were found to have used multiple services within the college, including financial aid. Financial support was often the first issue that a single parent female student had to obtain before they could consider enrolling in community college. These themes led to the theme of goal motivation, which emerged as part of social support. Having social support led to the ability to overcome financial challenges or academic barriers such as class availability or time to participate. The support of family and partners led these participants to start and then continue their education, providing a powerful motivation to complete their goals.

### **Goal Commitment**

The final theme focused on goal commitment and that the participants perceived goal commitment as supporting their effort to continue to work toward something meaningful. Wrapped up in this goal commitment was the awareness of those who were supporting them on their educational journeys. Females who enter higher education often struggle with support outside of the college to help guide them through their educational journey. The challenges for women in higher education are different than men, from entry into higher education to the journey through higher education (Lorz & Muhleck, 2019). Social support was a theme produced by this study, and all participants had some form of social support to help them balance the

challenges of raising children and attending school. Social support for these participants came from family, whether through assistance with childcare, or supporting the decision to go to school, social support was critical in overcoming the challenges of single parent female students.

The students in this study mostly identified parents as being significant. Through that social support from family, as well as partners in a relationship, the students were able to create a motivation to stay in school and finish their education. Many felt that the support of their family and partners made it possible to attend classes without worrying about childcare, or providing emotional support when challenges were difficult. Many participants stated that their family was the motivation that brought them to school originally, and then provided the motivation throughout the process to persist. Students who perceive family support are more likely to complete their studies (Juttler, 2020), and data from this study support that finding.

It is important to stress here that the social support provided allowed the participants to start or stay in school, but it also served as powerful goal motivation. The most relevant theme from the participant data involved goal motivation, having a reason to continue with education, and social support was significant in providing that motivation. Social support from parents taking care of children while the participants attended school, opening their homes so the participants could move in with their small children, or advocating for college attendance was a powerful motivator to finish their education. All participants had support in their family that served as a motivator, even if they were mainly cheerleaders, and providing that motivation from something that the student values (see Bozeman & Eadens, 2020) creates a powerful drive to persist and complete their degree.

The idea of goal motivation also extended to being a role model for their children, providing that social support for their children, whether it was bettering their lives or giving them

a role model of success. All participants stated that they had a motivation for their children to see them attend community college and complete it, even participants whose children were grown, felt the completion of their college degree was important to be a role model. Social support took on a variety of meanings through the participant's stories, but in the end, the social support provided the goal motivation for the single parent female student to persist and to overcome the challenges of attending community college.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Potential limitations to this study involve the potential for researcher bias, small sample size, and transferability. Care was taken throughout the design of the research question and creation of interview questions to ensure that rigor was carefully thought about at each stage of the research process. Qualitative research has limitations to the transferability of information to a larger population, however, the information obtained through qualitative research can serve to better understand the phenomenon of the challenges of single parent female students in community college.

The bias of the researcher is a limitation of this study. Care was taken throughout the study to ensure that bias was minimized and did not interfere with the participants ability to tell their own stories. Reflexive journaling can help ensure rigorous and trustworthy results in qualitative data analysis (Del Busso & Linqvist-Leonardsen, 2019), and was used throughout the data collection process. Creating an interview guide that ensured the same questions were ask for each participant helped remove my bias during the interview process and I conducted reflexive journaling to ensure I reflected on my approach to the interviews and how I asked the interview questions. I ensured that I did not share my own stories with the participants during the interviews and provided thick description to support the data analysis. Reflective journaling guided the

analysis of data as I reflected on the codes used and ensured that the data was creating the codes, rather than the codes leading the data. After the study was completed, member checking was done by the participants to ensure validity in the data presented. Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, care was taken to examine any opportunity for researcher bias to alter the outcome of the study.

The sample size in this study involved 10 participants, a smaller sample. The choice of 10 participants was based on convenience and time limitations but provided multiple data sources to promote rigor in this study (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). It is often felt that a smaller sample size prohibits generalizability in qualitative studies, however, the stories were very similar about the phenomenon, providing a generalizability of the phenomenon. Qualitative generalizability involves generalizing the findings of the phenomenon, rather than generalizing the data found (Levitt, 2021). The generalizability of this study is the phenomenon of single parent female students in community college and the challenges they encounter. Other study sites might have produced different data, however, the phenomenon that single parent female students all experienced similar challenges are similar.

The sample size in this study was sufficient to obtain data that supported the findings of the literature review. A smaller sample is often seen as a limitation in a qualitative study (Vasileiou et al., 2018); however, in this study the stories that the participants told were similar and the data collected responded to the research question and support for the literature review. The 10 participants in this study provided stories that were similar, which reached the standard of saturation (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) where the interviews yielded no new data.

The study may not be transferable; I conducted the study at a community college in a southern state, which may provide data specific to the site. The data presented may be

contextually bound, however transferability of qualitative studies is the way in which the study can be applicable to a broader context (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The description of challenges that single parent female students shared in their stories, supported the literature review of retention challenges in higher education. Individual data may not be transferable, but the themes produced by the interviews supports the relevant studies already done regarding challenges to retention.

There are limitations to qualitative studies, but care was taken in this study to ensure that those limitations were minimized as much as possible. Reflexive journaling and thick descriptions were used to ensure the data presented were the participants own stories and researcher bias did not interfere with data collection. Member checking was used to validate the data from the participants and ensure accuracy in the presentation of information. This study is not designed to be generalizable to other sites, however, the phenomenon of the challenges that single parent female students encounter in community college support the studies presented in the literature review.

### **Recommendations**

The findings of this study support the previous findings of studies as demonstrated in the literature review section of this paper. Student departure continues to be a challenge for the institutions of higher education as well as the students who being their academic career and are not able to complete it. The effects of attrition on the student include the financial stress of paying for a program that was not completed, and the disappointment of the social support system. This study found three themes that helped the participants overcome the challenges of being a single parent female student in community college and could be used to support single parent female students.

Academic integration was used as the conceptual framework of this study and was found to be important in the participant interviews. Using Tinto's theory of departure (1975), the participant information supported the need for academic integration with the community college. The support of teachers, and academic services was prevalent in all the participants interviews, using library resources, or tutoring, staying after class for teacher assistance or help planning their academic path through advising services. The resources the school provides assists these students in overcoming the challenges of school and raising children.

There is more to do in the area of academic integration. Additional support systems could be set up through the school to connect non-traditional students, providing for peer support groups. Non-traditional students feel more comfortable interacting with other non-traditional students (Steinhauer & Lovell, 2021). Students are more satisfied with their education if they perceive the college modifying to meet their needs (Amlani & Paulson, 2020), specifically focusing on single parent female students. The need for childcare was discussed by almost all the participants as being a way the community college could better serve them, however, even the community college has childcare facilities it is not available to all students, and not accessible when the student would need childcare.

It is known that faculty support is important in retention (Amlani & Paulson, 2020; Beasley, 2021; DeBorba et al., 2020) and creating a way for single parent female students to access faculty support in a more consistent method would be helpful. The participants who interacted with their faculty after class or in office hours stated how important that was to their ability to be successful in the class. Community colleges could create greater access to faculty through increased office hours, or scheduled availability in different modalities. Many of the participants took classes online, which meant that they never met their teacher, but providing

access outside of class could allow for more faculty interaction and has been found to be important to online learners (Mehall, 2020).

Having a support system was also very important to these participants and family support lead to these participants goal motivation to continue college and be successful. Non-traditional students rely on a strong support system (Steinhauer & Lovell, 2021) and the participants in this study identified support systems as being necessary for childcare, housing and motivation to continue. The community college could do more to encourage social support systems through organized programs and shared information. Social support systems are available, but only students who come to college with social and cultural resources take advantage of them (Karp et al., 2008), giving the community college the opportunity to provide more assistance in locating and engaging social support systems.

Finally, financial support could be provided, either through additional access to financial aid, or school supported community resources. The participants identified the Pell grant as being important to pay for college, however that was not enough in some cases to pay for housing and food for their families. It has been shown that in many cases the Pell grant is not enough to pay for college for many students (Yang & Venezia, 2020), indicating a need for greater financial support. There are additional resources that participants used in the community that provided housing assistance, however without knowledge of that service, it would go unused by the participants who need it most. Financial stress is a contributor to student attrition (Britt et al., 2017). At the college level, financial professionals could coordinate with community resources and students who need financial support in order to provide access to additional financial assistance.

Tinto's theory of student departure (1975) has reached the status of a paradigm, but the issue of student departure continues today. There are specific areas of assistance that community colleges could take to aid single parent female students. Based on the findings of this study, a focus on academic integration, specifically based on the needs of non-traditional students, promoting social support systems, and increasing access to financial aid would help single parent female students as they begin their academic studies.

### **Implications**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore perceived challenges of persistence to degree completion of undergraduate, female, single parent students in a Southern state, at a suburban community college. This study helped to address the gap in practice related to strategies to retain single parent female students beyond the first year of college. Tinto's theory of departure (1975) theorized that students who integrate into the academic system are more likely to retain and this study demonstrated that single parent female students were successful when they had academic support, social support which led to goal motivation, and financial support.

Themes from this study demonstrate how a community college can assist these students. Providing access to academic support services can create the academic engagement that is important for students to retain. Support from campus services, as well as faculty can help single parent female students in their studies, especially if they have been away from school for a length of time. Providing access to financial aid helps financially support these students, although Pell Grants alone are not enough to ensure that a single parent female student could support their education and family. Finally, social support systems provide a goal motivation that helps the single parent female student continue through the challenges of being a student and raising a family. Social support provided the necessary resources to begin their education, including



childcare and housing, but it also provided the motivation to continue toward the participants goal of completing college. Having a support system that cheers the participants on, or the opportunity to be a role model for their children, was powerful motivation to continue through the challenges that all the single parent female students faced as they worked towards degree completion at a community college.

A broader implication of this study is that community colleges can do more to help these students ensure that they can be successful. There are opportunities through engagement with the single parent female student that could provide additional financial support, and ways to connect to social support systems. While these participants have found ways to be successful, for a majority of single parents who enter college, that is not the case (Kruvelis et al., 2017), and positive social change could occur if more single parents could complete their college education and have options for careers that are higher paying. If institutions of higher education provide the resources and support, single parent female students can succeed in reaching the goal of a college degree and improved earning opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

This study contributes to the knowledge of retention in higher education, specifically related to single parent female students. While much work has been done in the field of retention, and specifically based on Tinto's theory of departure (1975) there is much more work to do to help students be successful in higher education. Tinto's original theory of the drop out process in higher education has been cited over 14,000 times and has served as the contextual framework for studies on retention for many populations of college students (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Chrysikos et al., 2017; Jama et al., 2008; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). Research continues to focus on what institutions of higher education can do to support retention, meanwhile, the

numbers of students who retain continue to remain low; in 2021 community college retention for first year students was just 63% (NCES, 2021). The information gathered from these studies need to be put into practice, there is much that institutions of higher education can do to support students and guide them through the challenges associated with the first year of college, we just need to start doing it. The success demonstrated by the participants in this study is not the norm but could be.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

### Interview Guide:

#### Opening

Purpose: The purpose of this interview is to understand the challenges that you have encountered during your first year of college. I am studying the challenges that female single parent students encounter in their first year of college in an effort to identify things that could be done to help them be successful. Your participation by sharing your stories will help me and others better understand what your perceived challenges and some things that you have done to overcome those challenges. This interview will last no more than 1 hour and will be recorded so the answers can be transcribed for analysis. Your identity will remain anonymous, and your information will only be used in the research paper for my dissertation. At any point if the questions are uncomfortable or don't apply to your situation, please let me know and we will move on. At the end of the interview, you will be compensated for your time with a \$20 Walmart gift card. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

#### Warm Up Question:

1. Tell me about your family
2. Describe your unique circumstances that might have contributed to your college experience?

#### Challenges

3. What challenges, if any, have you experienced?



- a. What factors, in your experience, might have contributed to any possible challenges?
4. Did you seek support from during your first year of college?

Probe Questions:

Academic Support:

1. What services did you use that were available from the school?
2. How useful did you find the support services from the school? (such as...)
3. What could the school do to help you overcome challenges in your first year?

Social Support:

4. What support do you have from your family or personal connections? (how do they support you like that?)
5. How have they helped you during your first year of college?
6. Is there someone who helps with your childcare?
7. What could your friends or personal connections have done to support you during the first year?

Financial Support:

1. What financial issues did you encounter? (such as?)
2. Where did you find financial support during your first year of college?
3. What other financial resources would have helped you during your first year of college? (specifically what was that?)

Closing thoughts:

4. What else would have helped you during the first year of college?
5. What should people know about your daily life that relates to college and being a parent?

Closing: That is all I have for you, thank you so much for your time. Your information and the stories you have shared will help understand the challenges single parents face in their journey through an education and you have been kind to share your time and information with me. If you have any questions in the future, please do not hesitate to contact me for follow up. I will be emailing you a copy of the completed study in approximately 6 months for member checking, this will allow you to see how your information informed the study. Thank you

## Appendix B: Sample Transcript

Speaker 1: You're pretty amazing. Okay. I want you to think back to those first years of the journey. Because we want to try and find ways that we can help single parents who are starting that journey that you've been so successful in. Thinking back there, what were some of [00:04:30] the hardest things that you encountered in those first year or two when you were trying to get your first associate's degree?

Speaker 2: There were two things that really stick out. One of them is affordable childcare during classes and finding the time to study. Because I mean, even now I take classes, I have to, I work a full time job, Monday through Friday. [00:05:00] At the end of the day we have soccer, we have cheer, we have vocal lessons and all these extracurricular that they're doing. By the time they're done, it's dinner, bath, bed, and then it's time to study. For me, because I have to get up at five o'clock in the morning, every single morning, I can't stay up until 10, 11 o'clock at night. I try and study when I can, [00:05:30] I get an hour here, an hour there, but a lot of times, it's the weekend and that's supposed to be family time.

If there was some sort of assistance with childcare during classes, especially in-seat face-to-face. And opportunities, maybe one weekend a month, where they might have... they used to have the youth centers would do they call it activity [00:06:00] nights and they would have the sleepovers with the kids. I could, man. Even now I, if in one weekend, I could get a month's worth of homework done in one weekend. That would be, whew!

Speaker 1: Yes. Okay. Did you... The answer is yes, of course. But did you experience financial struggles when you were first starting, because you made the decision to quit your job to go back [00:06:30] to school?

Speaker 2: As a single mom, over the age of 24, I was able to get through my bachelor's as a triple major from FAFSA and everything. It was all, I was debt free. I had zero debt by the time I graduated. Financially, it wasn't an issue, but I do know some women who are 19, 20 years old that still [00:07:00] have to include parents' income on their FAFSAs. When they have to do that, even if they're living on their own and they have their own child and they're doing everything by themselves, there's no way some of them can financially afford it. They wouldn't qualify for FAFSA because they have to include income that they're not receiving. I know that some people did, I didn't have that distress. I ordered my

books from Amazon and then when the semester was over, I sold them back to [00:07:30] Amazon and I usually made enough to get next semester's books. I was pretty lucky.

## Appendix C: Sample Journal Entries

### Monday From Others

These probably fit into community support, things like government programs or nonprofit assistance. Only 1 student mentioned that, and 1 mentioned credit cards as a method to pay for school if financial aid wasn't available  
this is not a major theme or relevant

### Scheduling

It seems very important to keep a schedule, most participants talked about getting up at a set time or having a set bedtime for themselves and their children.  
Also fitting homework in around everything else, homework was done during work, in the car, in between activities or at night. Flexibility with doing homework and not wasting a minute in the day seems to matter

### Coding round 1

I have completed round one of open coding, I am particularly drawn to the schedule issue, that has been such a reoccurring theme , as well as support and financial aid.  
Next step is to review codes for themes