

UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PARENTING ADULT LEARNERS  
REGARDING PERSISTENCE IN TWO-YEAR COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the results of semi-structured interviews conducted with six parenting adult learners (ParentALs) enrolled in three public two-year community colleges in the United States. This study investigated the problem of a lack of understanding of the experiences of ParentALs enrolled in community colleges. The purpose of this study was to examine how the lived experiences of ParentALs enrolled in community colleges may influence their persistence. Three themes emerged from the literature review and data analysis: the identity of the ParentAL, characteristics and intersectionality of factors, experiences, and perceptions that may influence ParentAL persistence in community college, and practices that support ParentAL persistence. This study affirmed that entry characteristics, student motivations, the external environment, internal campus and academic factors, and student sense of belonging influence ParentALs college experience as supported by the theory of adult learner persistence (Bergman et al., 2014; Bergman & Olson, 2020) and the Terenzini and Reason framework (Reason, 2009). This study asserted that community college leaders must recognize that ParentALs experience college differently than traditional students. ParentALs lived college experiences are connected to their work, family, and life responsibilities. Recommendations include: increasing data and understanding, reducing barriers, evaluating institutional culture and recruitment, attendance, grading, and other practices that may place ParentALs at a disadvantage, and professional development which informs practice. This study confirmed a need to further study the experiences of ParentALs enrolled in four-year universities

and graduate programs as well as the experiences and interactions shared between parenting faculty and ParentALs.

***Keywords: community college, student parent, parenting adult learner, persistence, 2Gen***

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Although nearly four million undergraduate students in the United States are parenting adult learners, this group is often invisible in higher education policy, practice, and institutional culture (Generation Hope, 2020). In the United States, postsecondary degree completion is essential to an individual's economic stability, upward mobility, and quality of life (Chase-Landsdale et al., 2019). When the individual seeking to persist in postsecondary education is a parenting adult learner, the benefits of completing a degree are multiplied across generations (Gault et al., 2019).

The completion of a postsecondary degree or credential is the most beneficial path to financial stability (Ascend, 2018; Bergman et al., 2014; Haleman, 2004; Gault et al., 2020). A college degree disrupts generational challenges and increases the potential for financial and family stability and improved child outcomes (Ascend 2018; Sommer et al., 2018; Wladis et al., 2018). Reichlin Cruse, Milli et al. (2019) found that an associate degree increases a single mother's lifetime earnings by approximately \$256,000 more than a single mother who only graduated from high school. Completion of a bachelor's degree yielded more than \$625,000 in lifetime earnings for single mothers. Increasing college persistence will facilitate improved quality of life for both parenting adult learners and their children (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn 2014; Sommer et al., 2018; Wladis et al., 2018).

Parenting adult learners, sometimes referred to as student parents or parenting students, are defined in this study as an enrolled college student, of any age, that provides more than half of the care for a biological, step, adoptive, foster, grand, or otherwise dependent child(ren). In this study, Parenting adult learners are referred to as ParentALs to promote readability. ParentALs experience college differently than their non-parenting peers (Bergman & Olson,

2020; Gault et al., 2020; MacDonald, 2018) and require targeted and intentional policies, practices, and resources to maintain postsecondary persistence (Bergman et al., 2014; Contreras-Mendez & Cruse, 2021).

The lived experiences of a ParentAL are uniquely related to their roles, responsibilities, and motivations as a parenting student enrolled in higher education (Markle, 2015; Wladis, 2018). ParentALs are often the first in their families to complete college (Conway et al., 2021). They make sacrifices related to juggling multiple roles and navigating significant role conflict, time poverty, and stress (Markle, 2015; Martinez et al., 2021). Yet, they are uniquely motivated to persist in postsecondary education to ensure that their child(ren) have a better life (Wladis, 2018). A college degree disrupts generational challenges and increases the potential for financial and family stability and improved child outcomes (Ascend, 2018; Sommer et al., 2018; Wladis et al., 2018). Factors that positively influence a ParentAL's likeliness to complete a degree are not just an opportunity to change the student's life but a chance to change their family's entire future for generations to come. Understanding how the lived experiences of ParentALs enrolled in community colleges may influence their persistence is essential to improving policy, practices, and perceptions (Contreras-Mendez & Cruse, 2021).

Wladis et al. (2018) stressed that reducing the persistence gap between parenting and non-parenting students is a key issue in closing student equity gaps. To address enrollment and persistence outcomes, institutions must recognize the unique lived experiences of ParentALs. The completion of a postsecondary degree or credential is the most beneficial path to financial stability (Ascend, 2018; Bergman et al., 2014; Haleman, 2004; Gault et al., 2020).

Absent of literature directly related to applying learning theories and concepts to understanding the factors which influence ParentAL persistence, one can apply a generalized

understanding of factors that impact all college students. However, this approach fails to recognize the unique work, family, and other responsibilities that adult learners face (Bergman et al., 2014). Adult learners experience a variety of barriers to their ability to persist in higher education (Bergman et al., 2014). Non-traditional students have higher attrition than traditional-age students regardless of their parenting status (Bergman et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2020; James, 2020; Wladis et al., 2018).

The persistence challenges that ParentALs experience intersect with and are compounded by factors that influence first-generation, low-income, and minority students (Hensly et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2021). Generation Hope (2020) found that ParentALs leave higher education without completing a degree more than their non-parenting peers. Rothwell (2021) found that ParentALs are more likely (44%) than non-parenting students (31%) to indicate that they have considered dropping out of higher education in the last six months. Emrey-Arras (2019) found that 52% of undergraduate ParentALs dropped out before completing a degree within six years, compared to 32% of non-parenting undergraduates.

Understanding why students fail to complete a degree is key to informing policies and practices that will help institutions of higher education close workforce and educational attainment gaps (Bergman & Olson, 2020). Current literature fails to demonstrate the lived experiences and perceptions unique to the ParentAL population as they persist in college. While there is a growing body of information concerning ParentALs enrolled in postsecondary education, few empirical studies exist, and those only marginally add to the understanding of the characteristics and experiences of ParentALs (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Reed et al., 2021). Higher education literature is historically focused on traditional non-parenting students (Bergman et al., 2014; Chiyaka et al., 2016; Greenland & Moore, 2021) and often dismisses the

interaction between the student and the college experience (Roland et al., 2016). Chen (2017) found higher education research and practice to be youth-centric and dismissive of the experiences and perceptions of adult learners. According to Duquaine-Watson, persistence research has vastly ignored the experiences of mothers who are ParentALs. Cho et al. (2021) found the limited research available on ParentALs to primarily be dedicated to childcare accessibility and the experiences of female graduate students (Cho et al., 2021) and graduate students who are married and parenting (Duquaine-Watson, 2017).

The information gap impacts ParentALs across higher education, including undergraduate, graduate, two-year, four-year, public, private, and professional development students (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Reed et al., 2021). However, ParentALs are more likely to enroll at a community college (Wladis et al., 2018; Institute for Women's Policy Research & Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2019). Community colleges provide an affordable and often more accessible option for ParentALs who in turn may fill an important role in helping community colleges to achieve enrollment and retention goals (Juszkiewicz, 2017). Given the high proportion of ParentALs enrolled and the need to mitigate the effects of overall declining student enrollments, community colleges are well suited as the focus of the study and uniquely positioned to seek to improve persistence outcomes amongst this student population.

It is important to understand how the lived experiences of ParentALs enrolled in community colleges may influence their persistence. Existing research does not adequately address the relationship between the lived experiences of ParentALs and their persistence in two-year community colleges (Reed et al., 2021) Further, the unique experiences and needs of ParentALs have not been adequately acknowledged by higher education leaders (Lin et al., 2021). Community College leaders must reframe their retention strategies to understand

persistence from the view of the student experience (Tinto, 2017b). Community college faculty and administrators must recognize that equity gaps, lack of data, ineffective student engagement policies and practices, and generalized or otherwise insufficient student support strategies may impede their students' ability to persist. Data must be available and able to be effectively utilized to inform practices that build connections, close gaps, respond to student attributes and needs, and improve an overall sense of belonging and self-efficacy amongst ParentALs (de Freitas et al., 2021; Tinto, 2017b; Wagner et al., 2021).

This researcher is a community college graduate with an associate degree in early childhood education, an associate degree in business management, and an undergraduate certificate in equine science. This researcher has significant experience as a ParentAL enrolled in higher education, completing each of her undergraduate and graduate-level degrees and certificates while parenting dependent children. This researcher is a dedicated and experienced educator, student advisor, higher education administrator, and workforce and community development steward with over 22 years of progressively responsible experience in community college teaching, program, and curriculum development, fundraising and grant writing, budgeting and finance, and community partnership development. As a community leader, this researcher has supported colleges and community partners in identifying, understanding, and solving the unique challenges of student populations.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

For this dissertation, the following definitions of key terms should be utilized:

**Attrition.** The withdrawal from a higher education program prior to the completion of a degree or credential. Often attributed to incentives or disincentives to persist (Bean & Eaton, 2001).

**Cost of Attendance (COA).** An estimate of the budget that a student needs to complete one year of postsecondary enrollment as mandated by the Higher Education Act (HEA) for institutions that receive Title IV funding. This calculation is published by institutions of higher education to offer some transparency in the cost associated with enrolling at the institution. COA is also used to determine individual student financial aid awards based on a reasonable standard of living and includes some allowable expenses including room, board, transportation, and childcare expense. However, the COA calculation does not differentiate living, or other, expenses between parenting and non-parenting students (Palacios et al., 2021).

**Discretionary time.** The time available to focus on study and academic assignments outside of employment and home and parental responsibilities (Wladis et al., 2018).

**Diversity.** Factors and qualities that represent a wide range of individual and cultural differences amongst humans to include, but not be limited by, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, religious affiliation, disability status, socioeconomic status (SES), parenting status, political, and other socio-cultural and identity factors (Fuentes et al., 2021).

**Enrollment.** Registration and participation in a college course(s) recognized by the institution as required for the student's certificate or degree program of study (National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 2023).

**Equity.** Opportunities for underrepresented populations to have equal access to participate in programs and resources that may close achievement gaps. An equity lens avoids deficit models that blame students and instead recognizes the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders (students, faculty, staff, administrators, and partners) (Fuentes et al., 2021).

**Financial aid.** Any federal, state, institutional, employer, military, or private grant, scholarship, student loan, waiver, or other financial support intended to offset the cost of college

attendance including but not limited to tuition, fees, textbooks, academic supplies, childcare, housing while the recipient is enrolled in college (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

**First-generation.** A college enrolled student with neither parent completing a four-year degree (The Center for First-generation Student Success, 2020).

**Full-time enrolled student.** A college student enrolled in 12 or more credit hours per semester is considered full-time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

**High-quality early childhood education.** Programs for children aged 8 and under that are characterized by emotionally supportive relationships and interactions that embrace diversity, resiliency, and socio-emotional development, effective and developmentally appropriate behavior and classroom management strategies, and evidence-based learning strategies that promote student curiosity, engagement, and discovery. Built on a foundation of child development theory, developmentally appropriate practice, small class sizes, and qualified well-prepared educators (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014).

**Inclusion.** The intentional, active, and ongoing effort to ensure all students and sociocultural perspectives are recognized and integrated within the education environment. Inclusion increases cultural awareness, empathy, and competence (Fuentes et al., 2021).

**Intersectionality.** The relationship between identity factors and how interconnected diversity factors may impact populations (Fuentes et al., 2021).

**Low-income.** Having a household income below the federal poverty level (FPL). FPL is also referred to as the poverty line (Hayes, 2022). In this study, low-income is defined as 200 percent or below the federal poverty level (Huelsman & Engle, 2013).

**Non-traditional student.** A student that is 24 years of age or older by January 1 of the academic year. For example, a student that enrolls in August 2021 and turns 24 years of age in

December 2021 is a non-traditional age student (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). A non-traditional student may have children or dependents, may be married, military enlisted, or a veteran, may be homeless or an emancipated minor, and does meet the criteria for dependent status for financial aid purposes (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

**Parenting adult learner (ParentAL).** An enrolled college student, of any age, that provides more than half of the care for a biological, step, adoptive, foster, grand, or otherwise dependent child or children (Gault et al., 2020) and meets the U.S. Department of Education (2020) criteria for a college student to be classified as independent for financial aid purposes. Student age and dependent child age are sometimes used as factors to define adult learner, and/or non-traditional student status (Remenick, 2019). However, neither college student (parent) nor dependent (child) age are factors used to define the status of ParentALs in this study with the notation that this study's participants were 18 years of age or older. In literature and practice, ParentALs may also be referred to as student parents and/or parenting students. The U.S. Department of Education Title IX protects pregnant and parenting students from discrimination (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

**Part-time enrolled student.** A college student enrolled in less than 12 credit hours per semester (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

**Persistence.** The continuous student degree progress from the first year to completion through subsequent years of enrollment (Bergman et al., 2014; Tinto, 2017a). For this study, persistence means that the student is making progress toward one specific degree major through continuous enrollment at one institution of higher education.

**Second-year student.** A student that has completed at least 30 credit hours in their current matriculated program of study including all the required core courses necessary to advance to courses labeled as second-year courses.

**Time poverty.** An indicator of insufficient time to engage in college engagement or academic study or work (Wladis et al., 2018).

**Traditional student.** A student that will not turn 24 years of age or older by January 1 of the academic year. For example, a student that enrolls in August 2021 and turns 24 years of age in January 2022 is a traditional-age student. A traditional student does not have children or dependents, is not married or military enlisted or a veteran, is not homeless or an emancipated minor, and does not meet the criteria for independent status for financial aid purposes (U.S. Department of Education, 2020)

**Two-generation approach (2Gen).** An intentional action that leverages partnerships to provide resources and opportunities that simultaneously meet the needs of both child and adult learners. Must simultaneously integrate both higher education workforce degree or credential training and quality early childhood education services (Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2018; Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014).

### **Statement of the Problem**

As of 2023, this study investigated a current problem in higher education is a lack of understanding about the lived experiences of ParentALs enrolled in community colleges. Despite the sparsity of research pinpointing the unique factors that influence the persistence of ParentALs enrolled in higher education, we know that ParentALs tend to achieve a higher cumulative grade point average (GPA) than traditional students, are significantly less likely to complete a degree than their childless peers, and if they persist are likely to take longer to earn a

degree (Wladis et al., 2018; Zarifa et al., 2018). The limited literature available is indicative of increasing awareness of the unique experiences of ParentALs and casts doubt on the effectiveness and relevance of policies and practices developed from theories and concepts based on the traditional college student (Ardissone et al., 2021).

The lived experiences of ParentALs enrolled in community colleges needs to be better understood. Colleges seldom identify ParentALs as a unique student subpopulation (Lin et al., 2021). Higher education institutions neglect to collect specific relevant data to inform policies, practices, and resources to support enrolled ParentALs (Archer et al., 2020; Ascend, 2018; Gault et al., 2020; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). Colleges and universities fail to assess the unique needs, challenges, perceptions, and motivations of ParentALs overlooking their distinct experiences in favor of grouping and assessing ParentAL persistence with traditional students and/or non-traditional students without children (Gault et al., 2020). Ryberg et al. (2021) found the generalization of student persistence to be a risk factor for ParentALs as they enroll in institutions of higher education unable to accommodate their needs.

The lack of institutional awareness and data collection is worsened by the lack of national data regarding student parenting status (Gault et al., 2020). Institutions that attempt to collect related data often look to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). However, this data collection tool is limited as many eligible students do not complete a FAFSA (Generation Hope, 2020). Students who complete a FAFSA are only asked if they have or will provide a child with more than half of their support during the academic year (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). This method fails to acknowledge that some students are parents who, for a variety of reasons, provide 49 percent or less of their child's support and therefore are not recorded as a ParentAL (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). Many college students are ineligible to

complete a FAFSA due to citizenship, immigration, and/or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status (Wagner et al., 2021). Further, many college students do not complete a FAFSA because they believe that they are ineligible, it is too late to apply, it is too difficult, or they are otherwise unaware or uninformed about the FAFSA process. Adult learners with a prior bachelor's degree seeking to retrain to earn a new employable degree or credential often do not complete a FAFSA because those with a bachelor's degree are ineligible for a Federal Pell Grant. This can create a missed opportunity for data collection and eligibility determination for other sources of student financial aid such as institutional scholarships and grants.

The federal Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS) is a common source of higher education data that does not collect parental status data (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). Despite the difficulty in collecting data related to ParentALs enrolled in college, Ascend (2018), Gault et al. (2019), and the Program Evaluation & Research Group (PERG; 2020) stress the importance of engaging ParentALs in data discovery and institutional planning. Gathering lived experiences describing the perspective of ParentALs enhances understanding and is essential to developing an authentic framework for improving persistence outcomes (Ascend, 2018; Gault et al. 2020; PERG, 2020).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of ParentALs enrolled in community colleges in the United States. This study addressed the challenge that community college faculty, staff, and leaders may be uninformed of the unique challenges and experiences that influence the postsecondary persistence of ParentALs (Chen, 2017; Noll et al., 2017; Pendleton & Atella, 2020). This study contributes to the improved understanding of how unique challenges and perceptions experienced by ParentALs may

influence their persistence in two-year postsecondary education. Increased understanding may lead to better-informed policy, practice, and planning efforts at community colleges and postsecondary institutions.

### **Research Question and Design**

This research question is consistent with and aligns with the problem statement and the purpose, title, and literature review themes. This study answered the following research question:

Research Question One: What are the lived experiences of parenting adult learners in community colleges?

This study was a qualitative phenomenological inquiry. Inductive data analysis of interviews was a suitable approach conducted to explore the perceptions of adult participants. An open-ended semi-structured interview guided this researcher to capture the participants' perceptions of their experience concerning persistence. The data collected and analyzed allowed this researcher to draw comparisons between the literature review and theoretical framework and the challenges study participants described that they perceived to influence their lived community college experience.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

The theory of adult learner persistence (Bergman et al., 2014; Braxton et al., 2004) served as the lens for the conceptual framework for this study. The theory of adult learner persistence demonstrated how entry characteristics and internal campus and academic factors may have a generalized influence on adult learner persistence (Bergman et al., 2014). This study sought to delve deeper to explore the persistence factors uniquely related to parenting while enrolled in community college. This study responded to the gap in research regarding ParentALs and their perceptions of how their experiences influence their persistence in postsecondary education

(Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020; Markle, 2015). The framework for this research affirmed this researcher's personal and professional interest in the relationship between pre-college and college experiences and perceptions and persistence amongst ParentALs. This researcher is an experienced higher education administrator with a dedicated interest in understanding and supporting positive persistence outcomes for both students and institutions of higher education. This researcher employed two interconnected theories to develop a theoretical framework to explore the conditions, circumstances, and experiences that influence persistence amongst ParentALs.

The Terenzini and Reason framework was utilized to understand how a student's pre-college background characteristics and experiences influence their learning and persistence outcomes (Reason, 2009). The Terenzini and Reason framework conceptualized how pre-college factors may influence a student's college experiences and interactions with faculty and peers, the organizational culture and environment, and academic and student activities thereby influencing enrollment, learning, and persistence outcomes (Reason, 2009). The knowledge gained by this study was framed through the scope of this guiding theory to increase the understanding of how the experiences of ParentALs enrolled in higher education may influence their ability to persist.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope**

This qualitative phenomenological study focused on six participating ParentALs enrolled in public, two-year, community colleges in the United States. In qualitative research, it is important to reflect on the researcher's approach, role, and influence on the study and subsequent conclusions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The subjective nature of such research studies must be acknowledged and recognized through the presentation of the assumptions, limitations, and scope of the study from beginning to end (Creswell, 2009, 2012).

## **Assumptions**

This researcher strived to minimize biases and assumptions. However, some real or perceived biases may exist. First, this researcher is a community college graduate that has significant experience as a ParentAL enrolled in higher education. This researcher completed each of her undergraduate and graduate-level degrees and certificates while parenting dependent children. Second, this researcher has experience planning and implementing surveys, focus groups, presentations, and programs that sought to understand and improve the persistence outcomes of ParentALs. Third, this researcher has experience advising and identifying resources for ParentALs enrolled in community college. Fourth, this researcher previously had a direct role in identifying and awarding students eligible to receive grants, scholarships, and other resources at her previous institution of employment which included resources for ParentALs. As a result, this researcher had prior assumptions about what the data may indicate based on the generalized characteristics of the participant population. This researcher also had the assumption that students who chose to participate in the study would be candid and truthful in their interview responses. The participants were not incentivized to participate, it is assumed that all participants were free-willing and voluntary.

## **Limitations**

An inherent limitation of this study was in the design of one-time interview data collected from a limited number of participants. A longitudinal study of a greater number of participants enrolled across multiple institutions of higher education would have provided a greater data yield. However, there is strength in the selection of ParentAL participants enrolled in three public two-year US community colleges. Public community colleges offer a variety of trades, technology, nursing, allied health, and liberal arts program majors which represent diverse

student motivations, interests, and career goals. Participants had completed at least 24 credit hours in community college degree program. It was important, to this researcher, to interview students that possessed the background to thoroughly develop perceptions related to the factors that influence their community college experience. Twenty-four credits completed is the equivalent to one full year of FAFSA-determined full-time enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Eligible participants were permitted to be enrolled part-time during the semester of the interview. However, participants were required to be enrolled at least half-time (six credits) during the semester of the interview. This selection qualifier did limit the research as it omits data that may have been shared by first-year students and students enrolled less than half-time. This study is further limited due to the voluntary self-reporting nature of participant selection and data collection. This study was possibly limited by the researcher's unintentional bias that was attempted to be mitigated.

### **Scope**

The scope of this study was designed to explore the experiences and perceptions of ParentALs enrolled in public, two-year, community colleges. Participants had some courses completed in their program to ensure their ability to draw from their own lived experiences and perceptions related to their current degree program. This researcher utilized a researcher-developed data collection instrument to establish a semi-structured interview guide. Although the site and sample size were limited, participants represented a spectrum of program majors. This resulted in a broader representation of participants' academic and career backgrounds, interests, and motivations than may have been available at just one institution or a site focused on one or two academic programs such as a business college. Further, the community college focus on two-year degrees leading to workforce credentials in trade, technical, nursing, and allied health

professions provided the ability to explore student motivation and persistence relative to financial and family prosperity. This study explored the ParentAL perspective regarding community college experiences, the perceptions of faculty, administrators, and higher education staff were beyond the scope of the research.

### **Rationale and Significance**

Student persistence is a pressing concern for both the ParentAL and the institution of higher education in which they are enrolled (Bergman et al., 2014; Tinto, 2012). As nearly four million undergraduate students in the United States are ParentALs (Chen, 2017; Noll et al., 2017; Wladis et al., 2018), their unique experiences and perceptions must be understood. However, the deficiency of data on ParentALs has resulted in low systemic awareness of how prevalent this population is within institutions of higher education. The lack of awareness and understanding of ParentALs has resulted in vastly inadequate development of resources and supportive policies to promote ParentAL persistence in higher education (Pendleton & Atella, 2020). This research study helped to identify ParentAL qualities and characteristics that highlight the factors and perceptions that uniquely influence their community college experiences.

Recognition of the unique experiences, perceptions, and challenges of ParentALs who reenter higher education to complete a degree is essential to informing practices that create a supportive environment to improve the college experience and increase the likeliness of persistence to degree completion (Bergman et al., 2014; Contreras-Mendez & Cruse, 2021; The Graduate Network, 2019). Increased understanding will help normalize the barriers experienced by ParentALs and will help community college leaders to establish a supportive environment that reduces stigma (Sharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019). Shifting the paradigm of institutional thinking rather than developing isolated resources and initiatives is essential to supporting the

ParentAL student population yet supporting adult learners “is not yet accepted as an integral part of the higher education narrative” (Eddinger, 2019, p. 1).

Increasing the understanding of the lived experiences of ParentALs is vital to improving higher education retention, equity, and institutional culture challenges. Informing a supportive campus environment that is responsive to the ParentAL experience is key to increasing student academic, career, family, and prosperity outcomes. Ultimately, fostering the persistence of ParentALs is essential to meeting current and future U.S. economic and workforce demands.

### **Summary**

Literature in higher education has affirmed that the lived experiences of ParentALs are different than the experiences of traditional and non-parenting college students (Bergman & Olson, 2020; Gault et al., 2020; MacDonald, 2018). Although approximately 74% of college students are non-traditional, the U.S. higher education system is not designed to promote the success of ParentALs, but instead is modeled to fit a direct from high school to college experience (Lewis, 2021). Colleges do not often identify ParentALs, assess their needs, or collect specific relevant data to target support for this population (Archer et al., 2020; Ascend, 2018; Gault et al., 2020; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020; Kienzl et al., 2022). Most colleges and universities group ParentALs with traditional students and/or non-traditional students without children (Gault et al., 2020).

The experiences and perspectives of ParentALs are also overlooked in research (Bergman et al., 2014; Brown & Nichols, 2013; MacDonald, 2018, Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Bergman and Olson (2020) found that institutional policies, practices, and resources fail to adequately support adult learners. ParentALs comprise a significant portion of community college enrollment. 42% of all U.S. ParentALs are enrolled in a public community college while only

15% enroll in a public four-year college (Institute for Women's Policy Research & Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2019; Ryberg et al., 2021). However, Eddinger (2019) found that higher education practices are often focused on traditional, four-year, full-time student research and understandings and are misaligned with the needs of ParentALs enrolled in community college.

The gap in information regarding the experiences of community college ParentALs is related to the lack of data collection and the absence of practices that identify ParentALs as unique members of the enrolled student population (Reed et al., 2021). ParentALs have become a prominent enrolled student group yet continue to be treated as “a deviation from the norm” (Eddinger, 2019, p. 1). Goldrick-Rab et al. (2020) found the sparsity of research about the experiences of ParentALs to be hindering the development of policies and practices aimed to improve the persistence and higher education outcomes of this population. Most U.S. postsecondary institutions place both traditional, straight from high school, students on the same pathway with the same resources, supports, and institutional practices as ParentALs despite significant variances in circumstances, goals, and needs (Dickerson & Stiefer, 2006). Stressing a need for future research, both Markle (2015) and Reason (2009) noted that the effects of social contexts (e.g., parenting) and the influences of a college student's family dynamics are uncharted in persistence research.

The lived experiences of ParentALs are uniquely related to their roles, responsibilities, and motivations as parenting students enrolled in postsecondary education (Markle, 2015; Wladis, 2018). ParentALs are often the first in their families to complete college (Conway et al., 2021). They make sacrifices related to juggling multiple roles and navigating significant role conflict, time poverty, and stress (Markle, 2015; Martinez et al., 2021). Yet, they are uniquely motivated to persist in postsecondary education to ensure that their child(ren) have a better life

(Wladis, 2018). A college degree disrupts generational challenges and increases the potential for financial and family stability and improved child outcomes (Ascend, 2018; Sommer et al., 2018; Wladis et al., 2018). Factors that positively influence a ParentAL's likeliness to complete a degree are not just an opportunity to change the student's life but a chance to change their family's entire future for generations to come. Understanding how the lived experiences of ParentALs enrolled in community colleges may influence their persistence is essential to improving policy, practices, and perceptions (Contreras-Mendez & Cruse, 2021).

This study provided an outlook on the college experience as perceived by ParentALs. This study begins to fill in literature gaps, provide ParentALs with a voice, and increases the understanding of the unique challenges and circumstances that they experience (Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020; Reason, 2009). The insight gained in this study may increase the understanding of how the lived experiences of ParentALs may influence their persistence and may help to inform policies and practices that improve their experiences.

An examination of the connection between the lived experiences of ParentALs and their persistence in community college is possible through the scope of two intersecting theories. Reason's (2009) Terenzini and Reason framework demonstrates how a student's pre-college background characteristics and experiences influence their persistence outcomes. As the parenting students in this study were adult learners, it is also important to understand the theory of adult learner persistence as the guiding conceptual framework. This theoretical and conceptual framework is presented in further detail in Chapter 2 along with the literature review that guided this study. Chapter 3 explains this study's methodology. Chapter 4 presents this study's results and findings. Chapter 5 concludes this study.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 2 consists of the literature review and conceptual framework that guided this research. The primary purpose of this study was to examine how the lived experiences of ParentALs enrolled in community colleges may influence their persistence. This study focused on specific factors related to the experiences of ParentALs rather than generalized factors related to college persistence for all students to increase understanding of this unique student sub-population (Lovell, 2014; MacDonald, 2018).

In this study, a parenting adult learner is referred to as a ParentAL and defined as an enrolled college student, aged 18 or older, that provides more than half of the care for a biological, step, adoptive, foster, grand, or otherwise dependent child or children (Gault et al., 2020) and meets the U.S. Department of Education (2020) criteria for a college student to be classified as independent for financial aid purposes.

This literature review identified relevant research and explored current knowledge related to the connection between the experiences and perceptions of ParentALs and their persistence in higher education. A robust review of concepts, theories, policies, practices, and strategies related to the experiences and outcomes of non-traditional, adult, parenting college students and higher education persistence and retention is vital to understanding the college experience and persistence of ParentALs. Additionally, the review of the two-generation approach, to ParentAL persistence, is essential to understanding the role of internal and external higher education partnerships and the intentional delivery of whole-family support to both the college student and their child(ren).

Key databases searched included ERIC, ProQuest, SAGE Open, and the University of New England Library and DUNE dissertation and thesis databases. Credible sources reviewed

included peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, policy whitepapers and briefs, and relevant online materials and documents. Key terms to guide the literature discovery process included adult education, adult learner, education policy, higher education persistence, higher education policy, higher education practice, higher education retention, higher education demographics, higher education declining enrollment, non-traditional college student, parenting adult learner, parents in college, parenting student, student parents, pre-college factors, postsecondary education, pregnant and parenting students, student dropout, GPA and persistence, adult learning theory, sense of belonging, college student stress, COVID-19 and parenting adult learners, college degree attainment, andragogy, role theory, time poverty, transformational learning, whole-family outcomes, and two-generation approach. Numerous online resources added depth of understanding when paired with scholarly work including Ascend at the Institute, the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, the Institute for Women's Policy Research, the National Center for Education Statistics, and the U.S. Department of Education. The diversity and density of sources are important to developing a holistic understanding of the key concepts and ideas that pertain to ParentAL experiences and persistence in higher education. Chapter 2 is organized into two sections. The first introduced the conceptual framework that served as the lens through which literature, data, and gathered information were evaluated. The second presented and discussed foundational and current literature highlighting the factors that influence the higher education persistence of ParentALs.

This literature review provides an account of research related to persistence in postsecondary education in the United States. It is important to note that, when conducting the literature review, three themes emerged as important topics related to this study in understanding the experiences influencing the persistence of ParentALs. Theme one describes the identity of

the ParentAL. Theme two illustrates the characteristics and intersectionality of factors, experiences, and perceptions that may influence ParentAL persistence in postsecondary education. Theme three highlights practices that support ParentAL persistence.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

There is extensive available research focused on higher education persistence (Astin et al., 2005; Braxton et al., 2007; Milem & Berger, 1997; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1993, 2006, 2012), the disproportionate graduation rates of parenting students compared to non-parenting students (Bergman et al., 2014; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Haleman, 2004; Wladis et al., 2018), and transformational learning (Mezirow, 1990, 1997, 2000) all of which are essential to understanding the postsecondary education persistence background of this focus of study. However, this study attempted to respond to the gap in undergraduate postsecondary data regarding the connection between the lived experiences of ParentALs and their persistence (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). This study also responded to the lack of relevant scholarly works despite Reason's (2009) call for research focused on unstudied, or understudied, student populations such as ParentALs and Markle's (2015) recommendation for further research connecting social context (e.g., parenting adult learner) and degree persistence.

The unique experiences and perceptions of ParentALs must be understood to improve persistence outcomes for both students and institutions of higher education. More than one of every five college students are parenting, representing a significant proportion of all students enrolled (Institute for Women's Policy Research & Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2019). The conceptual framework for this study affirmed this researcher's personal and professional interest in identifying factors that influence persistence amongst adult learners. A refined focus on the experiences and perceptions of postsecondary ParentAL persistence was possible through the

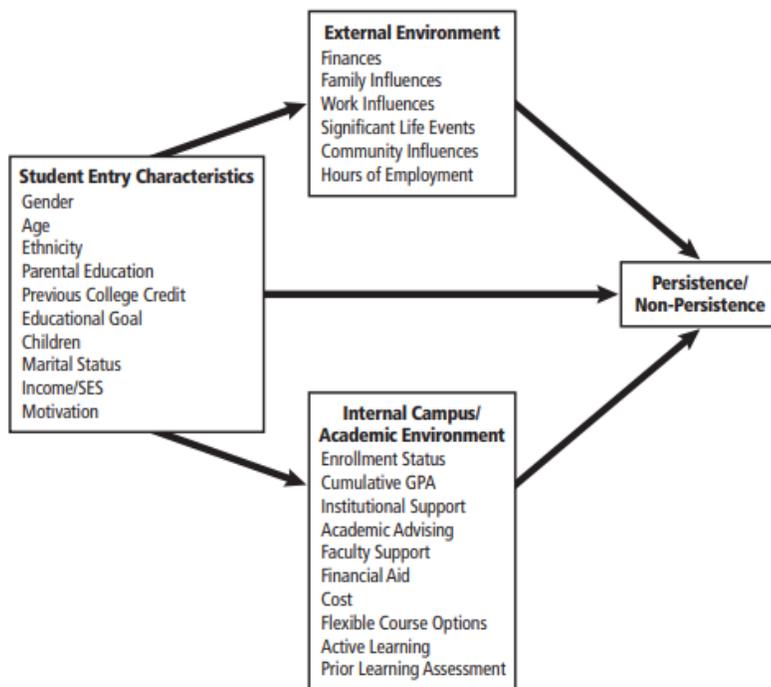
scope of two intersecting theories as applied to the factors that influence the persistence of this student sub-population. Reason's (2009) Terenzini and Reason framework demonstrated how a student's pre-college background characteristics and experiences influence their postsecondary experiences and outcomes. As the parenting students in this study were adult learners, it is also important to understand the theory of adult learner persistence as the guiding conceptual framework.

### **The Theory of Adult Learner Persistence**

Bergman (2012), Bergman et al. (2014), and Bergman and Olson (2020) expanded the prior theory developed by Braxton et al. (2004) to develop the Theory of Adult Learner Persistence. The Bergman et al. (2014) conceptual framework is grounded on the premise that entry characteristics (e.g., parental education, prior college experience, educational goals and motivations, children, marital status, income, etcetera), the external environment (e.g., finances, family support, employment, etcetera), and internal campus and academic factors (e.g., enrollment status, GPA, institutional support, financial aid, prior learning assessments (PLA), etcetera) as shown in Figure 1 may have a direct influence on adult learner persistence.

### **Figure 1**

*Model of Adult Learner Persistence (Bergman, 2012; Bergman et al., 2014; Bergman & Olson, 2020)*



*Note:* Figure 1 is a flow chart reflecting that student entry characteristics, external environment, and internal campus/academic environment may influence a student's ability to persist in postsecondary education.

Bergman et al. (2014). found that persistence can be correlated to student goals and motivations, role conflict, number of courses/credits enrolled, and relationship with faculty and/or advisor. A sense of family and institutional support and responsiveness was also found to correspond to persistence (Bergman et al., 2014). Bergman et al. (2014) believed that to positively impact persistence, a college's organizational culture and practices must be responsive and supportive of the needs of adult learners. The authors recommended that higher education institutions engage whole families in the college experience and seek to alleviate internal and external barriers that challenge student persistence. The framework model includes internal campus and environmental factors that Bergman (2012) found to strongly correlate with adult learner persistence (GPA, flexible scheduling, financial support, full- or part-time enrollment,

advising, et cetera). Factors such as residential dormitories, dining services, and student clubs and activities are viewed as less influential to adult learner persistence. The model recognizes that institutions are often inadequately able to support adult learners and that policies, practices, and resources designed to serve traditional students may worsen engagement and positive outcomes for adult learners. The following section describes the theoretical framework that guided this study.

### **The Terenzini and Reason Theoretical Framework**

Reason (2009) framed the concept of persistence as a positive progression of individual student goal attainment, rather than an institutional objective to retain and graduate students. Reason's work aligned with Tinto's (1975) retention research and the understanding that the unique experiences of adult learners, including ParentALs, influence college persistence. However, Reason recognized that relevant prior research focused on graduation as the primary student goal. He defined persistence as the "positive outcome of college" (Reason, 2009, p. 660). The foundation for the Terenzini and Reason framework is a belief that students enroll in college with diverse personal, educational, and social background experiences and perceptions that either help or hinder them from participating and persisting in higher education. Pre-college factors influence a student's future college experiences and interactions with faculty and peers, the organizational culture and context, and curricular, co-, and extra-curricular activities.

The Terenzini and Reason framework recognized that persistence is an "individual phenomenon" (Reason, 2009, p. 660) connected to a student's defined goal and therefore subject to influence by the individual's experiences, environment, and motivation. The framework recognizes that multiple interconnected factors related to students, faculty, and the institution influence student persistence. According to Reason (2009), students enroll in higher education

with diverse characteristics, dispositions, background experiences, sociodemographic traits, and academic preparedness. Prior learning experiences, social and emotional traits and experiences, variances in socio-economic and demographic factors, personal goals and motivations, and readiness for change may all influence a student's persistence. Academic experiences, chosen major, student connection to their chosen major, internships, practicum experiences, hours available for assignments and studying, and teaching styles and instructor behaviors may influence persistence. Nonacademic factors including family support, family responsibilities, and employment are also significant persistence factors.

The institutional environment in which the student is enrolled also influences persistence (Reason, 2009). Students likely experience a community college differently than a four-year university, and a commuter college differently than a college comprised mostly of traditional-aged residential students. Terenzini and Reason (2005) and Reason (2009) found that institutional policies and practices had considerable influences on student persistence. The institution's culture and ability to effectively communicate clear educational pathways and shared responsibility for student success may influence persistence. Facilitating a responsive environment that values a student's sense of belonging and promotes meaningful student engagement is more effective than efforts that focus on correcting student weaknesses and failures (Tinto, 2006; Reason, 2009).

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that students perceived their connection to and sense of belonging with faculty and peers to be related to persistence. Teaching methods that foster experiential, interactive, and collaborative learning opportunities may positively influence persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Conversely, faculty that are not perceived as well organized, approachable, or supportive may negatively influence persistence. Clearly

communicated instructions, well-organized lessons, engaging course discussions, effective and frequent feedback, and positive student-instructor rapport led to positive persistence outcomes. Student belief in their academic abilities may also influence persistence (Reason, 2009).

Reason (2009) found that the intersectional way a student's characteristics and experiences interact to significantly influence persistence. Reason pointed to Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) findings that the degree of change on any particular variable may not be as influential as the overall extent of interconnected changes that a student may experience. Reason also pointed to Tinto's (2006) findings that students' background characteristics cause students to perceive college experiences, policies, and practices differently. Student engagement "is, perhaps, the most influential driver of student decisions about persistence" (Reason, 2009, p. 678). Therefore, the student voice matters in considering multifaceted persistence influences and institutional practices. Reason suggested that existing higher education practices and interventions may not be effective in all student populations. Changing demographics, including the stronger presence of non-traditional students and ParentALs, require institutions of higher education to rethink their strategies and develop responsive learning environments and practices to support their current enrollment demographics. Reason urged institutions of higher education to study how student perceptions of their college experience may vary amongst different student demographic groups. Reason recognized improving persistence as a complex, multi-dimensional, local, undertaking that considers the institution's current demographics, environment, and student needs. Focusing on the interactions between factors that influence persistence that are most closely connected to student subpopulations, such as ParentALs, is vital to understanding and improving outcomes.

## Summary of Conceptual Framework

The unique challenges, experiences, and perceptions faced by ParentALs paired with a lack of intentional policies, procedures, and services for this student population influence persistence and demands further conceptual study (Ascend, 2018; Bergman et al., 2014). Pre-college factors influence a student's future college experiences and interactions with faculty and peers, the organizational culture and environment, and academic and student activities. Student backgrounds, experiences, perceptions, and roles may overlap and interconnect to influence student enrollment, learning, and persistence outcomes (Bergman et al., 2014). According to Reason (2009), higher education provides an environment that empowers students to transform their behaviors and achieve their goals. Institutional integrity or the student's ability to perceive that the institution's culture and behaviors are aligned with its mission and purpose is meaningfully connected to student persistence. Organizational strategies, behaviors, policies, and practices demonstrate the values of the organization and the student experiences they seek to provide. These cultural factors are more likely to influence student persistence than institutional attributes such as enrollment size or competitiveness (Reason, 2009).

The theory of adult learner persistence provided the lens to identify student entry characteristics and institutional factors that may have a generalized influence on adult learner persistence (Bergman, 2012; Bergman et al., 2014; Bergman & Olson, 2020; Braxton et al., 2004). Reason's (2009) Terenzini and Reason framework data gave focus on identifying how the participant's pre-college background characteristics and experiences influence their persistence outcomes. An inductive approach was taken to organize data collected from semi-structured interviews into themes and patterns that were compared with Reason's Terenzini and Reason framework and Bergman (2012), Bergman et al. (2014), and Bergman and Olson's (2020) theory

of adult learner persistence. This researcher compared new themes and patterns with the concepts and ideas found in the literature review using a thematic framework analysis. A thematic framework analysis is a coding method that is informed by both the literature review and ideas and themes that emerge from the data collected (Urquhart; 2012).

The knowledge gained by this study was framed through the lens of these conceptual and theoretical frameworks to increase the understanding of how the lived experiences of ParentALs enrolled in US community colleges may influence their persistence. This study also responded to recommendations that higher education institutions identify ways to collect, measure, and assess data related to ParentALs and develop practices that raise awareness of their unique experiences, equity factors, and outcomes (Gault et al., 2020). As student demographics change, and ParentALs continue to increase in enrollment size, research must reevaluate the effectiveness of existing persistence strategies and seek to identify opportunities to implement practices that are responsive to current student motivations, needs, and challenges.

The design of this qualitative phenomenological study and semi-structured interview guide was developed after a review of the literature on the topic of ParentALs enrolled in postsecondary education. This literature review intended to present a broad examination of published research related to the topic of study. This literature review provided an account of research related to persistence in postsecondary education in the United States. In addition, this review presented three important themes that emerged as important topics related to this study. Theme one described the identity of the ParentALs. Theme two illustrated the characteristics and intersectionality of factors, experiences, and perceptions that may influence ParentAL persistence in postsecondary education. Theme three highlighted practices that support ParentAL persistence.

### **Persistence Research in Postsecondary Education**

Persistence is one of the most pressing concerns in postsecondary education (Bergman et al., 2014; Burke, 2019; Tinto, 2012). Persistence is an important element of an institution's financial stability and rankings of institutional effectiveness (Generation Hope, 2020; Hanson, 2021). Persistence is also an important economic and quality of life factor for students seeking to complete a degree and advance their income and employment potential (Reichlin Cruse, Holzman et al., 2019; Wladis et al., 2018). Retention and persistence are higher education terms that are sometimes given interchangeable and multifaceted definitions (Burke, 2019). In this study, persistence was defined as a student's continuous degree progress from the first year to completion through subsequent years of enrollment (Bergman et al., 2014; Tinto, 2017a). To deepen the understanding of the term persistence in this study, persistence is used to describe student actions, behaviors, qualities, and motivations that influence an ability to continue to pursue higher education enrollment and degree completion while facing barriers (Moreno-Marcos et al., 2019; Tinto, 2017a), specifically the factors and experiences that challenge and influence ParentALs.

Researchers have attempted to understand the factors which influence higher education persistence for decades (Roland et al., 2016). Aljohani (2016) noted that U.S. researchers Tinto (1975), Bean (1980, 1982), and Spady (1970) were pioneers in studying higher education retention and persistence in the 1970s and early 1980s. Higher education literature historically focused on traditional students (Chiyaka et al., 2016; Greenland & Moore, 2021) and often dismissed the interaction between the student and the college experience (Roland et al., 2018). Prior to the 1970s, research tended to focus on the characteristics, and inadequacies of individual students rather than explore the connection between the college environment, student experience,

and student persistence (Manyanga et al., 2017). Research conducted by Astin (1984), Bean (1980, 1982), Bean and Metzner, (1985), Braxton et al., (2013), Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), Tinto (1982, 1990, 1993), and Reason (2006, 2009) demonstrated the connection between the institution's organizational culture and practices and the student's experiences, background, motivations, and social context, such as parenting (Roland et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2021). In the 1990s, Tinto (1993) initiated postsecondary persistence research focused on marginalized student population groups. Guiffrida (2006) reframed Tinto's (1993) research to demonstrate connections between a student's perception of membership, connection, community partnerships, and culturally appropriate approaches and postsecondary persistence. Guiffrida (2006) and Tinto (1993) pioneered the concept that a student's sense of belonging is a key determinant of postsecondary persistence. Bergman et al. (2014) added to the research by connecting persistence with pre-enrollment characteristics, financial aid, environmental factors, institutional responsiveness, and parental education. Markle (2015) and Wladis et al. (2018) established the connection between external pressures and responsibilities, such as working and parenting, and persistence. Tinto (2017b) reframed persistence studies away from the institutional lens with an introspective focus on the student perspective concerning the influences on persistence.

Although higher education persistence is a topic that has been researched extensively (Aljohani, 2016), there are few empirical studies on the challenges and experiences that uniquely influence the postsecondary persistence of ParentALs (Bergman et al., 2014). This literature review takes a focused approach to explore the multiple forces affecting the persistence outcomes of ParentALs in community colleges. The literature review explores how student experiences and institutional culture, policies, and practices uniquely influence persistence among ParentALs. The review addresses weaknesses in collecting, analyzing, and understanding

data related to ParentALs and highlights intentional resources and supports that have demonstrated success in positively influencing postsecondary persistence among this population.

### **Organizational Culture, Policies, and Practices Affect Persistence**

Bergman et al. (2014) and Reason (2009) found that students from different backgrounds realize different reactions, perceptions, and outcomes related to institutional policies, practices, and the college environment. Historically, institutions of higher education have focused retention efforts on fixing student problems (Watson Spiva, 2020). However, this approach places blame on the student and disregards the institutional environment's role in student outcomes.

Perceptions of the campus culture and environment influence persistence (Markle, 2015). Tinto (2017b) provided a persistence framework that seeks to understand student perceptions of their experiences with regard to postsecondary persistence. In this framework, student perceptions of how a sense of belonging and institutional practices may influence a student's motivation to persist at the institution. In this model, factors related to race, gender, and socio-economic characteristics are understood to also influence student perceptions concerning college experiences, challenges, and postsecondary persistence.

Bergman et al. (2014) found that the institutional environment influenced persistence more than pre-college or external factors. Markle's (2015) research participants described being belittled and disrespected by faculty and marginalized and alienated by policies favoring traditional students. Participants described being demeaned by instructors who expected prioritization of the student role and were unable to see differences between traditional and non-traditional students. These experiences increase a ParentAL's likeliness to leave college before graduation (Markle, 2015). Conversely, Bergman et al. found that students who perceived that the institution was responsive to their needs were 63% more likely to persist in higher education.

Barriers to adult learner persistence may be reduced by an organizational culture that acknowledges and addresses the distinct needs of adult learners (Bergman et al., 2014).

Institutions seeking to improve persistence outcomes must transform systems and structures to close equity gaps amongst marginalized students (Watson Spiva, 2020). Postsecondary institutions must “understand how student perceptions shape decisions to persist” (Tinto, 2017b, p. 254). This understanding is key to closing the persistence gap between student students of different social contexts and characteristics (Tinto, 2017b). Reason (2009) illustrated that a one-size-fits-all approach will not achieve the same outcomes for all students and will vary based on socio-demographic factors such as parenting status. Complete College America (n.d.) reaffirmed that a one-size-fits-all approach fails to holistically offer supportive pathways that are informed by an understanding of unique student needs. This speaks to the importance of developing a culture that recognizes the diverse experiences and needs of student populations as well as the intersectionality of student characteristics that may influence persistence. However, rather than attempting to implement strategies to solve all financial, academic, and socio-demographic barriers, colleges should seek to establish a supportive culture that is responsive to needs when they occur (Bergman & Olson, 2020; Reason, 2009).

### **Parenting Adult Learners in Two-Year Community Colleges**

ParentALs are more likely to enroll at a community college (Wladis et al., 2018; Institute for Women’s Policy Research & Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2019). Community colleges provide an affordable and often more accessible option for ParentALs who in turn may fill an important role in helping community colleges to achieve enrollment and retention goals (Juszkiewicz, 2017). ParentALs comprise a significant portion of community college enrollment. 42% of all U.S. ParentALs are enrolled in a public community college while only 15% enroll in

a public four-year college (Institute for Women’s Policy Research & Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2019; Ryberg et al., 2021). Forty percent of all female community college students are single mothers (Goodman & Reddy, 2019). Given the high proportion of ParentALs enrolled and the need to mitigate the effects of overall declining student enrollments, community colleges are uniquely situated to seek to improve persistence outcomes amongst this student population.

### **Two-Year Public Community College Demographics**

Two-year postsecondary institutions are a “distinctly American invention” (Grubbs, 2020, p. 194). Deeply rooted in United States history and founded to serve as secondary school alternatives to which students could learn a vocation and/or be rehabilitated after military service, community colleges have served an important role in meeting the education and workforce needs of the communities in which they serve (Grubbs, 2020; Maine Community College System, 2022). Founded in 1901, Joliet Junior College in Illinois is credited as the first permanent United States two-year college (Grubbs, 2020). Community colleges have experienced historical changes in naming conventions to include junior colleges, vocational institutes, vocational-technical institutes, technical colleges, and community colleges. Following the leadership of President Harry Truman, junior colleges began being renamed community colleges in 1947 (Grubbs, 2020). The President’s Commission on Higher Education (1947) recommended that community colleges serve to eliminate geographic and financial barriers to education and workforce development (Grubbs, 2020).

Community college enrollment peaked in 2010, after the Great Recession of 2007-2009, and has since experienced cascading enrollment declines (Juszkiewicz, 2017, 2020). Conversely, four-year public institutions of higher education have experienced gradual enrollment gains since 2010 (Juszkiewicz, 2020). Community college students tend to be non-traditional in age, have

prior college experience, and enroll part-time (Juszkiewicz, 2017). Less than 20% of community college students graduate within two years (Complete College America, n.d.). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2021a), there are 1,044 community colleges in the United States of which 936 are public, 35 are tribal, and 73 are independent. 878,900 associate degrees and 619,711 certificates were earned by community college graduates during the 2018-2019 academic year. During the fall 2019 semester, 6.8 million students enrolled in credit courses while five million enrolled in non-credit community college courses. The average student age is 28 and 36% of community college students are 22-39 years of age. Credit-seeking community college students tend to enroll part-time (65%) and are more likely to be female (57%). Community college students tend to be employed while enrolled; 75% of all part-time and 62% of full-time community college students are employed. 21% of full-time enrolled students also work full-time. Only 28% of public community colleges offer on-campus housing. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, 29% of U.S. community college students are first-generation, 15% are single-parenting adult learners, 20% are students with disabilities, 9% are non-U.S. citizens, 8% have a prior bachelor's degree, and 5% are veterans. In the fall of 2019, 44% of U.S. community college students were white, 27% Hispanic, 13% Black, 1% Native American, and 16% were reported as two or more races, other, unknown, or nonresident alien.

Community colleges tend to have an advantage in affordability and ability to respond to workforce needs to develop or adapt programs (Juszkiewicz, 2017). According to the College Board (2021), the average full-time undergraduate cost of public two-year in-state tuition and fees was \$3,800 during the 2021-2022 academic year, compared to \$10,740 for public four-year in-state tuition and fees (Ma & Pender, 2021). Community colleges offer diverse financial aid

opportunities for enrolled students. In 2015-2016, 73% of community college students applied for and 59% received some form of financial aid. 34% received some form of federal grant aid, including Pell Grants (American Association of Community Colleges, 2021a).

### **Community Colleges: Key to National College Attainment Goals**

Community colleges provide an affordable, accessible, and important access point to postsecondary attainment (Fulcher Dawson et al., 2021). In 2009, the Lumina Foundation published a national goal to move the U.S. degree and credential attainment rate from 39% to a national benchmark of 60% by 2025 (Matthews, 2009). Within months, President Barak Obama announced his American Graduation Initiative aimed to help realize Lumina's goal by supporting college completion for five million additional graduates by 2020 (Ward et al., 2020). As a result of these objectives, states began to develop their own degree and credential attainment goals and objectives. By 2019, 45 states had adopted an attainment goal, 41 of which had a goal that 60% or more of 25 through 64 year old adults will have completed a degree or credential of value as the benchmark standard. This initiative helped move the attainment needle to approximately 43% of all U.S. adults having a degree or credential by 2019 (Hensly et al., 2021). While most states aimed to achieve their attainment goal by 2025 or 2032, researchers predict that current state and national efforts will not realize a 60% degree attainment goal until between the years 2032 (Ward et al., 2020) and 2042 (Hensly et al., 2021). Ward et al. (2020) and Hensly et al. (2021) both predict that drastic efforts to expedite adult learner degree completion are needed to reach attainment goals. Significant improvements to close attainment gaps between race, socioeconomic status, and other factors that influence persistence amongst adult learners will be essential. Efforts to improve only traditional-aged student attainment will cause state attainment goals to fail. Whereas efforts to help adult learners graduate more quickly by completing an

unfinished degree will be key to the realization of state and national attainment goals (Hensly et al., 2021; Ward et al., 2020). Community colleges provide critical postsecondary opportunities for adult learners, especially those who are low-income, first-generation, or traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

### **Two-Year Public Community College Enrollment Projections**

Changing demographics and declining enrollment projections will deeply challenge United States institutions of higher education. Two-year colleges will be the most severely impacted (Grawe, 2018) and must reframe approaches to promoting student persistence. Tinto (2017b) suggested that institutions must strategically increase their comprehensive “understanding of student perceptions, not simply their behavioral manifestation, and their impact upon student decisions to stay or leave” (p. 264) to successfully improve persistence outcomes. Tinto (2017b) stressed that institutions must understand how their policies and practices are perceived by students and seek to take actions that increase students’ sense of belonging and commitment to persist at their enrolled postsecondary institution.

While striving to achieve high degree completion benchmarks, institutions of higher education are simultaneously experiencing deep declines in enrollment because of pandemic disruptions and demographic shifts (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021; Venit, 2022). U.S. higher education is facing a dramatic demographic cliff and a steep decline in the traditional college-age population. Grawe’s (2018, 2021) Higher Education Demand Index (HEDI) forecasts that U.S. higher education enrollment will increase by about 4% from 2018 to 2025 to be followed by a steady national enrollment decline of about 10% from the 2025 peak by 2034. Drastic college enrollment reductions will impact nearly every region of the United States by 2029 due to declining birth rates, migration trends, and decreased demand amongst the

traditional college-age population. Demographic changes will result in an approximate 10-20% decline in college enrollment in almost every region of the United States with New England experiencing the worst enrollment projections and a forecasted 25% enrollment decline. Nationally, elite four-year colleges will be the least threatened by demographic shifts. However, two-year colleges will be the most severely impacted. The anticipated rate of enrollment declines for two-year colleges will be nearly 20% faster than for higher education enrollment in general (Grawe, 2018).

Projected demographic changes combined with the ripple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, will further decrease the number of students seeking to begin or complete a college degree (Venit, 2022). Changing demographics and declining enrollment numbers will deeply challenge U.S. institutions of higher education, placing the nation's economic growth at risk. College graduates form the nation's knowledge economy, generate tax income, grow the United States Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and are less reliant on public assistance (Venit, 2022). Reduced completion rates threaten the nation's ability to compete in the global market (Venit, 2022). With fewer traditional students to recruit, institutions of higher education must intentionally focus on attracting adult learners (Eddinger, 2019) and improving student persistence amongst diverse population groups (Grawe, 2021). Efforts to increase institutional enrollment by recruiting new students will be insufficient to regain pre-pandemic enrollment numbers (Venit, 2022). Institutions of higher education must intentionally focus on attracting adult learners and improving their persistence (Bergman & Olson, 2020; Eddinger, 2019; Grawe, 2021). Student persistence is essential to realizing both student and institutional success and financial prosperity (Seltzer, 2021). Students who are not successful in college are unable to reap the rewards of completing a certificate, degree, or credential. Increasing persistence rates

amongst ParentALs is vital to the economic and workforce health of the nation (Kienzl et al., 2022). However, supporting students in persisting is increasingly more complex and difficult as students face financial, health, and psychological challenges associated with the pandemic (Venit, 2022).

Improving understanding of the unique perceptions and challenges that influence the success of ParentALs is also vital to an institution's ability to retain students, financial stability, and overall effectiveness (Hanson, 2021; Generation Hope, 2020). Public institutions are often funded based on retention rates (Wagner et al., 2021) yet U.S. institutions of higher education are struggling to achieve retention goals (Bergman & Olson, 2020). Not only does student attrition negatively impact rates of persistence, retention, and projected revenue, institutions experience a loss of value in recruitment efforts to enroll a student who does not graduate. Cuseo (2010) found that retaining students through persistence strategies is three to four times more financially effective than efforts to recruit and enroll new students. De Freitas et al. (2021) estimated that \$2 million was saved for every 50 retained undergraduate students. In a 2021 interview, Nathan Grawe suggested that a 25% increase in student persistence (decreased attrition) would offset the potential losses related to population declines (Seltzer, 2021). Wagner et al. (2021) urged institutions of higher education to seek to understand the complex and interconnected factors that influence persistence rather than placing blame on students for failing to persist. Identifying factors that influence persistence amongst ParentALs is vital to solving systemic equities that may exist in institutions of higher education (Gault et al., 2019).

### **The Identity of a Parenting Adult Learner**

ParentALs experience postsecondary education differently than traditional and non-parenting students and have unique responsibilities and persistence challenges (Hubbard, 2019).

Conway et al. (2021) found that ParentALs with children under the age of 13 were “among the least likely student groups to complete college” (p. 1). Understanding the influences on the persistence of ParentALs requires postsecondary education institutions to recognize and understand the unique qualities of this population (Ascend, 2018). Academia provides varying definitions to describe traditional and non-traditional college student populations. Frequently, traditional, and non-traditional students are classified by age alone; a student under age 24 is traditional, and a student over age 24 is non-traditional (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015; Remenick, 2019). More descriptively, a traditional college student is a high school graduate aged 18 to 24 who is financially dependent on their parent(s) and is matriculated in a degree program (NCES, 2015; Remenick, 2019). In contrast, The National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.) defines a non-traditional student by the existence of one or more of the following characteristics: “delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, attended part-time, financially independent, worked full time while enrolled, had dependents other than a spouse, was a single parent, or did not obtain a standard high school diploma” (NCES, n.d.b., para. 2). Other variables to differentiate traditional versus non-traditional students include on-campus versus off-campus living, employment status, race, gender, enrollment in a non-degree program (NCES, n.d.a), intent to complete a four-year degree, marital status, financial aid dependency status (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005), and military, college reentry, and first-generation status (MacDonald, 2018). In this study, a ParentAL is defined as an enrolled college student that meets the criteria to be classified as independent for financial aid purposes and has a dependent child(ren) residing in the same household. This study focused on undergraduate ParentALs 18 years of age and older. Although the study participants were enrolled at least half-time in six or more college credits per semester in public two-year community colleges, the literature reviewed

broadly represents undergraduate ParentALs without specificity to full- or part-time enrollment and encompasses two-year, four-year, public, and private institutions of higher education.

### **Parenting Adult Learner Demographics**

Reducing the persistence gap between parenting and non-parenting students is a key issue in increasing student equity amongst traditionally underserved student groups (Pendleton & Atella, 2020; Wladis et al., 2018). Conway et al. (2021) placed ParentALs as a notable minority group at great risk of higher education dropout. Wladis (2018) found that the factors that make ParentALs less likely to persist intersect with and are worsened by characteristics that create barriers to student success. ParentALs are significantly more likely to be students of color and tend to be Black, Native American, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, or students who identify as more than one race (Gault et al., 2020; Institute for Women’s Policy Research & Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2019; Wladis et al., 2018). Policies and practices that remove barriers and threats to student persistence are vital to resolving “systemic inequities in college access and success” (Gault et al., 2019, pp. 6-7).

ParentALs are more likely to be first-generation students (Conway et al., 2021; Generation Hope, 2020; Reichlin Cruse, Holzman et al., 2019). A large proportion (47%) of ParentALs attend community college (American Association of Community Colleges, 2021b; Wladis, 2018). Female students represent 70% of ParentALs (Archer et al., 2020; Cruse et al., 2019; Gault et al., 2020; MacDonald, 2018; Wladis et al., 2018). ParentALs are more likely to be employed full-time (68%) than non-parenting students (39%) (The Hope Center, 2021). However, ParentALs are more than twice as likely to be low-income than non-parenting dependent students as defined as 200 percent or below the federal poverty level (Huelsman & Engle, 2013). ParentALs are more likely to be single mothers living below the poverty level

(Gault et al., 2014; Lovell, 2014; Wladis et al., 2018). Single ParentALs are almost three times as likely to be low-income than non-parenting dependent students (Huelsman & Engle, 2013).

Further, single ParentALs are three times as likely to have no reportable earnings, exacerbating financial barriers associated with raising children and persisting in higher education (Huelsman & Engle, 2013).

ParentALs have higher cumulative GPAs than traditional students (Wladis et al., 2018). Despite academic ability, ParentALs are significantly less likely to complete a degree than their childless peers (Wladis et al., 2018; Zarifa et al., 2018). Zarifa et al. (2018) found that while GPA correlated to traditional student persistence, GPA became insignificant to the persistence of ParentALs. Parenting adult learners tend to take longer to complete a degree, especially if they are female as they are more likely to be enrolled part-time and experience barriers related to family responsibilities (James, 2020; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Wladis et al., 2018; Zarifa et al., 2018). The Institute for Women's Policy Research found that only 18% of ParentALs complete an associate or bachelor's degree within six years of enrolling, compared to 54% of traditional, dependent, non-parenting students (Reichlin Cruse, Richburg-Hayes et al., 2021). This statistic is worsened by gender, with only eight percent of mothers completing a degree within six years, compared to approximately half of all females without children (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). Part-time and irregular enrollment increases the time needed to complete a degree, worsens feelings of isolation, and negatively impacts financial aid eligibility and persistence outcomes (Brown & Nichols, 2013).

Lovell (2014) and Markle (2015) also found that the gender of ParentALs influences student motivation, persistence, and likeliness to overcome barriers and persist in higher education. The most recent research from the Institute for Women's Policy Research & Ascend

at the Aspen Institute (2019) found that of the approximately 3.8 million ParentALs enrolled in U.S. higher education in 2015-2016, about 2.7 million (70%) were female parenting students and 1.1 million (30%) were fathers. The majority of the female parenting students were single (62%) while male ParentALs tended to be married (61%). According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research & Ascend at the Aspen Institute (2019), ParentALs tend to be older than college students without children. The median age of a ParentAL was 32 in 2015-2016, significantly older than the median age of 20 for a traditional dependent student and somewhat older than the median age of 27 for a non-parenting independent student. The majority (80%) of ParentALs have one to two children. More than half (53%) had children under the age of six (Institute for Women's Policy Research & Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2019).

Nationally, ParentALs are more likely to be students of color (Generation Hope, 2020). A racial-equity lens must be applied when evaluating the interconnected factors that impact student persistence. While race and ethnicity are significant factors of inequality in higher education, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), role as a parent, lesbian, gay, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) identity, employment, disability, and first-generation status also play a role in equity, inclusion, accessibility, belonging, and persistence measures and outcomes (Atay & Trebing, 2017; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016; Markle, 2015; Reason, 2009; Tinto, 2017). ParentALs experience a multitude of factors that may influence their persistence. The interconnection of this population's increased likeliness to be first-generation, low-income, students of color, and/or employed while enrolled in college challenges their ability to persist (Gault et al., 2020; Generation Hope, 2020; Institute for Women's Policy Research & Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2019; The Hope Center, 2021). Many institutions of higher education seek to promote student success amongst underserved special population groups by focusing on one attribute, e.g., first-

generation status or race (Atay & Trebing, 2017). However, this practice ignores the intersectionality of factors that may influence persistence and disregards the belief that students gain a sense of purpose and belonging from their multiple identities and characteristics (Harpur et al., 2022; Hill et al., 2021). Harpur et al. (2022) suggested that focusing on a single student attribute may improve outcomes of the individual but fails to address the bigger picture of the intersectionality of all factors which may influence the student's experience, sense of belonging, and persistence. Policies and practices that serve a single attribute are unable to holistically support the diversity and connectivity of student needs.

### **Characteristics and Intersectionality of Factors, Experiences, and Perceptions**

ParentALs experience shared challenges and circumstances that differentiate them from traditional and non-traditional non-parenting students which place them at higher risk of attrition (Ascend at the Aspen Institute and The Jed Foundation, 2021; Cho et al., 2021). Family, work, housing, transportation, childcare, finances, time management, socio-emotional factors, and obligations are experienced differently by ParentALs. Cho et al. (2021) found that the difference in roles between parenting and non-parenting students causes pressure which may make a ParentAL more likely to leave college than a traditional student. The unique experiences of ParentALs influence readiness and motivation to learn (Cox, 2015), ability to persist in higher education (Reason, 2009), and feelings of belonging or isolation as a college student (Markle, 2015). Reason believed that a student's pre-college factors, such as parenting status, influence college experiences and outcomes. Cox demonstrated that a coach, or student advisor, can help support a ParentAL to engage in transformational learning and achieve their goals after a conflict or challenge such as loss of employment or other significant life change or circumstance.

ParentALs experience socioeconomic (SES), racial, ethnic, and institutional inequities (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Wladis et al., 2018). ParentALs experience higher rates of basic needs insecurities and financial demands than traditional students (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020; Kienzl et al., 2022). Food and housing insecurity and the financial demands of childcare are remarkably different for ParentALs (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). ParentALs tend to be first-generation college students navigating college enrollment, persistence, and completion without the family understanding and support readily available in families with multi-generation college alumni (Wladis et al., 2018; Program Evaluation and Research Group, 2020).

Tinto (1993), Braxton et al. (2000), Bean (1980, 1982), and Bergman and Olson (2020) highlight a student's motivation and commitment to earning a degree as a strong indicator of likeliness to persist. Literature affirms that despite unique barriers and experiences, ParentALs are especially motivated to achieve academic success (Goodman & Reddy, 2019). ParentALs often indicate that they enrolled in college to set a good example as a role model for their children (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Sommer et al., 2018; Wladis et al., 2018). The educational attainment of a parent is understood to improve child outcomes including the likeliness of the child(ren) to enroll in college (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Lovell, 2014; Wladis et al., 2018; Sommer et al., 2018; Reardon, 2011; Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014; Gomez, 2016). Child outcomes are a powerful catalyst for parental motivation (Ascend, 2018) and perceptions of how earning a degree may impact their children may influence ParentAL persistence (Wilsey, 2013). ParentALs are motivated to earn a degree to improve the quality of life and financial stability of their children (Goodman & Reddy, 2019; Kaushal, 2014; Reichlin Cruse, Milli et al., 2019; Wladis et al., 2018). Lovell (2014) and Markle (2015) found that gender influenced student motivation and likeliness to overcome persistence barriers. Goodman and

Reddy found that single female ParentALs are especially motivated to improve intergenerational outcomes. Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005), Lovell (2014), and Wladis et al. (2018) found that ParentALs with children over the age of six years have a higher motivation to complete a degree. ParentALs also enroll to advance their skills and their likeliness to earn a promotion or enter a career field with better potential for prosperity and quality of life. Bergman and Olson (2020) found that ParentALs often enroll in higher education in response to a fear of not being eligible for career advancement despite being successful in the workforce based on their experience and years of service. Bergman and Olson found that adult learners expressing a strong commitment to achieving their higher education goals were much more likely to persist. Lovell (2014) found that ParentALs enrolled in two-year degree programs expressed higher levels of motivation than those enrolled in four-year programs.

### **Unique Challenges May Limit Persistence**

Adult learners experience a variety of barriers to their ability to persist in higher education (Bergman et al., 2014). Generation Hope (2020) found that ParentALs leave higher education without completing a degree more than their non-parenting peers. Emrey-Arras (2019) found that 52% of undergraduate ParentALs dropped out before completing a degree within six years, compared to 32% of non-parenting undergraduates. Despite attempts to foster student success for all learners, resources available to individual students are often unequal (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Increased understanding of the experiences and perceptions of ParentALs provides an opportunity for higher education leaders to acknowledge and attend to the most pressing needs of these students (Ascend, 2018).

## **Pre-College Factors Can Create Barriers to Persistence**

ParentALs are more likely to have pre-college factors that leave them inadequately prepared for higher education (Costello, 2014; James, 2020; Reason, 2009). Adult learners are influenced by background characteristics, learning styles, and motivations that are different from traditional college students (Bergman & Olson, 2020). ParentALs tend to be female, single, with little familial support, first-generation, employed yet low-income, and students of color (Gault et al., 2020). The interaction of these socio-demographic background characteristics intensifies the vulnerability of ParentALs (Lin et al., 2021; Reason, 2009). Student self-efficacy, positive regard for an instructor, institutional rapport, and personal motivations to persist are influenced by background characteristics, disposition, and prior learning experiences (Reason, 2009). Computer literacy (Remenick, 2019), and prior academic credits and experience can influence a parenting student's readiness to learn in a higher education setting (Bergman et al., 2014; Remenick, 2019; The Graduate Network, 2019). Academically, ParentALs tend to need remedial and developmental courses and may have self-doubt in their sense of belonging and ability to succeed in higher education (Bergman et al., 2014; Lovell, 2014; Reason, 2009; Wladis et al., 2018). The multifaceted interconnections between academic and non-academic student background characteristics and perceptions of educational experiences add to the complexity of factors that influence ParentAL persistence.

### ***Role Conflict***

Role expectations cause pressure on a student to act in a certain way and limit time and other resources available for fulfilling multiple roles (Defazio et al., 2020). ParentALs have different employment responsibilities than traditional-age students (Bergman et al., 2014; Shi, 2017). Work demands compete with other responsibilities leading to lower persistence rates as

students experience conflicts between work and school commitments (Bergman et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2020; Lovell, 2014). ParentALs are more vulnerable than other student populations due to the added responsibilities associated with their role as a parent (Lin et al., 2021).

According to Markle (2015), role conflict negatively impacts the persistence of female parenting students more than male parenting students as women tend to internalize an ideal standard for both the role of mother and student. Students who are mothers often epitomize role expectations to an intensity that renders them unable to achieve the standards which they set for themselves as mothers, students, spouses, and employees. Students that are mothers tend to perceive that their educational goals are selfish and detract from their ability to care for their family; they express guilt for investing in their own learning. Parenting female students are burdened by household responsibilities more than male students, yet male students do not express feeling guilty about focusing on academics rather than family. Guilt and frustration related to this balancing act impact persistence (Bergman et al., 2014; Kensinger & Minnick, 2018). ParentALs consider withdrawing from college because they feel out of place and unlike traditional students. Braxton et al. (2013) found that the support of a partner or significant other positively influenced persistence. Markle found that male ParentALs were 1.6 times more likely to be married than female parenting students. They highlighted the isolation experienced by female ParentALs (Markle, 2015). Their college responsibilities separate them from other mothers and their life responsibilities are vastly different from traditional college students. Gault et al. (2020) found that ParentALs were much less likely to complete college than other students due to differences in life responsibilities and challenges related to childcare, financial insecurity, and time poverty.

### ***Time Poverty***

ParentALs are resilient to challenges and highly motivated to succeed but have major constraints on time (Ascend, 2018; Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014). Time poverty is a “byproduct of student parenthood” (Wladis et al., 2018, p. 810) that decreases both the quality and quantity of time that ParentALs can dedicate to college studies. ParentALs must balance family, work, and academic responsibilities (Chen et al., 2020; He et al., 2019; James, 2020; Lovell, 2014; Markle, 2015; Remenick, 2019; Sommer et al., 2018). Time poverty is an often-overlooked threat to physical and mental well-being, productivity, and prosperity that is not given as much policy and organizational attention as financial poverty (Giurge & Whillan, 2020). Perceptions of success in a particular role are often incompatible with the time and physical and emotional energy and capacity available, causing time poverty for ParentALs (Markle, 2015). Juggling multiple roles often leads a student to take longer to complete a degree (Wladis et al., 2018), as they are more likely to be enrolled part-time or take time off to manage other responsibilities (James, 2020; Markle, 2015; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Martinez et al. (2021) found that time commuting to college increased exhaustion, stress, and time poverty. Feeling overwhelmed by role strain, adult learners may pause their education when pressured by an unexpected challenge (Dill, 2020). Pauses in enrollment impact a ParentAL’s ability to persist (Bergman et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2020; Markle, 2015; PERG, 2020; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Part-time enrollment increases student isolation (Brown & Nichols, 2013) and negatively impacts persistence and financial aid eligibility (Wladis et al., 2018). Research indicates that part-time enrollment is a primary factor in understanding college attainment differences between traditional and non-traditional college students (Markle, 2015; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).

Wladis et al. (2018) found that both the quality and quantity of time available for studying directly impacted persistence even when other factors were controlled. ParentALs have a significant shortage of time (Bergman et al., 2014) and spend less time focused on their learning than non-parenting students (Wladis et al., 2018). Although parenting students have less discretionary time for themselves, they spend more of their personal time on academics than non-parenting students. Students with young children under the age of six are the most time-poor and spend considerably more time working, taking care of children, and managing household responsibilities. ParentALs with children under the age of six, spend 86 more hours per week on non-discretionary responsibilities than students that do not have young children. Students with preschool-aged children have about 10 hours per day, after employment, for courses, assignments, eating and meal prep, family and personal recreation and relaxation, and sleeping. Conversely, students without children can dedicate 21 or more hours to discretionary and leisure activities. The “lower amount of discretionary time completely explains the relationship between having a young child and lower college persistence and credit accumulation” (Wladis et al., 2018, p. 827). Similarly, Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) found family responsibilities to be the primary influence on a parenting student’s decision to leave college).

Several researchers highlight gender differences related to factors that influence the persistence of ParentALs (Markle, 2015; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Wladis et al., 2018). Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) found that balancing childcare and education responsibilities caused significant time poverty for female ParentALs. According to Markle (2015), female parenting students experience time poverty to a greater degree than males and lack sufficient time to dedicate exclusively to being a student. Female adult learners often report studying or completing assignments while simultaneously cooking for or feeding children or during unideal

times such as very late at night. Conway et al. (2021) found that mothers were more likely than fathers to have interrupted sleep patterns which may negatively impact cognitive function.

Naylor et al. (2018) also found that female students experience role conflict at a greater level than male students. This workload stress challenges the female student's ability to complete both academic and other responsibilities to an extent that leads them to consider leaving college.

### ***Stress***

Ascend at the Aspen Institute and The Jed Foundation (2021) found that ParentALs were more likely to experience stress than non-parenting students. 43% of ParentALs indicated feeling stressed all or most of the time, 40% felt overwhelmed, 29% struggled to regulate emotions, 28% felt depressed, and 28% felt isolated. Markle (2015) found that nontraditional students perceive that persisting in college is tougher for them than their traditional student counterparts. Strada (2020) found that 42% of U.S. adults without a degree or credential were very interested in postsecondary education but 64% did not know how to secure financial aid or other funding sources. Wagner et al. (2021) found that insufficient financial aid, lack of understanding of how to access resources, role conflict caused by juggling multiple responsibilities including paying for childcare and basic needs, lack of family support, and lack of understanding of how to navigate and pay for college caused significant stress. Sharp and Dorrance Hall (2019) found that ParentALs avoided seeking help to reduce their stress due to the perceived cost of support and potential stigma despite experiencing negative somatic physical health symptoms caused by the combined stress of managing parenting and academic responsibilities. Parenting-adult learners are more likely to enroll part-time and experience fragmented time to focus on higher education (Conway et al., 2021). Part-time and irregular enrollment can contribute to stress by increasing

feelings of isolation and negatively impacting eligibility for financial aid resources (Brown & Nichols, 2013).

Cho et al. (2021) found parenting status to be a strong indicator of student stress and poor mental health while race and ethnicity did not. Caring for dependent children(ren) creates a shared experience for all ParentALs regardless of ethnicity and other social determinants. Balancing family, work, school, and community roles and obligations can cause significant stress (Bergman et al., 2014). Student stress may also be caused or worsened by past negative academic experiences (Bergman et al., 2014; The Graduate Network, 2019), mental and physical health, substance use, depression, domestic violence, trauma, and/or abuse (Ascend, 2018; Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014; Duncan et al., 2011; Lovell, 2014; Thompson, 2014; Wladis et al., 2018). Ascend at the Aspen Institute and The Jed Foundation (2021) found that ParentALs were much more likely to have experienced stress factors including trauma, guilt over leaving their children to attend classes or study, and “cultural stigmas against therapy” (p. 13). The Hope Center (2021) found that stressors common to ParentALs place them at increased risk for significant mental health challenges.

Chen (2017) found that education is often the first factor to be dismissed when a student experiences stress. Frustration, time poverty, inter-role conflict, and lack of confidence may cause stress at a level that leads students to leave college (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Cerven, 2013; Duncan et al., 2011; Haleman, 2004; Lovell, 2014; Markle, 2015; Naylor et al., 2018; PERG, 2020; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Thompson, 2014; The Graduate Network, 2019). Students experiencing stress have difficulty adjusting to and/or concentrating on their studies (Naylor et al., 2018) and may express unhappiness with school-work-life balance (Wladis et al., 2018). Chen et al. (2020) found that stress can worsen feelings of isolation, insecurity, and

disconnection with traditional student peers, especially if the adult learner perceives the institution of higher education to be unaware or unresponsive to their experiences as a ParentAL. Naylor et al. found that a student's sense of belonging significantly influenced persistence. Cho et al. (2021) found that feeling isolated is common among parenting students and increases the likelihood that the student will experience anxiety and depression. Cho et al. indicate the importance of colleges to understand the connection between social support (family, peer, organization), student well-being, and stress reduction.

### **Parenting Adult Learners Likely to Have Prior Credits but no Degree**

Twelve million U.S. parents have completed some college but no degree (Hensly et al., 2021). Completion of a degree or employable credential is vital to individual, local, state, and national workforce and economic objectives. The U.S. benchmark to achieve 60% degree or credential completion is aligned with several state attainment goals across the nation. States often realize that focusing on only traditional-aged student attainment is not enough (Hensly et al., 2021; Ward et al., 2020). Many states focus efforts to improve the state-wide educational attainment of adult learners, especially those who have completed some college but lack a degree or credential of value (Hensly et al., 2021). However, these adult learner initiatives have “largely ignored the sizable population of parents who started but have not completed a degree” (Hensly et al., 2021, p. 6). Hensley et al., found that ParentALs are rarely acknowledged or intentionally included in college completion plans even though 35% of adults with some college but no degree has a dependent child(ren). Research and program planning fail to recognize that ParentALs experience college differently than adult learners without children. Single parents and Indigenous, Latino, and Black parents were the least likely to have earned a college degree. For these students, structural barriers negatively impact educational attainment despite motivation

and desire to complete a degree. Single parents are the most likely adult learners to have completed some college but no degree. The intersectionality of factors related to ParentAL persistence and the influence of race, ethnicity, first-generation, gender, and other socioeconomic factors are rarely considered in state-wide adult learner college completion strategies (Hensly et al., 2021).

The Institute for Women's Policy Research indicated that the achievement of the nationwide 60% degree attainment goal was highly unlikely without significant efforts to support the re-engagement and persistence of parenting adults with some college but no degree (Hensly et al., 2021). For adults with some college but no degree, the likeliness to reengage and complete a degree increases relative to the number of prior credits completed (Shapiro et al., 2019). Hensly et al. (2021) found that 65% of unenrolled parents with some college but no degree have completed at least one year of college. Adult learners with prior credits may be hesitant to reengage due to prior poor academic experiences, fear of not belonging, and/or worry about balancing multiple roles (Karmelita, 2020). Adult learners may avoid re-engaging with college due to self-doubt caused by a perception that they cannot be successful or have been away from school too long (Inside Track, 2020). The 2020 Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey found that 49% of American adults without a degree or credential saw self-doubt as a primary barrier to returning to education (Strada Education Network, 2020). Adult learners may perceive that they cannot reengage with higher education and complete a degree that is relevant to their current life goals and skill set. A 2017 report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that approximately 43% of prior earned credits were *lost* and not accepted for transfer when a student sought to reengage with higher education. Ensuring that these adults have opportunities to reengage with college in a radically different accessible, equitable, and

meaningful way “is essential for family well-being, racial equity, and broader social and economic progress” (Hensly et al., 2021, p. 6).

### **Basic Needs Insecurities and Other Financial Challenges**

Financial worries greatly influence persistence (Kensinger & Minnick, 2018; Wagner et al., 2021). ParentALs have more complex financial responsibilities and are challenged more by financial insecurities than traditional students (Archer et al., 2020; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020; Pendleton & Atella, 2020). ParentALs often need to reduce their employment hours to enroll in college (Gomez, 2016). With reduced incomes and little family support, ParentALs are more likely to experience basic needs insecurities (Martinez et al., 2021). Basic needs include food, affordable housing, mental and physical health, sleep, sanitation, hygiene, and transportation (Martinez et al., 2021). Time and income poverty and limited family and financial aid guidance worsen basic needs insecurities. Insecurities influence mental and physical well-being. Food insecurity may cause ParentALs to experience physical symptoms such as illness, fatigue, and inability to concentrate. Food insecurity may also increase a student’s feelings of isolation and reduce their sense of belonging on campus as they may avoid attending student organization meetings, dining hall experiences, and other activities that require food purchase or sharing (Martinez et al., 2021).

Financial and basic needs insecurities of ParentALs are multifaceted and compounding. ParentALs often lack stable housing and may not have access to reliable transportation (Ascend, 2018; Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014; He et al., 2019; PERG, 2020). Martinez et al. (2021) found that housing insecurity led to food insecurity. Most ParentALs are commuting students reliant on owning and maintaining a car or navigating public transportation, if available (Generation Hope, 2020). Transportation barriers exacerbate challenges in meeting the basic

essentials needed to persist in higher education. Commuting to college also increases time poverty and financial strain and may increase feelings of exhaustion, stress, and isolation (Martinez et al., 2021). The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (2021) #RealCollege survey found that ParentALs were unable to pay, or fully pay, for their basic needs. 38% of ParentALs were unable to fully pay for their housing (compared to 19% of non-parenting students) and 43% underpaid utilities (compared to 18% of non-parenting students). Parenting adult learners, if able, tend to borrow money from friends and family to pay for essentials. However, 29% of ParentALs reported that they fell into debt collection in the prior 12 months compared to just 9% of non-parenting students. Kienzle et al. (2022) found that ParentALs with a child(ren) under the age of six were the most vulnerable to basic needs insecurities.

Parenting adult learners often lack a safety net to solve unexpected financial barriers such as illness, car and/or home repairs, and childcare changes (Wagner et al., 2021). Ascend at the Aspen Institute and The Jed Foundation (2021) found that 21.3% of ParentALs perceive their financial circumstances as always stressful compared to just 14.5% of non-parenting students. Basic needs insecurities, financial fragility, and the need to prioritize children and employment over education make ParentALs more vulnerable to attrition than traditional students (Archer et al., 2020; Eddinger, 2019; Kienzl et al., 2022). ParentALs who perceive their persistence will negatively impact their children or families financially, or otherwise, are more likely to withdraw (Wagner et al., 2021). The financial costs of transportation to class, internships, practicums, work, and their children's childcare or school are a difficult barrier for ParentALs (Generation Hope, 2020). The need to provide for both themselves and their child(ren) and the likeliness to have basic needs insecurities (e.g., housing, food, childcare, transportation) may cause

ParentALs to take on more student debt than non-parenting students (Institute for Women's Policy Research & Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2019).

### **Student Loan Debt**

The ability to access affordable and dependable food, housing, technology, transportation, health and mental health care, and support is essential to persistence (The Hope Center, 2021). Insecurities in essential needs often lead students to take on debt, while juggling multiple responsibilities and stressors that place them at higher risk of leaving college without a degree. ParentALs tend to be older and take longer to complete a degree which further increases their likeliness to rely on student loans to fund their basic and educational needs. ParentALs' tendency to have higher amounts of student debt is a barrier that can impact their ability to enroll and persist in higher education (The Graduate Network, 2019; Wladis et al., 2018). Student loan debt can make securing affordable housing and transportation more challenging and may limit a parent's ability to save for their children's educational future (Pendleton & Atella, 2020).

The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS; 2019) discovered that students residing in a Northeast U.S. state are more likely to have an increased amount of student loan debt. Analysis conducted by the Institute for Women's Policy Research and Ascend at the Aspen Institute (2019) found that the median student loan debt of ParentALs enrolled in college in 2015-2016 was two-and-a-half times greater than that of non-parenting college students. Further, the Institute for Women's Policy Research and Ascend at the Aspen Institute found that single female ParentALs had \$9,500 in median student loan debt during the 2015-2016 academic year. The median female parenting student loan debt was \$8,300 and the median student loan debt amongst all ParentALs (male and female) was \$6,500. Comparatively, students without children had a median of \$2,500 in student loan debt. Contreras-Mendez and Reichlin Cruse (2021) found

that debt owed for remedial, attempted but not completed, prior program, and prerequisite courses may negatively influence ParentALs' persistence as they struggle to juggle financial challenges as they attempt to move forward toward degree completion.

Student loan default is a growing concern (Scott-Clayton, 2018). Loan default exacerbates stress and financial hardship and increases repayment costs. Wages, tax refunds, and public benefits can be garnished to repay a defaulted loan. A defaulted loan and subsequently reduced credit score can hinder a student's ability to secure affordable housing, future financial aid, transportation, and professional licenses in some states (TICAS, 2019). The Institute for College Access and Success (2018) places ParentALs among the most vulnerable to student loan default. The Institute for College Access and Success (2019) found that single parents, Black, first-generation, independent, Pell grant recipients, and those with low household incomes are less likely to graduate and more likely to default on a student loan. Socioeconomic characteristics of ParentALs often intersect with other indicators of vulnerability (Generation Hope, 2020; Lin et al., 2021). ParentALs are more likely to be Black, first-generation, and low-income (Cerven, 2013; Gault et al., 2020; Generation Hope, 2020; Institute for Women's Policy Research & Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2019) and are less likely to complete a degree within six years of enrollment (Emrey-Arras, 2019).

According to TICAS (2019), more than half of students (51%) who default on student loans have dependent children. Single ParentALs are more likely to default (20% vs 8%). 38% of undergraduate Black and African American students defaulted on a student loan within 12 years, more than students of any other race or ethnicity. Comparatively, 12% of white students and 21% of Hispanic students defaulted. TICAS (2018) found that 23% of first-generation students defaulted on a student loan, compared to only 14% of students whose parents earned a degree.

TICAS (2018) found that 28% of Pell Grant recipients defaulted while only 5% of non-Pell eligible undergraduates with household incomes greater than \$40,000 defaulted on a student loan. TICAS (2018, 2019) found that persistence to degree completion correlated to student loan default. Undergraduates who completed a degree within six years were significantly less likely to default than those who failed to persist. TICAS (2018) found that of all undergraduates studied, 23% that did not earn a degree within six years defaulted within twelve years whereas only 11% of degree completers defaulted within the same timeframe. Failure to persist to degree completion can perpetuate inter-generational financial and prosperity challenges (Generation Hope, 2020).

### **Childcare**

Although not all ParentALs need childcare, access to affordable high-quality childcare is a strong determinant of the persistence of ParentALs with young children (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2020). Chen (2017) found childcare to be essential to adult learner persistence as ParentALs with access to childcare are three times more likely to complete a degree. Generation Hope (2020) cited childcare as the most significant barrier to ParentAL persistence. Archer et al. (2020) suggested that the unaffordability of childcare is the primary cause of high student loan debt among ParentALs, especially single mothers. Goodman and Reddy (2019) found that accessible and affordable childcare was the most critical need among undergraduate ParentALs. Wladis (2018) and Miller (2019) found that financial aid awards were insufficient to cover the cost of childcare. Goldrick-Rab et al. (2020) found that the 2019 average overall annual cost of childcare in the United States was \$9,000 per child, with an even higher average cost for full-time center-based childcare (Emrey-Arras, 2019). Archer et al. found that the average childcare rate is greater than the in-state college tuition rates in 33 states and the District of Columbia. Further,

they found that childcare costs single female parenting students approximately one-third of their median yearly incomes (Archer et al., 2020). Emrey-Arras (2019) found that 60% of undergraduate ParentALs were enrolled at an institution of higher education that did not offer on-campus childcare. Reichlin Cruse, Richburg-Hayes et al. (2021) found that the number of institutions of higher education offering childcare is declining from 59% in 2004 to 45% in 2019 with even sharper declines amongst public community colleges. The 2021 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSEE) found that almost 30% of students indicate that caring for a dependent may increase their likeliness to withdraw from college.

Generation Hope (2020) found that on-campus childcare often prioritized faculty and staff and left students with the barrier of lengthy waitlists and/or expensive rates. Ashford (2020) found that more than half of ParentALs miss at least one class per semester due to a lack of childcare. Generation Hope (2020) found that 60% of ParentALs surveyed missed one to five or more days of class due to a lack of childcare. Literature has affirmed that childcare accessibility, affordability, reliability, and quality as one of the most significant barriers to persistence for ParentALs (Ascend, 2018; Bergman et al., 2014; Costello, 2014; PERG, 2020; Sommer et al., 2018; The Graduate Network, 2019; Wladis et al., 2018). A lack of suitable childcare leads adult learners to reduce their course load, withdraw from courses, and stop out of college completely.

### **Financial Aid**

A lack of adequate finances, financial support, and factors leading to the inaccessibility of financial aid negatively influence persistence (Ascend, 2018; Bergman et al., 2014; Gomez, 2016; Markle, 2015; Sommer et al., 2018). Generation Hope (2020) found that ParentALs were challenged by accessing offices of student financial aid and navigating complex financial processes. Emrey-Arras (2019) and Generation Hope (2020) found a lack of communication

from financial aid staff to inform ParentALs that they may qualify for additional financial aid to assist with dependent care.

Reichlin Cruse, Richburg-Hayes et al. (2021) found that the cost of higher education enrollment and completion was almost \$7,600 more (per child) for ParentALs than for students without children. ParentALs spend more on food, housing, utilities, transportation, basic needs, and other costs beyond tuition and fees. Despite increased costs and decreased financial resources, ParentALs rarely receive financial aid funding earmarked specifically for parenting students. Palacios et al. (2021) found that although ParentALs are more likely to be low-income and eligible for public benefits, neither federal student financial aid nor public benefits programs were sufficient, even when combined, for ParentALs to meet the necessary cost of attendance (COA) beyond tuition. Instead, Palacios et al. found a disconnect between financial aid and public benefits that worsened rather than improved ParentALs persistence vulnerabilities. Public benefits programs often have strict work requirements and administrative burdens that are often incompatible with academic schedule requirements. Financial aid programs often disproportionately exclude adult learners by undervaluing their true cost of attendance beyond tuition and fees. Further financial aid policies often restrict grant and work-study benefits for part-time and/or employed students (Palacios et al., 2021). Scholarship and financial aid policies that require full-time enrollment are often unavailable to ParentALs who primarily enroll part-time and are thereby excluded from funding sources that meet the true cost of college attendance and persistence (Eddinger, 2019).

While childcare is an allowable cost of attendance expense, institutions of higher education do not often systematically adjust financial aid to include childcare expenses because data regarding child age, childcare market rates, and childcare needs are not collected (Wladis,

2018). Generation Hope (2020) reported that 75% of ParentAL survey responders did not know that financial aid awards could be increased to assist with childcare. Wladis (2018) found that student financial aid awards were insufficient to fund childcare necessary for courses and schoolwork. Wladis suggested that policymakers provide ParentALs with the resources necessary to increase their ability to study and complete assignments. However, federal support for on-campus childcare has been declining and only meets about 5% of actual childcare needs amongst ParentALs. Wladis also found that current financial aid practices were counterproductive to promoting the persistence of ParentALs as they do not receive enough support to meet their basic needs. The lack of adequate financial aid exacerbates time poverty as ParentALs are forced to work more, study less, and take longer to complete their degrees.

### **Institutional Policies and Practices**

Institutional and faculty policies and practices may cause enrollment barriers (Chen, 2017) and influence ParentAL persistence (Markle, 2015). Postsecondary student persistence strategies are often based on traditional students and may be of disadvantage to non-traditional students (Chen et al., 2020). Institutional policies, procedures, culture, structure, governance, biases, and systemic processes may interfere with or prevent student entry and persistence (Markle, 2015; Remenick, 2019). Institutions of higher education that set a goal to support a student subpopulation without intentionally integrating that work within a larger institutional-wide strategic lens often fall short of delivering on the student financial, academic, and engagement needs to improve persistence amongst the subpopulation (Grawe, 2021).

Remenick (2019) found that ParentALs become marginalized when attempting to access student services that are only available during work hours or cause time, transportation, or logistical conflicts. Archer et al. (2020) found that the lack of time available to access supportive

resources influences persistence in higher education. Institutional structures, processes, and pedagogy may add to rather than resolve the challenges faced by ParentALs (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Lovell, 2014). Generation Hope (2020) found that ParentALs reported that participating in group projects and assignments, obtaining childcare, accessing career placement services, navigating financial aid processes, and securing transportation are the greatest challenges to persistence.

A holistic approach to revising policies and practices is necessary to meet the needs of ParentALs. Intentional efforts to adapt student orientation, course scheduling, financial aid, student employment, and other factors to reduce barriers experienced by ParentALs are vital to promoting persistence (Grawe, 2021). Attendance policies, course scheduling, sequencing, and lack of program flexibility also create obstacles to ParentALs (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Markle, 2015; Remenick, 2019). Lack of parking and family housing, lactation areas, affordable and accessible childcare, and effective communication about relevant campus and community resources worsen the burdens experienced by ParentALs (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Markle, 2015; Remenick, 2019; Zinshteyn, 2019).

Faculty perceptions and interactions with students may also negatively impact a student's experience and persistence. Ascend at the Aspen Institute and The Jed Foundation (2021) found that 57% of ParentALs felt demeaned or marginalized by an instructor that respond well to their role as a ParentAL. Chen et al. (2020) found that the extent to which an institution utilizes part-time faculty correlates to student persistence. Faculty and staff that lack an understanding of the unique dynamics of the parenting adult learner and may lack the ability to acknowledge the many roles of parenting students and are ill-equipped to provide a supportive environment (Wilsey, 2013). Faculty behaviors and practices may worsen student perceptions of feeling

alienated, stereotyped, judged, stigmatized, and/or marginalized (Brown & Nichols, 2013; Gomez, 2016; Markle, 2015; Remenick, 2019; The Graduate Network, 2019). Such feelings of disconnection with the college, faculty, and peers decrease a student's sense of belonging and decrease their likeliness to persist (Naylor et al., 2018).

### **Sense of Belonging**

Higher education literature has often cited a sense of academic and social belonging and engagement with a college or university to be a strong predictor of persistence (Naylor et al., 2018; Tinto, 1993; Wagner et al., 2021). Similarly, perceptions of disconnection or exclusion negatively influence persistence (Lovell, 2014). Non-traditional, commuter, working, and/or ParentALs may be less likely to feel valued by and/or connected to the college (Wagner et al., 2021). Role conflict provides ParentALs with little time to spend on campus and make connections with peers, advisors, and/or support staff (Kirk & Lewis, 2015; Wagner et al., 2021). Kirk and Lewis (2015) found that ParentALs may view the campus as a service location, similar to a retail store or benefits office, rather than as a holistic and supportive campus community.

Braxton et al. (2013) found that student perceptions of the institution of higher education's culture, integrity, and dedication to student welfare were closely related to persistence. However, ParentALs express concerns regarding institutional contempt (Lovell, 2014), institutional racism (Ascend, 2018), discrimination (Costello, 2014), and unclear expectations of the college or university (Naylor et al., 2018). Inflexible policies and practices based on the notion that students do not have responsibilities beyond academics create unnecessary barriers for ParentALs and further decrease their sense of belonging in higher education (Remenick, 2019). Dickerson and Stiefer (2006) found that ParentALs feel rattled when faced with a culture that is designed for traditional college students. ParentALs experience

college differently than traditional students and an institutional culture designed for traditional students may cause ParentALs to feel isolated, inadequate, incapable, lost, or other emotions that are counterproductive to persistence. Conversely, an institutional culture that provides a supportive environment for ParentALs fosters a student's sense of belonging.

### **Practices that Support Parenting Adult Learner Persistence**

Some institutions of higher education have services, resource centers, and/or staffing specifically for ParentALs. These colleges and universities offer coaching, advising, counseling, academic and career resources, financial support, legal help, assistance with applying for public benefits, childcare, family-friendly activities and events, and integrated community resources intentionally designed for ParentALs (Goodman & Reddy, 2019). Investment in supportive resources for ParentALs provides a strong return. While rates of investment gain vary regionally and between factors that influence ParentALs, Reichlin Cruse, Milli et al. (2019) found that the estimated rates of return would hold even if not all ParentALs were served, allowing services to be scalable and proportional to local, state, and federal funding allocations. Reichlin Cruse, Milli et al. estimated the following investment returns for U.S. single female ParentALs enrolled in higher education:

- Childcare: \$4.30 returned on each U.S. dollar invested. Investment gains would be realized by increasing single mother degree completion by an estimated 21% and subsequently increasing tax contributions and decreasing public assistance expenses.
- Case management: \$5.48 returned on each U.S. dollar invested. Providing case management for all single female ParentALs would increase their degree completion by 47%.

- Financial aid: \$5.05 returned on each U.S. dollar invested. Providing an additional \$2,000 per year in grants to single ParentALs would increase their degree completion by 2.8% per \$1,000 granted.
- Associate degree completion: \$12.32 returned on each U.S. dollar invested. Nationally, the total cost of attendance and completion of an associate degree for single ParentALs is \$14,200 and they realize a return of 1,232%.

### **Institutional Culture**

A campus culture designed to help ParentALs succeed improves the likeliness that a student will stay in school even when financial, role, emotional, and/or other stressors challenge the adult learner's persistence (Naylor et al., 2018). ParentALs that feel welcomed and identified in a college culture feel confident and better equipped to persist (Generation Hope, 2020). Institutions must acknowledge and address the needs, expectations, and barriers experienced by ParentALs (PERG, 2020; Shi, 2017). The policies, strategies, and resources that a college practice and the way they are communicated and offered to students contribute to the institutional culture and influence student persistence (Generation Hope, 2020). Higher education institutions must cultivate a culture that values student potential and seeks to utilize the power of high-quality education, clear academic and career pathways, and intentional and meaningful support systems to empower student persistence and success (FrameWorks Institute, 2019). Goodman and Reddy (2019) found that professional development for faculty and staff on the unique needs of ParentALs positively influences persistence. Institutional and faculty perceptions, attitudes, expectations, and communication may enhance or impede persistence (Markle, 2015; PERG, 2020). Adult learners are more likely to persist if they perceive positive faculty and institutional support and responsiveness (Bergman et al., 2014). Faculty who are seen

as approachable, helpful, engaged in learning, and interested in student development and growth support the persistence of ParentALs (Lovell, 2014). Parenting students also benefit from clearly communicated and reasonable expectations from faculty (Lovell, 2014; Markle, 2015).

### **Institutional Policies**

Institutional policies must be in place to identify and track the number of ParentALs enrolled (Generation Hope, 2020; Markle, 2015; Remenick, 2019). ParentALs should have opportunities to participate in policy development and updates including specific policies related to ParentALs (Generation Hope, 2020). Institutional policies play an important role in communicating a sense of belonging and value to ParentALs. Providing clear guidelines regarding the allowance of children in classrooms is important to ParentALs (Generation Hope, 2020). A policy that allows a ParentAL to bring their child to class in unexpected circumstances when childcare is not accessible may prevent missed attendance and ensure access to classroom instruction. ParentALs also benefit from clear and reasonable expectations, quality content, flexible attendance policies, and increased access to faculty (Lovell, 2014; Markle, 2015). Alternately, policies that allow occasional synchronous or asynchronous remote learning opportunities in place of in-person attendance let ParentALs remain engaged when their child is sick, or childcare is unexpectedly unavailable. Generation Hope (2020) found that 60% of ParentALs surveyed missed one to five days or more of classroom instruction during the prior semester due to an unexpected lack of childcare.

### **Institutional Practices**

Recognition of the unique experiences, perceptions, and challenges of ParentALs who reenter higher education to complete a degree is essential to informing practices that create a supportive environment to improve the college experience and increase the likeliness of

persistence to degree completion (Bergman et al., 2014; Contreras-Mendez & Cruse, 2021; The Graduate Network, 2019). As ParentALs may have some prior college experience but lack a degree, intentional, targeted, and flexible support should be provided to returning adult learners to guide them through a degree pathway and student resource opportunities (Contreras-Mendez & Cruse, 2021). Evening and weekend class schedules, hybrid and online learning, shortened semesters, consistent full-year schedules, competency-based education (CBE), credit for prior learning (PLA and CPL), and test-out opportunities may also significantly reduce barriers and promote persistence for ParentALs (Ancel et al., 2018; Bergman et al., 2014; Markle, 2015; Remenick, 2019; The Graduate Network, 2019). Opportunities for ParentALs to earn transcript credit for work and life experiences honor the students' pre-college experiences and reduce the overall time needed to complete a degree (Ancel et al., 2018).

Supportive institutional practices and resources for ParentALs must be convenient, approachable, visible, accessible, and well promoted and encouraged (Ascend, 2018; Cerven, 2013; Chen et al., 2020; PERG, 2020; The Graduate Network, 2019; Wilsey, 2013). Student parents have unique time barriers and need campus resources to be available to them when childcare is open as well as during evening and weekend hours (Ascend, 2018; Chen et al., 2020; Wilsey, 2013). Flexible admissions, financial aid, academic advisor, and student navigator schedules help ParentALs to persist (Markle, 2015). Online and phone resources offer flexibility and improve resource accessibility (Ascend, 2018). Early alert warning systems, tutoring, and writing centers, technology loan programs, and degree pathways are helpful to parenting students (Hawthorne, 2016; PERG, 2020; Remenick, 2019; Sommer et al., 2018; The Graduate Network, 2019; Wilsey, 2013). However, targeted resources such as pregnancy parking, childcare, family housing and transportation, pregnancy and lactation support, child-friendly study spaces, family-

friendly leave policies, family health care and insurance, and legal aid must not be overlooked in favor of more traditional student success initiatives (Brown & Nichols, 2013; PERG, 2020).

### **Financial Aid and Basic Needs Insecurity Relief**

ParentALs must often overcome food, housing, and financial insecurities to pursue an educational path (Archer et al., 2020). Financial aid, emergent need and hardship grants and scholarships, flexible funds, and other monetary resources are essential to ParentAL success (Bergman et al., 2014; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Chen et al., 2020; Duncan et al.; 2011; Haleman, 2004; James, 2020; PERG, 2020; Remenick, 2019; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; The Graduate Network, 2019; Wagner et al., 2021; Wladis et al., 2018). Martinez et al. (2021) found that students view basic needs as a shared responsibility of the student and the institute of higher education. However, students express feeling shame in asking for assistance in meeting their basic needs. Wladis et al. (2018) recommend that financial aid award practices recognize that ParentALs may need to reduce their employment hours to reduce role strain and commit to educational persistence and success. Employer support, tuition and financial assistance, flexible work schedules, and student employment may also help alleviate financial and time barriers among ParentALs (Bergman et al., 2014; James, 2020; Markle, 2015; Remenick, 2019; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; The Graduate Network, 2019).

Financial aid formulas that are proactively inclusive of childcare expenses and the unique needs of ParentALs reduce barriers and support persistence (Chen et al., 2020; Gomez, 2016; Wladis et al., 2018). Bergman and Olson (2020) found that students that have access to financial resources to help them meet basic needs are better able to overcome unanticipated barriers and are more likely to persist. Miller (2019) found that financial aid policies in Canada, Finland, Germany, and other countries systematically increase financial aid awards to ParentALs. Miller

recommended that the United States adjust the Federal Pell Grant and Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (FSEOG) programs to similarly increase award amounts for ParentALs. Alternately, Miller suggested that institutions of higher education could develop policies to increase financial aid to ParentALs through state or local appropriations or funding streams. Although it would be unlikely that such policy changes would fund the total cost of attendance and completion, it would move the needle in recognizing that ParentALs experience greater financial challenges than non-parenting students (Miller, 2019).

Increasing financial aid to ParentALs decreases the amount of time needed to complete a degree and increases persistence (Zarifa et al., 2018). Institutional practices which help students to access campus and community resources such as on-campus childcare (or childcare scholarships and subsidies), food pantries (or food subsidies), housing, heating, and transportation assistance reduce financial barriers and may improve persistence (Ascend at the Aspen Institute and The Jed Foundation, 2021; Coles et al., 2020; Contreras-Mendez & Cruse, 2021; Cruse et al., 2019). Emergent need grants reduce stress and promote persistence by reducing financial barriers and improving a student's sense of belonging and perception that the institution values their role as a student and parent (Wagner et al., 2021). Effective emergent need practices must allow funds to be quickly available to students at decisive moments when an unexpected financial barrier may otherwise derail the student's ability to persist. Resources and partnerships that alleviate student hunger positively influence persistence. Institutions of higher education may help meet this need by funding a food pantry through the student activities fund, fundraising efforts, or by partnering with a food bank distribution center or an organization such as Swipe Out Hunger (Coles et al., 2020). Institutions of higher education should consider providing food during student organization meetings and activities to reduce feelings of shame

and isolation among students that cannot bring or purchase adequate food. Additionally, food pantries should be conveniently located and available during hours that are accessible to ParentALs (Martinez et al., 2021).

### **Campus Environment**

The physical environment of an institution of higher education may also influence persistence (Generation Hope, 2020). Welcoming infant changing and feeding spaces improves ParentALs' sense of belonging, social capital, and ability to engage in campus activities. Generation Hope also cited parent or expectant parent parking, children's play spaces, family-friendly library and/or lounge spaces, family housing, on-campus childcare, photos displayed of parenting students with their children, and a family-friendly resource space with diapers and other infant and child necessities as environmental aspects important to ParentAL persistence. Family-friendly events and on-site childcare during student events (e.g., orientation, recognition, workshops, student engagement opportunities, mental health and stress reduction activities, etcetera) may also improve the ParentAL experience (Ascend at the Aspen Institute and The Jed Foundation, 2021; Sharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019). Generation Hope (2020) found that 29% of two- and four-year ParentALs reported knowing of no family-friendly characteristics or spaces on their campus. Generation Hope found that while not all ParentALs need childcare services, on-campus childcare may reduce a student's reliance on friends, family, and community childcare options. On-campus childcare may also provide access to low-cost or subsidized childcare opportunities. Generation Hope recommended that institutions of higher education identify a staff person to advocate for and support ParentALs. This position should be supported by an interdisciplinary team of students, faculty, staff, and administrators utilizing data and shared student experiences to inform supportive practices for ParentALs.

## **Sense of Belonging**

Institutional practices must be designed to recognize the experiences and needs of ParentALs (Markle, 2015; Remenick, 2019; Sharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019). ParentALs should be included in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices as interconnected to racial, income, and first-generation equity factors (Institute for Women's Policy Research & Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2019). ParentALs should be provided with opportunities to be included in campus activities as increased engagement has a positive effect on persistence (Generation Hope, 2020). Institutions must develop practices that reduce isolation among full- and part-time parenting students through mentoring, support groups, student parent ambassador programming, leadership development, parenting and life skills training, and other opportunities which foster a sense of community and collaboration (Lovell, 2014; PERG, 2020; Remenick, 2019; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Implementation of stress reduction activities such as mindfulness, yoga, and cognitive-behavioral interventions helps decrease ParentALs' stress and provides students with the tools needed to achieve their goals despite challenges (Sharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019). Universally allowing students to leave the classroom to accept a phone call and treating sick children the same as sick students in excused absence policies improves sense of belonging and inclusivity. Opportunities to access career planning, placement, and internship opportunities that are welcoming and accessible to ParentALs are important to building confidence, connection with the campus and community, persistence, and ultimately building vital career connections (Generation Hope, 2020).

Institutions of higher education must recognize that life will get in the way of ParentAL persistence (Ancel et al., 2018). A dedicated student coach/navigator and opportunities to develop faculty and peer relationships and develop social capital are essential to ParentAL

persistence (Ancel et al., 2018; Cruse et al., 2019; FrameWorks Institute, 2019). Professional development for faculty and staff on the unique experiences and barriers that impact ParentALs is important to ensuring a sense of belonging and reducing overall stress (Ascend at the Aspen Institute and The Jed Foundation, 2021; Giacalone, 2020; Goodman & Reddy, 2019). The likeliness of a ParentAL to persist is increased by a sense of flexibility and understanding from faculty and staff. Faculty that acknowledges and value the unique life experiences of ParentALs and encourage their contributions to classroom learning improve sense of belonging and strengthen classroom relationships (Giacalone, 2020).

Sharp and Dorrance Hall (2019) suggest that normalizing the barriers experienced by ParentALs will improve a supportive environment that recognizes the unique challenges, reduces stigma, and affirms the need for support resources for this population. Ascend at the Aspen Institute and The Jed Foundation (2021) also recommend that faculty and staff become comfortable asking students if they are parents, so that they may better understand their unique experiences and needs. Increasing faculty and staff understanding is key to shifting the culture to one where ParentALs are fully considered in policies and practices.

### **Technology-Enhanced Learning**

de Freitas et al. (2021) suggest that institutions of higher education must become more responsive to the needs of non-traditional students. Technology-enhanced personalized learning and student support services are key to adapting to the needs of ParentALs. Colleges and universities must take an institution-wide approach to utilize data to inform effective teaching and learning, student support, student engagement, and practices to positively influence persistence. Tracking data over time is essential to monitoring persistence and other indicators amongst vulnerable student populations (Goodman & Reddy, 2019; Pendleton & Atella, 2020;

Wagner et al., 2021). Institutions of higher education should develop a collaborative culture with a governance and human resources structure that can utilize data to effectively respond to diverse student sub-populations, attributes, behaviors, needs, and other persistence factors. A student-centered approach to data collection is necessary to develop adaptive and responsive practices that improve student experiences (de Freitas et al., 2021). Gaining the perspective of the ParentAL can help to inform best practices. The student perspective can help inform institutions of higher education in planning responsive online programming, access to student resources and library services, and other technology-enhanced student supports that ParentALs need real-time flexible access to (Eddinger, 2019).

Ascend at the Aspen Institute and The Jed Foundation (2021) provide recommendations about the use of asynchronous online course and technology such as Zoom® as a ParentAL strategy. Asynchronous online courses and access to student support resources are essential to meeting the scheduling needs of ParentALs (Ascend at the Aspen Institute and The Jed Foundation, 2021). Technology such as Zoom® may make faculty and staff more accessible to students. However, Ascend at the Aspen Institute and the Jed Foundation found that required synchronized Zoom® lectures and student orientations can cause hardship for ParentALs who are working and caring for their children during the synchronized time schedule. In contrast, they found that virtual office hours and encouragement to participate in optional study or information sessions can diminish feelings of isolation. Allowing ParentALs to asynchronously review virtual learning materials and review sessions provides much-needed flexibility and allowing students to rewatch recorded class sessions promotes opportunities for ParentALs to gain lessons missed while they were absent or focused on another responsibility (Ascend at the Aspen Institute and The Jed Foundation, 2021).

## **Combining Culture and Practice: A Two-Generation Approach**

Literature reveals that building a “family-friendly campus culture” (Ascend, 2018, p. 4) with policies and practices that embrace a whole-family approach improves persistence outcomes for ParentALs (Brown & Nichols, 2013; PERG, 2020; Sommer et al., 2018). When institutions understand and acknowledge the unique needs of their student populations, they can develop and implement meaningful practices to allow students to achieve their full potential. Nationwide, institutions of higher education, are updating policies and practices to promote the well-being of both students and their children through a two-generation approach (FrameWorks Institute, 2019, p. 9). A two-generation (2Gen) approach is focused on the interconnections of factors that influence outcomes for both parent and child (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014; He et al., 2019; Mosle & Sims, 2021; Sommer et al., 2018).

Ascend at the Aspen Institute has been at the forefront of developing the 2Gen approach and guiding principles since 2010 (Mosle & Sims, 2021). It is important to note that, according to the FrameWorks Institute (2019), the use of the term approach is intentional when discussing 2Gen practices. An approach represents both a mindset and a model useful in developing a framework to guide holistic support, thoughtful design, intentional coordination, and effective implementation and evaluation. The FrameWorks Institute describes the hallmark of a 2Gen approach to be the intentional, thorough, and simultaneous consideration of the challenges separating families from well-being. A 2Gen approach must reflect on the diverse barriers and needs and envision multiple ways to foster favorable outcomes. A 2Gen approach is multifaceted and is not established to simply remove barriers as they occur or provide financial hand-outs or hand-ups. Instead, a 2Gen approach is a means to deliberately design and systemically update policies, programs, strategies, and organizational cultures to align to a model that provides

opportunities for whole-families to develop skills and build social capital. A 2Gen approach seeks to transform the way people think about challenges related to poverty as a societal issue rather than problems resulting from the shortcomings of the individuals experiencing it.

A 2Gen approach leverages the power of college and community partnerships to focus on whole-family outcomes (Ascend, 2018; Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014; Sommer et al., 2018). A 2Gen approach minimizes a variety of logistical challenges by providing wrap-around services for ParentALs and their children (Sommer et al., 2018). Colleges should intentionally align campus, community, and workforce partnerships to streamline accessibility of resources, “braid and blend funding streams” (Ascend, 2018, p. 5), improve service delivery, and realize administrative efficiencies (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014; Sommer et al., 2018). A 2Gen approach reaches ParentALs where they are upon college enrollment and strives to provide a supportive environment that fosters the growth and wellness of both parents and children simultaneously (FrameWorks Institute, 2019). Ensuring opportunities to build social capital, maintain health and wellness, prepare for meaningful work, and achieve family stability unlocks a ParentAL’s ability to reach their full potential. A 2Gen approach supports ParentALs in persisting in college and earning credentials which results in reduced stress, improved mental health, and increased family income and prosperity (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). A 2Gen approach understands that students' challenges, needs, expectations, and life circumstances change over time (Bergman et al., 2014) and connects practices and resources to strengthen impact (FrameWorks Institute, 2019).

Bergman and Olson (2020) found that flexible and adaptable policies and practices and responsiveness from faculty and staff are key to empowering adult learners to persist through challenging life events and barriers to academic success. A 2Gen approach is one method to

intentionally develop a responsive and supportive organizational culture that leverages partnerships to provide resources and opportunities that simultaneously meet the needs of ParentALs and their children (Ascend, 2018; Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014). Supported by the theories of adult learner persistence (Bergman et al., 2014), the Terenzini and Reason framework (Reason, 2009), Role Theory (Markle, 2015), andragogy, transformational learning, and other adult learning theories (Cox, 2015), a 2Gen approach is an effective strategy to cultivate a supportive campus culture to promote resiliency, and boost student confidence (Cerven, 2013; Chase-Lansdale and Brooks-Gunn, 2014; Lovell, 2014). Effective 2Gen resources include financial support, advising, and coaching that is responsive to emergent student needs (Ascend, 2018; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Costello, 2014; Haleman, 2004; Lovell, 2014; Remenick, 2019). Cox (2015) applies andragogy and transformational learning to demonstrate the effectiveness of meaningful coaching experiences for adult learners. Andragogy is the process of supporting adult learners in drawing upon their own life experiences to create new learning (Cox, 2015). Andragogy implies that adult readiness to learn is connected to the perceived importance or relevance of the concept (e.g., employment credential and degree) to be studied. Cox described andragogy as based on the premise that adults are generally self-directed, connect new ideas to real-world problems, have a wealth of prior experience, are guided by goal-oriented intrinsic motivation, and may need to challenge pre-conceived ideas before adopting new viewpoints. Learning must be relevant to current needs or resolve a problem or uncertainty (Cox, 2015).

Dedicated and well-trained coaches are essential to a 2Gen approach as they connect students to resources, help build social capital, and promote persistence and transformational learning (Ascend, 2018; Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014; Cruse et al., 2019; FrameWorks

Institute, 2019; Sommer et al., 2018). Cox (2015) described transformative learning through a coaching approach that focuses on encouraging changes in cognitive reasoning. Transformative learning allows adult learners to continue to learn by making meaning from their own social experiences. The foundation of transformative learning theory is the belief that adult learners have preconceived “frames of reference, or meaning perspectives” (Cox, 2015, p. 32) based on values, beliefs, experiences, emotions, understandings, and conditioned responses that lead the learner to instinctively accept or reject ideas and/or behaviors. These presumptions, labels, habits of mind, expectations, learning styles, and unique methods of developing perceptions begin in childhood and continue through human development (Cox, 2015).

Higher education coaches may identify teachable moments and readiness to learn in students who experience a conflict, challenge, or contradiction in their understanding and/or ability to achieve a goal (Ancel et al., 2018; Cox, 2015). Coaches take these opportunities to support transformation through reflective learning phases, goal setting, and action planning. Cox (2015) describes coaching as the process of providing a safety net where students can assess, explore, and find meaning in their existing perceptions. Coaches may then support the student to challenge their perceptions and critically analyze and reflect on alternate views, behaviors, and potential actions. Gaining the ability to think outside the box is one of the key indicators of transformative learning. Motivated by a conflict, such as poor work-life balance, challenge, such as loss of income, or contradiction in their understanding and/or ability to achieve a goal, ParentALs, when given effective support, can engage in transformational learning. Cox demonstrated that an understanding of learning theory and student coaching and advising practice can help to understand the unique attributes of ParentALs and inform practice.

A variety of intrinsic and external factors influence adult learner outcomes (Archer et al. 2020; Bergman et al., 2014; Costello, 2014; Gault et al., 2020; Gomez, 2016; Shi, 2017; Lovell, 2014; Wladis et al., 2018). Student coaches, faculty, and advisors dedicated to supporting ParentALs help students to maximize their strengths, motivations, and goals while connecting students with the resources needed to overcome their specific barriers (Ancel et al., 2018; Markle, 2015; Reminick, 2019). Dedicated ParentAL coaches are essential to a 2Gen approach. Coaches connect students to institutional and community resources, help build social capital, and promote persistence (Ancel et al., 2018; Ascend, 2018; Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014; FrameWorks Institute, 2019; Sommer et al., 2018). Social capital may be described as positive reciprocal networks, connections, and relationships with people, resources, knowledge, and opportunities (FrameWorks Institute, 2019). Reciprocal student engagement and mentorship build social capital (Sommer et al., 2018). Social capital positively influences persistence, especially for underserved and/or at-risk students (Kirk and Lewis, 2015).

### **Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The long-term impacts of the pandemic on college enrollment and student success may continue to burden both students and institutions of higher education for the next decade or longer (Venit, E., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has caused lasting changes and significant challenges for both students and institutions of higher education (The Hope Center, 2021). Higher education enrollment, retention, and FAFSA completion rates have been reduced (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021; The Hope Center, 2021). Student and faculty stress and anxiety have increased (Son et al., 2020; The Hope Center, 2021). According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, community colleges experienced the greatest decline in students with a 15% enrollment

reduction from fall 2019 to fall 2021. Foster (2022) found that ParentALs were amongst the most greatly impacted by the pandemic. While tuition, housing, and ancillary services revenue continued to decline in the months after the start of the pandemic, necessary pandemic-related expenses continue to fiscally challenge institutions of higher education (Whitford, 2021). A fall 2020 survey conducted by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU; 2020) found that 75% of institutions indicated that COVID-19 pandemic-related expenses continued to exceed their budgetary estimates during the fall semester. According to NAICU (2020), COVID-19 testing, technology, and other pandemic-related expenses will continue to burden colleges and universities in the foreseeable future. Students may remain in heightened demand for funding for basic and emergent needs and mental health services (NAICU, 2020).

### **Exacerbated Basic Needs Insecurities**

Persisting in higher education is extremely challenging for ParentALs, and the COVID-19 pandemic has made it even more trying (Goldrick-Rab et al., (2021). ParentALs are often socio-economically disadvantaged (St. Amour, 2020) and indicate basic needs insecurity, including food and housing, as a primary factor for their persistence vulnerability (The Hope Center, 2021). ParentALs express uncertainty about their next meal, concern for feeding their children and families, and exasperation over having to choose between food, heat, and transportation to attend courses and/or field practicums. Supporting the basic needs of all students has become even more complex since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (The Hope Center, 2021). The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (2021) conducted a #RealCollege survey of 32,560 ParentALs enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education during the fall of 2020. 75% of the ParentAL respondents were enrolled in a two-

year college and 97% were enrolled in a public two- or four-year college or university (Kienzl et al., 2022). The survey found that most ParentALs face basic needs insecurity including food and/or housing insecurity. While the percentage of all students experiencing basic needs insecurity has remained at approximately 60% in each of the six years of #RealCollege surveys conducted by the Hope Center, the overall percentage of ParentALs experiencing basic needs insecurities in the fall 2020 semester was 12 percentage points greater than students without children. The Hope Center's #RealCollege survey found that 70% of all ParentALs experienced basic needs insecurities. However, challenges in meeting basic needs were exacerbated amongst single ParentALs with a child under the age of six. 86% of single, female, ParentALs, with one or more children under the age of six, reported having experienced basic needs insecurities in the fall 2020 semester. The #RealCollege survey found that 60% of ParentALs experienced food insecurity in the 30 days prior to the survey and 34% experienced reduced pay and/or employment hours because of the pandemic. 24% reported losing a job (Kienzl et al., 2022).

### **Higher Education Emergency Relief Funding**

Despite drastic financial barriers and shifts in learning instruction and delivery, caused by the pandemic, institutions of higher education offered to support their students (The Hope Center, 2021). The Hope Center found that community colleges were best equipped with pre-existing institutional resources and support for their students facing basic needs insecurities. Within a few weeks of the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress initiated an unprecedented approach to supporting students enrolled in higher education. On March 27, 2020, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) became law, providing \$14 billion as the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF I) for

institutions of higher education response efforts (CARES Act, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The CARES Act of 2020 required that institutions of higher education disburse a significant share of the funds directly to students as student emergency relief grants to offset the costs experienced during the disruption of campus operations in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. On December 27, 2020, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2020 (CRRSAA) became law, providing \$22.7 billion as the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF II) for institutions of higher education COVID-19 response (Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

On March 11, 2021, the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARP) became law providing an additional \$39.6 billion as the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF III) for institutions of higher education COVID-19 response efforts (American Rescue Plan Act, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). As of March 2021, HEERF funds for institutions of higher education and their students total more than \$76 billion. Student emergency relief grants funded through CRRSAA and ARP (HEERF II and III), were permitted to be used for any component of a student's higher education enrollment or emergent needs related to the COVID-19 pandemic such as food, housing, childcare, and health and mental health care (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The Hope Center (2021) found that emergency grants played an important role in student persistence. However, ineffective communication, misinformation, eligibility factors, and other barriers prevented the emergent need funds to be accessed by all students (The Hope Center, 2021).

### **Exacerbated Role Conflict**

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the loss of employment for many students enrolled in higher education (The Hope Center, 2021). One-third of U.S. mothers aged 25-44 left employment because the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted their children's school and childcare (Heggeness & Fields, 2020). School and daycare closings and the shift to remote learning intensified the role conflict of ParentALs (Dill, 2020; The Hope Center, 2021). The Hope Center (2021) found that 75% of ParentALs reported spending at least 40 hours per week caring for a child during the fall 2020 semester. Amongst, community college students, ParentALs may have been the most impacted by COVID-19 as "parents are among the unsung heroes of this crisis. They have adapted their households and juggled work, children's schooling, and other household needs" (Heggeness & Fields, 2020, para. 13).

Most ParentALs are employed while completing a degree and raising a family (Foster, 2022; Rothwell, 2021). Many are employed as frontline workers such as certified nursing assistants and medical assistants seeking to upskill their employability by earning a nursing or other healthcare credentialed degree. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified the intensity of employment and parenting responsibilities for front-line workers, leading many ParentALs to reduce or stop their education (Dill, 2020). A sense of belonging may be diminished in online courses. The COVID-19 pandemic caused changes in student and instructor interactions. ParentALs may consider dropping a course due to changes in student-instructor communication, the need to learn (or purchase) a new technology, or an increased feeling of being overwhelmed by competing demands and uncertainties (Dill, 2020; St. Amour, 2020). According to Dill (2020), adult learners tend to pause their education more than traditional students when feeling overwhelmed by role conflict due to their tendency to place value on a

high GPA. The Hope Center (2021) conducted a fall 2020 survey of more than 6,400 students enrolled in associate, bachelor's, or certificate programs at an institution of higher education. The survey found that 37% of ParentALs considered leaving their educational program due to childcare responsibilities. 27% of ParentALs considered leaving due to the cost of attendance, 25% due to COVID-19, 24% due to a new job, and 17% considered leaving due to emotional stress (The Hope Center, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased stress and anxiety for ParentALs as well as their concerns about affording housing and food (Lin et al., 2021). Heggeness and Fields (2020) found that mothers were significantly more burdened with these pandemic-related concerns than fathers. Alon et al. (2020) found that mothers, and particularly single mothers, are more negatively impacted than fathers because of childcare and school closures and pandemic-related challenges. Further, mothers will be more likely to experience longer-term loss of income, less secure future employment, and barriers to career advancement due to pandemic-related school, childcare, and workforce changes. Kashen et al. (2020) found that the role of mother and the need to leave or reduce work to care for a child(ren) during the pandemic will negatively impact short- and long-term income, retirement security, and gender equity. Kashen et al. suggest that the disproportionately negative effects of the pandemic for mothers will negatively impact families, communities, and post-pandemic economic recovery and may reverse 25 years of maternal workforce and gender equity progress. However, practices to retain ParentALs to degree or credential completion can help to mitigate some of the pandemic-influenced setbacks by increasing opportunities for better employment and higher wages (Foster, 2022).

## **Pandemic Lessons Learned**

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified persistence challenges among ParentALs (Foster, 2022; Kienzl et al., 2022; Rothwell, 2021). The experiences of ParentALs during the COVID-19 pandemic should incite a call to action for institutions of higher education to seek to increase efforts to support the persistence of this underserved student population (Foster, 2022). Rothwell (2021) suggests that institutions of higher education do more to serve the unique needs of ParentALs. ParentALs must be identified, recognized, and supported in a way that increases their sense of belonging and purpose (Kienzl et al., 2022). Data and shared student experiences can inform understanding and intentional practices that are responsive to ParentAL needs for flexible scheduling, structured and efficient pathways, effective and supportive communication, and access to resources such as affordable childcare, emergent need scholarships and grants, and mental health services (Foster, 2022; Rothwell, 2021). Longitudinal data on ParentALs may help institutions of higher learning to better understand this population's persistence response to significant events such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Gault et al., 2020). Institutions of higher education must identify and track information on ParentALs, disaggregated by race, gender, and other factors that may influence persistence. ParentALs must be included in diversity and equity and inclusion efforts to identify the intersectional student persistence barriers such as low-income, first-generation status, and/or structural racism (Kienzl et al., 2022). Institutions of higher education should see the lessons learned during the pandemic as an opportunity to recognize barriers to student persistence with an urgency necessary to resolve gaps in student engagement, mental health, academic pathways, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (Venit, 2022).

## Summary

Chapter 2 presented the conceptual framework that guided this study and a review of the literature. The literature review revealed connections between the lived experiences of ParentALs and their persistence (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). However, the need for further research (Reason, 2009; Markle, 2015), increased understanding and improved data collection (Ascend, 2018; Gault et al., 2019) became apparent as authors describe the ParentAL population as *invisible* (Chen, 2017; Generation Hope, 2020; Pendleton & Atella, 2020; Wladis et al., 2018), *understudied* (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Reed et al., 2021), and *underrepresented* (Archer et al., 2020; Gault et al., 2020; Lin et al., 202). The unique experiences and perceptions of ParentALs must be understood to improve persistence outcomes for both students and institutions of higher education (Pendleton & Atella, 2020).

Bergman et al.'s (2014) theory of adult learner persistence guided the study and demonstrated that a student's college entry characteristics (e.g., parental education, prior college experience, educational goals and motivations, children, marital status, income, etcetera), the external environment (e.g., finances, family support, employment, etcetera), and internal campus and academic factors (e.g., enrollment status, GPA, institutional support, financial aid, etcetera) may have a direct influence on persistence amongst adult learners. This knowledge may help to inform practices that respond to the unique characteristics of ParentALs such as credit for prior learning, flexible and/or asynchronous course scheduling, and on-campus childcare.

Reason's (2009) Terenzini and Reason framework recognized that student persistence may be influenced by the individual's experiences, environment, and motivation. This framework helps to demonstrate how intentional goal setting and understanding diversity in

student characteristics, background experiences, and sociodemographic traits are connected to postsecondary persistence.

Persistence is one of the most pressing concerns in postsecondary education (Bergman et al., 2014; Burke, 2019; Tinto, 2012). In this study, persistence was defined as a student's continuous degree progress from the first year to completion through subsequent years of enrollment (Bergman et al., 2014; Tinto, 2017a). The literature review revealed how the unique lived experiences of ParentALs may influence their persistence. A focus was placed on the experiences of participants enrolled in community colleges, as ParentALs are more likely to enroll at a community college (Wladis et al., 2018; Institute for Women's Policy Research & Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2019). The literature also highlighted scalable resources that demonstrate high rates of return on investment when made available to ParentALs. Such resources included childcare, student coaching, also described as case management, dedicated financial aid, and policies, practices, and supports that empower a ParentAL to earn an associate degree or higher credential (Reichlin Cruse, Milli et al., 2019).

Developing a student's sense of belonging by recognizing ParentAL's unique and intersectional experiences, characteristics, and needs (Sharp & Dorrance Hall, 2019) and offering a variety of opportunities to be included and engaged in the college environment was revealed to be of importance (Generation Hope, 2020). Opportunities to build a connection with peers, faculty, and staff and to engage in practices that reduce stress and build confidence help ParentALs to build social capital, improve well-being, and increase the likeliness to persist (Tinto, 2006; Tinto, 2017b; Giacalone, 2020; Goodman & Reddy, 2019; Generation Hope, 2020; Naylor et al., 2018).

Finally, the literature reviewed demonstrated the importance of understanding how events and unanticipated circumstances, such as the COVID-19 global pandemic may specifically influence ParentAL persistence. This understanding may help to inform practices that attempt to minimize the negative effects of role conflict, financial insecurities, and stress to establish a postsecondary environment that promotes persistence. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology for this study.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The importance of student persistence to student and institutional outcomes is well articulated in higher education research (Bergman et al., 2014; Tinto, 2012) yet ParentALs are less likely to persist to degree completion than their non-parenting peers (Generation Hope, 2020; Wladis, 2018). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of ParentALs enrolled in United States community colleges. This study addressed the challenge that community college faculty, staff, and leaders may be uninformed of the unique challenges and experiences that influence the postsecondary persistence of ParentALs (Chen, 2017; Noll et al., 2017; Pendleton & Atella, 2020). This study contributed to the improved understanding of how unique challenges and perceptions experienced by ParentALs may influence their persistence in two-year postsecondary education. Increased understanding may lead to better-informed policy, practice, and planning efforts by community college faculty, staff, and leaders.

Chapter 3 describes the research design, site, participants, instrumentation, data collection and analysis, limitations, delimitations, ethical issues, and trustworthiness. This study examined how the lived experiences of six ParentALs enrolled in community colleges may have influenced their persistence. Participants were required to have completed some courses in their program. This ensured their ability to draw from their own experiences and perceptions related to their persistence in their current degree program.

This researcher selected the theory of adult learner persistence (Bergman et al., 2014; Braxton et al., 2004) as a lens to develop the conceptual framework for this study. The theory of adult learner persistence demonstrated how entry characteristics and internal campus, and academic factors may have a generalized influence on adult learner persistence (Bergman et al.,

2014). Additionally, one interconnected theory was utilized to develop a theoretical framework to study the conditions, circumstances, and experiences that influence persistence among ParentALs. The Terenzini and Reason framework denotes how a student's pre-college background characteristics and experiences influence their learning and persistence outcomes (Reason, 2009). The data collected in this study was analyzed through the scope of the conceptual and theoretical framework.

The design of this qualitative phenomenological study and semi-structured interview guide was developed after a review of literature on the topic of ParentALs enrolled in postsecondary education. This literature review intended to present a broad examination of published research related to the topic of study. This literature review provided an account of research related to persistence in postsecondary education in the United States. It is important to note that, when conducting the literature review, three themes emerged as important topics related to this study in understanding the experiences influencing the persistence of ParentALs. Theme one describes the identity of the ParentAL. Theme two illustrates the characteristics and intersectionality of factors, experiences, and perceptions that may influence ParentAL persistence in postsecondary education. Theme three highlights practices that support ParentAL persistence.

This study recognized that participants would have some generalizable attributes related to the adult learner persistence theory (Bergman et al., 2014). However, the interviews investigated the uniqueness of ParentALs as a student sub-population, distinct from both traditional students and non-traditional non-parenting students. The study gathered information from this understudied population to explore if students perceive that they are well supported and/or marginalized in institutional culture, policies, practices, and experiences. While research

demonstrates that ParentALs tend to have a higher GPA than non-parenting students (Wladis et al., 2018), this study sought to identify factors that make this population less likely to persist to degree completion. This study investigated the participants' lived experiences, including the supportive factors that foster ParentAL persistence. Interview questions addressed the literature gaps by gaining the ParentAL perspective of pre-college background and entry characteristics, motivations for enrolling in higher education and earning a degree, responsibilities and role conflict, institutional culture, college policies, practices, resources, barriers, and experiences, and other factors that may encourage or discourage their persistence. Forman et al. (2008) suggested that interview studies provide rich opportunities to collect comprehensive holistic data highlighting the perspectives of interviewees which bring a sense of realism and importance to the research. It was important to this researcher that the participant's voices were heard throughout the interview study. Ascend at the Aspen Institute (2018) found that lived experiences of the parenting student perspective encouraged institutions of higher education to improve understanding of ParentAL experiences and needs. Inclusion of the ParentAL student voice is anticipated to strengthen understanding and improve policy and practice development.

As of 2023, this study investigated a current problem in higher education is a lack of understanding about the lived experiences of ParentALs enrolled in community colleges. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of ParentALs enrolled in community colleges in the United States. Examined through the lens of the theory of adult learner persistence (Bergman et al., 2014; Braxton et al., 2004) and analyzed through the Terenzini and Reason framework (Reason, 2009) this study answered the following question:

Research Question One: What are the lived experiences of parenting adult learners in community colleges?

### **Site Information and Demographics**

To investigate the lived experiences of ParentALs enrolled in community college, participants were recruited via social media. The study did not focus on one community college, or represent one unique site, but instead explored the experiences and perceptions of participants enrolled in three public two-year United States community colleges. Interview data was collected from second-year undergraduate ParentAL students to explore the participants' lived experiences and perceptions related to the factors which may have influenced their community college experience. The broad eligibility criteria to recruit participants from any community college was chosen to represent a larger cross-sectional analysis of undergraduate student experiences and perceptions. The participants represented in the study were each enrolled in a public, two-year, community college but variances exist in participant characteristics and enrolled college characteristics, e.g., geographic location, urban/rurality, enrollment size, primary enrollment type (commuter versus residential), average student age, institutional culture, range of degree programs offered, approach to identifying and tracking ParentALs, and persistence resources offered to all students, and/or specifically to ParentALs.

### **Participants and Sampling Method**

The participant population was six qualified ParentALs enrolled in a two-year United States community college. Volunteer research participants were recruited through social media networking (Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn). Qualifying participants met the following inclusion criteria:

- over the age of 18 and has one or more dependent children residing in the household,

- enrolled in an associate degree program at a two-year public US community college,
- enrolled in six or more credits in the current semester of study,
- have completed 24 or more course credits towards the current degree program.

It was important, to this researcher, to interview students that had enough college experience to thoroughly develop perceptions related to the factors that influence their persistence. Twenty-four credits completed is the equivalent to one full year of FAFSA-determined full-time enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Participants were enrolled either full-time or part-time during the semester of the interview. This researcher planned to randomly select participants from the list of qualified ParentALs that responded to the recruitment. However, ten potential participants expressed interest and only six confirmed an interview appointment time. Once the six interview appointments were completed, this researcher sent the remaining four respondents an email that thanked them for their interest and informed them that this researcher's recruitment had been completed. The study was limited due to the voluntary self-reporting nature of participant selection and data collection. The study was potentially limited by the researcher's unintentional bias which was mitigated through a bracketing process to exclude the researcher's preconceived ideas and judgments (Dorfler & Stierand, 2020).

Recruitment did not begin until the proposed Institutional Review Board (IRB) exempt research study was approved by the University of New England's IRB (Appendix A). After approval, social media outlets (Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn) were utilized to recruit voluntary participants. Recruitment text (Appendix B) and images posted on social media identified the purpose of the study and the criteria for participation. Utilizing social media expanded the reach of recruitment efforts and provided the study with diverse representation of

lived experiences amongst participants. The social media recruitment posts (Appendix B) instructed interested participants on how to contact this researcher. After participant eligibility was confirmed, this researcher emailed recruitment respondents with the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C) and offered a selection of dates and times to schedule an interview. This researcher maintained a separate master list to record participants name, email address, and college affiliation for recruitment purposes. This researcher sent participants a reminder email within 48 hours before the scheduled interview with the time, date, and Zoom® link.

### **Instrumentation and Data Collection**

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological methodology to examine the lived experiences of ParentALs enrolled in two-year community colleges. Inductive data analysis of interviews was conducted to explore the perceptions of adult participants. This researcher developed an open-ended semi-structured interview guide (Appendix D). The data collected allow this researcher to draw comparisons between the literature review and theoretical framework and the challenges study participants describe they perceive to influence postsecondary persistence while parenting. This researcher utilized Zoom® to conduct interviews with six voluntary adult participants. Each interview was completed in approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews occurred over a period of seven weeks. This researcher reviewed the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C) with the participants before asking interview questions. This researcher received the participant's verbal permission to record the audio and begin the interview before asking interview questions. Participants provided pseudonyms for their own name and the name of their college to protect their identity. Pseudonyms were used throughout the interview and transcriptions. This researcher was in a secured location with her camera on so that participants could confirm the secured location.

Interview audio and video was recorded. However, participants were not required to have their cameras on. This researcher stored all interview recordings and notes on a password-protected laptop computer that only this researcher has access to. The interviews were transcribed verbatim via Otter.ai®. Transcription and coding were saved in a folder separate from the study narrative. Participants were given the right to skip or not answer any question, for any reason including questions regarding socioeconomic, demographic, academic, and/or other topics that may seem sensitive or personal. In conducting member checking, participants were asked to review their interview transcript and respond to confirm the accuracy or to clarify/correct inaccuracies. Each participant was provided with seven calendar days to conduct member checking. This researcher accepted each transcript as verified as-is after the eight-day participant review period if the participant did not respond. The Master list and audio and video recordings were destroyed after all the participants had the opportunity to review their interview transcripts for accuracy. Interview transcriptions were deleted after coding. All other data will be deleted three years after the conclusion of the study.

### **Selection of Semi-Structured Interview Methodology**

The literature review provided generalizable theories, concepts, and understandings regarding broad and intersecting factors which influence the persistence of non-traditional adult learners, including ParentALs. However, this study intended to investigate the lived experiences of ParentALs and collect accounts of their experiences and perceptions in as much depth as possible. This researcher has experience utilizing focus groups and surveys to college data related to higher education interventions and outcomes; both were considered potential data collection tools in this study. However, this researcher believed that semi-structured interviews are the most appropriate for this effort to interact with participants in a manner that allowed unanticipated responses to emerge and be explored in an exchange between researcher and participant(s).

Semi-structured interviews allowed this researcher to explore the participant's perspective by utilizing a pre-planned but flexible interview guide informed by theories, concepts, and themes revealed in the literature review. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2, The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice #RealCollege Survey (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020), the Generation Hope (2020) survey, the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) interview study (Contreras-Mendez & Reichlin Cruse, 2021), the IWPR Survey of Women in Mississippi's Community Colleges (Hess et al., 2014), and the Family Friendly Campus Toolkit Student Survey (PERG, 2020) served to inform the interview questions (Appendix D).

A qualitative interview data collection approach is described by Creswell (2012) as best suited for vulnerable topics and allowing participants to respond or comment beyond the primary questions. Semi-structured interviews conducted with a diverse but purposeful selection of participants with intimate, first-hand, current experience as ParentALs enrolled in public community colleges further aimed to uncover the multifaceted layers of factors that may influence ParentAL persistence (Frechette et al., 2020). This researcher utilized one-on-one qualitative semi-structured interview questions (Appendix D) to invite open-ended responses from individual voluntary participants. The interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom®. Although participants were permitted to keep their video cameras off during the interview, the automatically generated interview recording allowed this researcher to focus on the primary questions and probing follow-up prompts rather than taking detailed notes throughout the interview. While the order and specific word choice of the questions varied somewhat with each interview, this researcher ensured that each participant was asked key questions informed by the interview guide. The selected methodology allowed this researcher to deploy questions in a way that encouraged conversation and information sharing in a more conversational way to allow the

participants' experiences and perceptions to naturally emerge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In contrast, a survey would have limited the study to the themes and concepts already known or anticipated to be influential to the participant population. This researcher believed that semi-structured interviews would position her to "discover reasons for observed patterns, especially the invisible or surprising ones" (Busetto et al., 2020, p. 1).

### **Data Analysis**

Phenomenological research is a qualitative method that allows the researcher to "identify the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by the participants" (Creswell, 2009, p. 30). Phenomenology is concerned with the lived experiences of the participants. This researcher employed an inductive approach to the research. According to Creswell, inductive researchers form data gathered from participants into themes to be explored for patterns and developed into higher levels of abstractions that are compared with the conceptual and theoretical framework and literature review.

Adapting from Creswell's (2009) inductive research model, this researcher examined the background of the phenomenon by conducting a literature review that examines the concepts and theories relating to the lived experiences of ParentALs enrolled in community college. Then, this researcher collected interview data related to the participants' lived experiences. This researcher then analyzed the data to form themes and compared the developing themes and patterns with the literature review. The interview data was analyzed and coded at the word and sentence level utilizing both manual coding techniques and the qualitative analysis software MaxQDA®.

A thematic framework analysis was selected as the coding method. The grounded theory method (GTM) was considered. However, Urquhart (2012) states that GTM cannot be conducted if the researcher utilizes concepts from the literature to predetermine qualitative data codes.

Urquhart provided the thematic framework analysis as a coding method that is informed by both the literature review and ideas and themes that emerge from the data collected. Braun and Clarke (2006) and King (2004) present the thematic framework analysis as an effective means to explore the perspectives of research participants, recognize commonalities and variances, and identify unexpected insights. King suggested that a thematic framework analysis provides an effective means to develop a reader-friendly depiction of the data interpretation. King suggested that a researcher begin their analysis with a few key predetermined codes (e.g., from the literature review themes). However, researchers must be open to identifying data that may conflict with predetermined codes or assumptions (King, 2004, Nowell et al., 2017). The conceptual and theoretical framework and themes from the literature review helped the researcher code and analyze the data. However, the researcher was mindful of new ideas or themes that emerge as the coding analysis informed a descriptive theory of the data patterns.

These initial index codes and memos formed the foundation for analytic codes that was analyzed across all interview transcripts and notes (Deterding & Waters, 2018). New codes were added, and notes were applied as novel data and/or discrepancies emerged. A hierarchical coding frame was developed to group coded data elements into themes to be integrated into the description of the results. In conducting member checking, participants were asked to review a verbatim interview transcript and respond to confirm the accuracy or to clarify/correct inaccuracies. Participants were given seven days to review and respond to the transcript. After eight days, this researcher proceeded with the transcript analysis of participants who did not respond. Finally, this researcher developed and propose findings that may be generalizable to ParentALs enrolled in community college.

## **Limitations, Delimitations, Ethical Issues**

Limitations of a research study depict the factors that may undermine the results or diminish the interpretation of the results (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2015). Limitations exist in all research studies. However, a researcher must guard against risk by thoughtfully acknowledging and listing potential limitations. The stated delimitations provide clarity concerning the scope of this study. This section serves to remind the reader of the specific context of this study and may help to inform decisions about the study's applicability to other settings and/or circumstances.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study may be related to the qualitative semi-structured interview methodology choice. Interview studies do not preserve the anonymity of participants in the same manner as questionnaires and online surveys (Creswell, 2012). Further, interview researchers may also knowingly or unknowingly demonstrate bias through body language or commentary. These two factors may have influenced participant responses and/or comfort in sharing personal information. To reduce potential bias and/or leading questions prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher developed a semi-structured interview guide and reviewed key interview questions with two colleagues experienced in working with the ParentAL population in addition to the research advisors. This aimed to ensure the questions were worded in an unbiased manner toward the student population and to ensure that the student participants' voice was well articulated in the study data. The study design was exploratory and non-experimental in design, limiting risk. The open-ended nature of the semi-structured interview questions (Appendix D) allowed richer qualitative discovery and analysis of themes that may not have been predicted by this researcher.

This researcher has experience working with this student population. Further, this researcher completed multiple undergraduate and graduate-level degrees and certificates as a ParentAL. This researcher is a devoted educator, student advisor, higher education administrator, and workforce and community development steward with over 23 years of progressively responsible experience in community college teaching, program and curriculum development, fundraising and grant writing, project management, budgeting and finance, and community partnership development. As a community and higher education leader, this researcher has supported colleges and community partners in identifying, understanding, and solving the unique challenges of ParentALs and other student population groups.

### **Delimitations**

The delimitations of this study included the narrow scope of the participant selection process. In the United States, more than one of every five college students are parenting (Institute for Women's Policy Research & Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2019). Although nearly four million undergraduate students are ParentALs, researchers have described this group as the most invisible in higher education (Chen, 2017; Generation Hope, 2020; Lin et al., 2021; Noll et al., 2017; Pendleton & Atella, 2020; Wladis et al., 2018). This study began to address the challenge that higher education institutions, faculty, and staff are uninformed of the unique factors that influence the persistence of ParentALs. Although ParentALs are a significant enrolled population in all higher education types, the participants selected in this study were undergraduates enrolled in public two-year community colleges located in the United States. This study takes one step forward in Tinto's (2017b) recommendation that the student perspective is emphasized when studying higher education persistence. Future studies may seek

to gain the perspectives of ParentALs enrolled in public four-year institutions of higher education or private colleges and/or universities, and/or ParentALs enrolled in graduate study.

### **Ethical Issues**

It was important, to this researcher, and the integrity of this study, that the research be conducted ethically with careful consideration of the participants' values, beliefs, experiences, confidence, and trust. This study adhered to *The Belmont Report* which outlines ethical principles, applications, and guidelines for research involving human subjects (The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C) before agreeing to the interview appointment. By accepting and attending the appointment, participants acknowledged consent. The Participant Information Sheet informed participants that their engagement is voluntary and that there were no anticipated risks related to their participation. Participants were informed that pseudonyms would replace their names to remove individual identifiers from the research results. Participants were informed that their interview responses would be held confidential and only made available to those directly involved in the research study (this researcher, this researcher's three dissertation advisors, and the UNE's IRB). The Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C) informed participants that they may remove themselves from the study at any time, prior to completion of the interview and transcript review, by informing this researcher. All research data was secured by this researcher and stored electronically with password protection on this researcher's computer which only the researcher has access to. The master list was stored separately from interview data within the password protected computer.

### **Trustworthiness**

According to Nowell et al. (2017), it is the researcher's culpability to ensure rigor and trustworthiness. The researcher must demonstrate trustworthiness as "the trustworthiness of results is the bedrock of high-quality qualitative research" (Birt et al., 2016, p. 1802). Trustworthiness adds to the legitimacy of the research and is necessary for persuading readers to become familiar with the research and to place recommendations into practice (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Nowell et al., 2017). Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed trustworthiness criteria for qualitative research. They require a trustworthy researcher to demonstrate credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

#### **Credibility**

Credibility is realized when the researcher, participants, and readers can recognize a phenomenon within the study when confronted by a like experience or set of factors (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility addresses the alignment between the participant's lived experiences and perspectives and the researcher's interpretation and expression of them (Nowell et al., 2017; Tobin & Begley, 2004). Credibility provides confidence in the research and the portrayal of data analysis and interpretation. Thematic data coding and analysis, triangulation, a reflexive audit trail, and member checking are efforts that the researcher utilized to ensure credibility in this study (Nowell et al., 2017).

#### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the generalizability of the research (Nowell et al., 2017). The researcher was not responsible for predicting who may wish to transfer information or findings related to the study. However, this researcher was responsible for providing rich descriptions to inform a visualization of the study so that readers may judge the transferability (Lincoln & Guba,

1985). To promote transferability, this researcher completed a robust literature review enriched by rich descriptions of the participants' shared lived experiences and perceptions of factors that may influence ParentAL persistence. Narrative summation, participant interview excerpts, and visual representations (figures and tables) were designed to aid the reader in achieving understanding and determining transferability.

### **Dependability**

This researcher's audit trail documents the data, analysis, interpretations, decisions, and rationale that this researcher employed to prepare and present this study may be provided if requested. The audit trail is a collection of the researcher notes, and member-checking results that led to the development of codes and themes, rationale for interpretations, and the portrayal of findings and recommendations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The audit trail may provide a foundation for which further, or similar, study can be validated for accuracy and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is achieved when credibility, transferability, and dependability are established (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This researcher conducted triangulation to test data interpretations and the development of themes and concepts for corroboration and/or disconfirming evidence between the theoretical and conceptual framework, literature review, and participant interviews (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The audit trail and thorough description of the methodology contained in this chapter are intended to lead the reader to realize the confirmability of the study.

## Summary

Chapter 3 described the research methodology, data collection and coding practices, and consideration of participants' rights and potential limitations of the study. Guided by the literature review and theoretical and conceptual framework, this study took an inductive research approach to compare, contrast, and fill in the gaps between current literature, theory, and practice and the shared lived experiences of the study participants. The theory of adult learner persistence provided a lens to identify student entry characteristics and institutional factors that may have a generalized influence on adult learner persistence (Bergman, 2012; Bergman et al., 2014; Bergman & Olson, 2020; Braxton et al., 2004)). Reason's (2009) Terenzini and Reason Framework Data gave focus to identifying how the participant's pre-college background characteristics and experiences influence their persistence outcomes.

Participants were adult volunteers enrolled in community college while raising dependent children at the time of the study. This researcher believes the participant voice to be vital to increasing the understanding of the multifaceted and interconnected factors that may influence the persistence of ParentALs enrolled in community college. Analysis of the data collected from the participants helped to inform understanding of how lived experiences including student background characteristics, the external environment, and internal campus and academic factors may influence ParentAL persistence (Bergman et al., 2014). Analysis increased the understanding of how juggling multiple responsibilities, role conflict, and barriers unique to ParentALs may influence their college experience (Gault et al., 2020; MacDonald, 2018; Markle, 2015). This study allowed this researcher to develop a holistic account to articulate the complexity of the multifaceted interconnected factors that may influence ParentAL persistence in community college. Evaluating the data collected from interviews exploring the lived

experiences of ParentALs with the information gathered in the literature review allowed this researcher to reveal and describe the many aspects connected to ParentAL persistence. The results may be generalized to inform understanding, policies, practices, and awareness amongst institutions of higher education, especially community colleges. The following chapter 4 presents the results and findings of this study.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of parenting adult learners (ParentALs) enrolled in United States community colleges. Six parenting ParentALs attending community colleges participated in the study to examine the lived experiences of ParentALs enrolled in public two-year community colleges in the United States. The research design employed for this study utilized semi-structured interviews to examine the participants' lived experiences. The qualitative approach to this research study was designed to develop an understanding of the perspectives of study participants about their experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018), specifically concerning their perspectives as ParentALs enrolled in community college. Inductive analysis of the qualitative interview data allowed this researcher to identify how and if the participants' shared experiences compared to the concepts, theories, challenges, and supportive practices discussed in the literature review. This researcher was mindful to be cognizant of novel data and themes that emerged during the analysis.

### **Analysis Method**

Interview data was collected and recorded via Zoom®, the transcripts were transcribed verbatim via Otter.ai®, and the interview data were coded and analyzed using MAXQDA Analytics Pro®. The interviews were recorded after this researcher received verbal consent from each participant. The open-ended nature of the interview protocol enabled participants to engage in conversational language, elaborating on their own lived experiences and perceptions of how their experiences may influence their community college persistence in a manner that yielded rich data.

Coding occurred initially at the individual transcript level. Codes were edited, and additional codes were added throughout the data clustering and code mapping process. This

researcher validated the results with the theoretical framework and literature review.

Dependability was established through triangulation to determine that the results were consistent with the concepts and theories discussed in the literature review. Transferability and credibility were established when the shared lived experiences of the participants resulted in data that confirmed the theory of adult learner persistence (Bergman, 2012; Bergman et al., 2014; Bergman & Olson, 2020; Braxton et al., 2004) and the Terenzini and Reason framework (Reason, 2009).

### **Presentation of Results and Findings**

The semi-structured interviews were completed in November 2022 through January 2023 with six adult learners that were currently enrolled in a public community college degree program while raising one or more dependent children. Due to an initially slow recruitment process, this researcher received University of New England Institutional Review Board approval (Appendix E) to include community college graduates who graduated between 2018 through 2022 in participant selection. However, all six participants were enrolled in community college at the time of the interview. This researcher found an increased interest and availability of potential participants during the winter break when participants were not conflicted by an academic course schedule and thus five of the six interviews were conducted in late December 2022 or early January 2023. The participants met the qualifications listed on the Participation Information Sheet (Appendix C) and represented three unique community colleges and four associate degree program majors (Early Childhood Education, Nursing, Physical Therapy Assistant, and Psychology). Each participant had completed at least twenty-four course credits toward their current degree. Five of the six participants referenced having postsecondary

education experience prior to their current community college degree enrollment. Each participant identified as female.

### **Thematic Analysis of Interview Data**

This researcher employed an inductive approach to organizing the data collected from the interviews into themes that were explored for patterns that were compared with the literature review (Creswell, 2009). Inductive data maps and clusters helped this researcher to organize, compare, and contrast data and then describe the results through the conceptual framework lens of the theory of adult learner persistence (Bergman et al., 2014) which is grounded on the premise that entry characteristics (e.g., prior college experience, educational motivations, children, marital status, etcetera), the external environment (e.g., finances, family support, employment, etcetera.), and internal campus and academic factors (e.g., enrollment status, GPA, institutional support, financial aid, etcetera) may have a direct influence on adult learner persistence.

#### **Theme 1: The Identity of the Parenting Adult Learner**

The first theme that emerged helped to demonstrate the identity of ParentALs and depicts characteristics and factors that lead them to experience postsecondary education differently than traditional and non-parenting students (Hubbard, 2019). Table 1 introduces the participant group and orients the reader to their enrollment, course delivery, employment status, and their program major.

#### **Table 1**

*Participant Group*

Participant Name (Pseudonym)	Enrollment Status (At the time of the Interview)	Primary Course Methodology	Employed (Or Self-Employed)	Program Major	Highest Level of Education
Allison	Full-Time	Online	Yes	Psychology	Associate Degree
Katie	Part-Time	Online	Yes	Early Childhood Education	Bachelor's Degree
Lorrie	Full-Time	On-Campus	No	Nursing	High School Diploma
Madison	Full-Time	Online	Yes	Early Childhood Education	Some college, no degree
Patience	Part-Time	On-Campus	No	Early Childhood Education	Master's in Business Administration
Shelby	Full-Time	On-Campus	Yes	Physical Therapy Assistant	Some college, no degree

*Note:* This table displays factors related to the identity of the participant group.

Table 2 illustrates the participants' entry characteristics.

**Table 2**

*Participant Entry Characteristics*

Participant Entry Characteristics		Sample (of six participants)
Gender		6
	Male	0
	Female	6
Marital Status		6
	Married or Cohabiting	4
	Single	2
Number of Dependent Children		6
	1	3
	2	2
	3	0
	4	1
Ages of Dependent Children		11 (children)
	0-4	3
	5-12	3
	13-17	5
Prior College Experience		6
	Yes	5

Participant Entry Characteristics	Sample (of six participants)
No	1
Motivation for Community College Degree	6
To Get a Local Job	3
Income/Provide for Kids/Stability	3
To Show My Kid	3
I Could Graduate/ Importance of Education	3
Passion/To Help People	3

*Note:* This table displays the community college entry characteristics of the participant group.

Table 3 demonstrates the characteristics of the participants' external environment.

**Table 3**

*External Environment Characteristics*

External Environment	Sample (of six participants)
Employment While Enrolled in Community College	6
Not Employed	2
Full-Time (30+ hours)	2
Part-Time (<30)	1
Varies between FT & PT	1
Experienced Basic Needs Insecurities While Enrolled in Community College	6
Yes	6
No	0
Transportation	4
Oil/Heat	2
Housing	3
Food	1
Has a Strong Support System (Social Capital)	6
Yes	5
No	1
College Support Person(s)	5
Family	5
Community Support Person(s)	4
Friends	2

*Note:* This table displays environmental characteristics outside of community college that may influence the lived experiences of the community college participants.

Table 4 reflects some of the internal campus and academic factors that may influence the participants' persistence.

**Table 4***Internal College and Academic Factors*

Internal College & Academic Factors		Sample (of six participants)
Expressed Familiarity with Financial Aid Resources		6
	Yes	2
	No	0
	Somewhat	4
Pell Grant Recipient		6
	Yes	3
	No	3
Enrollment Status		6
	Full-Time (12+)	4
	Part-Time	2
Course Delivery		6
	Primarily Online	3
	Primarily On-Campus	3

*Note:* This table displays the internal community college campus and academic that may influence the lived experiences of the community college participants.

Most participants discussed specific academic experiences reflective of their chosen major, the institutional culture of their community college, experiences with teachers and/or advisors, the time commitment required for studying and completing assignments, and experiences in required clinical or field practicum placements.

***Academic Schedules***

Each of the six participants discussed aspects of their degree program and academic experiences related to their academic course schedules. Course delivery methods were described from the perspective of ParentALs. Allison described synchronous courses as “traditional classes” that were “difficult to navigate around child schedules.” Madison described wanting to take in-person courses but was unable to because they were either canceled or did not fit within her work schedule. Patience liked her college and program’s flexibility, allowing her to choose between on-campus, online, and hybrid courses. Despite this flexibility, online courses were

sometimes challenging because her children “interrupted a lot and want to say ‘hi’ all the time” and on-campus courses were challenging “because it has been hard to afford the transportation.” Katie shared “I’d rather be in-person, but it is good to have [online courses] as a backup option.” Shelby expressed “I don’t particularly like online classes, but as a parent, it sure is helpful especially the ones that don’t have a specific time, asynchronous is what I think they call it, those are really helpful for parents.” Now a full-time, on-campus student, Lorrie shared:

To be honest, I preferred online for a bunch of different reasons. First of all, it was just easier with my kids’ schedule. I felt like I could be a better mom and be there for them. I could get them ready to go to school in the morning. I would wake up early and get a good chunk of homework done, help them get off to school, and keep going. It was nice having that flexibility if my kids had doctor’s appointments during the day or dentist or whatever just being able to get those in a little bit easier...I live two hours away from campus and from our clinical placements so I spend four hours a day driving now, those were four hours that I could spend studying [when I was an online student] and now I feel like that’s been taken away and it’s been very very difficult to study at the level that I like to study with having that commute every day now. I am finding it a lot more challenging being on campus.

### ***Role Strain***

Cho et al. (2021) found that the difference in roles and responsibilities between parenting and non-parenting students causes pressure which may make a ParentAL more likely to leave college than a traditional student. Allison described having to juggle school, work, household, and family responsibilities within a limited amount of time. Role strain and time poverty were connected through the necessity to attend college courses, work, and complete household and

family responsibilities while simultaneously needing to manage her son's school, sports, job, and transportation needs:

I was trying to juggle my job, even though I'm self-employed, I still have to work, because I have to keep this home and my kid and everything else for my kid going. So, I had to keep my schedule plus he was working, and I had to get him to work and home from work and he was also into sports.

She summarized by expressing that "everything is different for student parents." Lorrie expressed that parenting students have a lot more to focus on and manage and their "time is just split in more directions." Madison described an ability to balance school, family, and household responsibilities well while enrolled in school and working in a part-time student employment position as a tutor, "I was employed as a student tutor during this semester that we're currently in, but I had to leave that job when I started working in the childcare center, I couldn't do both it was too much." However, when she started working full-time in a position related to her major while still enrolled in school Madison "started to struggle with school [and] felt like [she] didn't have time to do anything." Madison had COVID-19 during the time of her interview and discussed times when she was worried she was going to fail because she became far behind in her coursework after beginning to work full-time and becoming sick with COVID-19. Madison shared "this semester when I started working full-time and by the end of October, I started to really struggle with school. I felt like I didn't have time to do anything. I got really behind and thought I was gonna fail."

Katie shared that time management was very challenging when navigating school, family, and household schedules:

It's hard because you can't predict exactly when you get to do your homework or whatnot and it's harder to find the time because you have to intertwine the kid's schedules and other people's schedules that might take care of her.

Katie also shared "I would really like to have a job but I'm just doing what I am able to do." When asked about her employment status, Lorrie shared "I can barely find time to sleep, let alone work." Shelby described reflecting on the complexities of juggling so much. She described parenting students to need to be more dedicated when compared to other students due to the conflicting responsibilities. Balancing school, family, and household responsibilities cause her to be very aware of the "finite amount of time in which I need to finish." Patience shared that every day as a ParentAL is very demanding "almost every minute is so busy."

### ***Time for Academics***

Time available to dedicate to course assignments and studying may influence persistence (Reason, 2009). ParentALs have major constraints on time as they must balance family, work, and academic responsibilities (Ascend, 2018; Chen et al., 2020; He et al., 2019; James, 2020; Markle, 2015). This researcher asked each participant about the time they spend studying or completing schoolwork. Allison, Patience, and Madison stated that the amount of time spent on studying and completing assignments varied between semesters and weeks and was dependent on the course load and specific courses. Allison, a full-time online student, indicated that difficult courses may require 15 hours or more just for the one course in addition to the time requirements for the other courses while less challenging semesters may only require about eight hours per week dedicated to studying and completing assignments. Madison, a full-time student online, indicated that some days require eight or more hours to complete assignments but overall, the time commitment varies from a few hours per week for a less challenging semester up to

twenty hours per week for a tougher course load. Katie, a part-time online student, indicated that she typically spent three to five hours per week studying and completing assignments. Shelby, a full-time on-campus student, stated that her time spent studying and completing assignments was about three hours per week. Patience a part-time on-campus student indicated that coursework typically takes five to six hours when she is enrolled part-time but increases significantly when she is enrolled full-time. Lorrie, a full-time on-campus student shared:

I get up at 4:00 every day and I always do a study session before I have to leave in the morning, and I probably do homework until about 11:00 every night but I do have a commute in between there, so I do have four hours where I am not really studying. So, it seems like I'm doing studying stuff all day long but I guess I have that drive to kind of think about things and reflect on how clinical went or about class and to organize what I need to get done. And then on weekends I basically have to study the minute I wake up to when I go to bed because I feel like I'm playing catch-up now with the commute...even when we were completely 100% online, I would still study from the moment I woke up to the moment I went to bed, and that's just because I really strive to be knowledgeable. It is really important to me. I really want to do well in the clinical setting, and I want to learn as much as I can. I am here to learn and being successful in my courses is important to me, so I probably study more than most.

Four of the participants indicated that they did not have a dedicated space to complete their assignments. Katie shared that she worked on schoolwork "in my bedroom because we don't really have an office in the home...some days [my kid] is right next to me." Allison shared that they had to move their space during the winter for heating reasons. "Once it gets cold in [my office] in a couple of weeks I'm going to have to move into the living room because this is the

coldest room in the house.” Madison shared that it was helpful to complete assignments in the college’s TRiO space and utilize the TRiO printer when she was an on-campus student. She also shared frustrations after becoming employed and switching to online courses. “I’m an online-only student now and so I don’t get to enjoy the same benefits as some of the students that have the ability to go to campus on a regular basis.” Madison shared that at one point she had been permitted to do schoolwork during lunch or downtimes at work “but my employer has now said we’re not allowed to do homework during downtime if we’re done everything that was supposed to be done, we just sit there and do nothing or find something that is work-related.” She shared that she felt her degree in early childhood education “is work-related” to her employment within the childcare field.

Five of the six participants referred to the unpredictable nature of a parenting student’s schedule. Four of the six participants indicated that their children sometimes sit beside them while working on college schoolwork. Patience shared “The biggest challenge is not having a quiet room to study [because] the children want to stay with me.” Patience specified that she completes her coursework at home after the children go to bed, “or sometimes on the weekends my husband takes them somewhere to play.” Katie shared that she plans to complete all of her schoolwork at the beginning of the week to help mitigate time challenges, but that is not always possible:

I try not to do [coursework] last minute because that works when you’re young [and don’t have kids] like when I was in school before but waiting until the last minute doesn’t always work when you don’t actually have the last minute because something else comes up with the kids.

Shelby described that “it is nice to have a family distraction but at the same time I feel behind, and my typical study times aren’t necessarily where I’d like them to be because I have other responsibilities.” She talked about the challenges of trying to complete coursework while a child is close by. “It’s hard to study and have your kiddo taping you on the shoulder or talking to you constantly, it’s really really hard to focus.” Shelby shared that “nighttime is really hard to get things done...[and] if I do coursework during the day, I can’t do it first thing but only after the kiddo is dropped off [at school].” Weekend homework was challenging as it required that she “find something for him to do or someone to come get him and take him to an event or something.” She also described the challenge of completing online tests:

We have our tests online, and that’s a challenge. I have to definitely try to do tests when nobody’s here but that’s not always possible, and people walk in on me as if I’m not doing anything important and these are locked-in lockdown tests and I get a little anxious about people walking around, and behind me.

She described having a friend that would stay on the weekends, in prior semesters, to help entertain and/or transport her child so that she could complete her schoolwork:

So, Friday and Saturday night were times that I could really dig in and get a lot done and that was really great because I didn’t feel so guilty with the Mom guilt that we have [because] I knew that [my son] was having a great time.

### ***Clinical and Practicum Requirements***

Reason (2009) believed that academic experiences including clinical and practicum experiences may influence persistence. Four of the six participants mentioned college experiences related to required clinical or practicum experience. Madison shared that her field practicum experience led to her full-time employment before graduation. The childcare center

where her children attend and where she volunteered before enrolling in community college also became her field practicum site. She described the feeling that “you want to have a job and you need to work as a parent, and I wanted to get into my field sooner.” Madison described a conversation that she’d had with her field practicum supervisor:

They said, ‘hey come to work here if you apply you will pretty much have the job’ and so I threw myself into working. I didn’t realize how stressful that was going to make my life between work and the kids and a schedule and so I semi-regret getting a job.

Two participants illustrated challenges associated with their field experiences. Shelby shared that her clinical requirements were full-time which made juggling school, work, family, and household responsibilities even more difficult:

There is a real challenge when you go into the medical field, I don’t know about other fields. Maybe this is the same with all community colleges, but we have clinical experiences that we have to undertake. These are full-time, and I know that there are a couple of students that also work, and these students that work have a similar experience as the parenting students, where we really wish it was part-time so that we could function. Having a full-time clinical makes it really difficult to manage.

Shelby shared that she chose her physical therapy degree program because she knew she could find part-time related work after graduation. Shelby shared frustration over the full-time clinical requirement:

One of the reasons I am not in my original degree from the University, which I worked on for probably a dozen years, is that I can’t work full-time because of my family situation and this degree will allow me to work part-time. One of the reasons that the clinicals are full-time is for students to get the experience, so they understand what that’s

like. I think that's kind of a cop-out and I don't think that's fair. So that's a challenge.

Then, I have a longer clinical next semester, so I'm concerned about it.

Shelby and Lorrie shared that the logistics of their full-time clinical placements are among their biggest stressors. Both participants shared that their clinical sites were 90-120 minutes each-way from their homes which exacerbated the struggle of navigating family, household, and transportation challenges. Shelby described being uninformed of clinical expectations for responsibilities, time commitment, and travel. She was not permitted to request a specific clinical site or select from a list of locations that may relate to her geographic location or professional area of interest, "mine was an hour and a half away, which is not supposed to happen, but it did. So that really sucked with having to juggle transportation with my child." She described the stress of only having a one-week notice that her clinical would be 90 minutes away from her home and she would have to quickly manage all of the time, transportation, family, and household responsibilities that would need to be adjusted for her to attend the required clinical assignment three days per week. Shelby shared:

When clinical happens...well, it's just very frustrating. Like last semester, I didn't know what I was going to do for clinical until a week or two before and when you have a family and people that rely on you to do all the running around, I was so stressed out I felt like I was going to throw up every day. It was awful. It was one of the worst experiences of my life honestly.

When discussing the upcoming semester Shelby added:

Hopefully, clinical seems a little more open this year. I don't know why it was so closed for us, I thought that was ridiculous. I've been told in the past by other people who've been through the program that they actually picked where they were going.

Lorrie shared, “I live two hours away from campus and from our clinical placements, so I spend four hours a day driving now, those were four hours that I could spend studying.” When asked if there was anything she would like to see changed at her college, specifically for parenting students, Lorrie shared:

I would say flexibility in course times. We get our course schedule, and it is what it is. You can't choose times. It's just like, these are your course times. These are your clinical days. These are your hours. It's very rigid. I just wish that there was like a little bit of flexibility in the course schedule itself.

This researcher asked Lorrie if she was able to choose her clinical site location. Lorrie responded, “No, which is another frustrating thing as sometimes I have been sent where it’s taken me almost three hours one way just to get to the clinical. So, I wish they took that into a little bit more consideration.” Shelby summarized her conversations with other ParentALs by sharing “when talking with other moms and one dad that go to school here, that has been their biggest challenge as well, the timing of the clinicals and making everything work.” When describing her clinical experience Lorrie shared: “three days are spent on clinical and then the other three days are spent on theory courses.” She added:

You’re doing something six days a week, the one day you have at home...we are rushing to get laundry and food and do homework and write papers and it’s chaotic...there is a very limited amount of time for family time.

### ***Instructor Behavior***

Cox (2015) demonstrated that student advisors and coaches can play a role in ParentAL goal attainment and persistence. Reason (2009) found that teaching styles and instructor behaviors may influence persistence. Several participants described a connection between the

behaviors of their academic instructors and/or advisors and their college experience. Allison, Shelby, Patience, and Katie shared that they felt fortunate that many of their instructors were parents and seemed to understand the complexity of navigating multiple responsibilities and schedules. Shelby shared “I think that a lot of the faculty already have children so they can relate.” Allison said, “I’ve been very fortunate that a good portion of my instructors are also parents, so we’ve had that relationship with having to navigate it all.” She further shared her perspective “I feel like in today’s world, a lot of the faculty kind of get it and understand it because they’re also in the same positions, especially where there are so many more non-traditional students than there used to be.” Conversely, Allison described that “younger, fresh out of college or still in college” instructors were much more rigid about when they opened and closed assignments and never allowed for flexibility in starting an assignment early or receiving a deadline extension. These instructors were described as not “having lived life yet [so] they don’t get it.” Shelby also expressed frustration “when connections are made [with instructors] but not always followed up on, so it takes a lot of effort sometimes to get what you need and it might not happen, that’s frustrating.”

When discussing falling behind in assignments after accepting a full-time job, Madison shared that she felt the primary factor that allowed her to persist was the encouragement of her academic advisor (who was also her instructor) and the flexibility of significantly extended deadlines that the instructor offered. When describing her experience falling behind in her coursework due to adding a full-time job and being sick, she explained that “my instructor’s communication helped.” Madison added that her professor:

Told me that I can do it and sent me some really big extensions because, at the beginning of the semester, I had all A's, and she [knew] I could do the quality of work that is expected, and I just got behind working and not feeling well.

She compared this to her prior college experience, before having children, and said: "I feel like the community college instructor worked with me, I don't know if any of the major colleges might [have]."

Patience described her academic advisor (also her primary instructor) as being very flexible "if my kids get sick, I can just tell my instructor and she just sends me the Zoom® link so I can participate."

Katie shared that her community college experience was very different from her prior college experience where deadlines were very strict and inflexible which often led to reduced or failed grades. Katie described that her "advisor and instructor is teaching both of my classes this semester." She found this to be a positive influence as "she has a lot of insight and that is really helpful. She's definitely understanding about timeline deadlines and gives leeway on that."

When further asked to describe her experiences, Katie shared:

I can see why with less parents enrolled at a regular school [why] having deadlines are more important. At other schools, they are always like you have to get your stuff in on time. If you don't you will get docked or you can't pass it in depending on the professor. But it's a lot different here because there are deadlines at the end of the semester and at the mid-half of the semester, but I think that it helps a lot to have leeway to be able to get done a day or two days late. It is good for that to be okay because maybe I was supposed to get it done on Sunday and suddenly something came up. I think that an understanding of how those things happen is important.

According to Tinto (2006), Reason (2009), and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), student-instructor relationships and interactions influence student outcomes. ParentALs benefit from clearly communicated and reasonable expectations from faculty (Lovell, 2014; Markle, 2015). Participants expressed appreciation for instructors who were well organized and who clearly conveyed course assignments and expectations. Well-written course syllabi, assignment instructions, and course planners/ assignment schedules were described as helpful time management supports. “I strive for those high grades, and I know that I don’t absolutely have to have them, but I know that I need to understand the material to be where I want to be” (Allison). Katie shared:

I have had a pretty good experience through the perspective of the classes I’ve taken and the teachers I have had. They are very organized. They have the layout all organized in BrightSpace. I am able to look at the schedule and see what is expected each week. That is really helpful. Well-organized clear instructions are helpful, especially online. I also really like having online and in-person classes having the same layout. I like passing in my work through BrightSpace. As a parent, it makes it easier, I think, and it is a pretty basic tool to use as a student. I know it might be hard for the faculty to make but it is really helpful for the student to use BrightSpace for both. It makes it really easy to go from one type of class to the next for consistency reasons. And then, the syllabus is easy to find. Having the syllabus outlined and planned ahead, knowing what each week will bring and look like, is really helpful for time management.

### ***Sense of Belonging***

The unique experiences of ParentALs influence their feelings of belonging or isolation as college students (Markle, 2015). According to Tinto (2006) and Reason (2009), an institution’s

culture and ability to foster students' sense of belonging influence persistence. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) also found that students perceived their connection to and sense of belonging with faculty and peers to be related to persistence. Participants expressed variances in their sense of belonging and engagement with the community college. Allison indicated that she felt a sense of connection/belonging when saw her instructor's child on her lap during a meeting. Madison described the feeling that the community college offered a lot of opportunities for students "I feel like they do a lot." However, those opportunities often were only available during the day and on-campus so are not readily accessible to online, working, and/or parenting students. Madison shared:

I've noticed a big difference now that I'm working full-time during the day, that a lot of this stuff happens during the day on campus. [Now] I am an online-only student, and I don't get to enjoy the same benefits as some of the students that have the ability to go to campus on a regular basis. I'm missing all of the activities.

Madison described feeling "welcome until I started working" and now feels like "there's nothing for me. I can see the pictures and I can't go to anything. [The college] is having a big event next week for the people who work as tutors, and I can't go because I'm working." She also shared that she "was involved in Student Senate and was involved in activities with student life up until I started working, and then everything just became not flexible for my schedule." When asked if there was a virtual opportunity to participate in Student Senate she responded, "their life revolved around their school life...they tell me they miss me all the time and I'm just like yeah I miss you all too but if I could go back to school I would."

Katie shared that taking on-campus courses helped her "to feel the sense of community and that was good." She described activities and opportunities to engage with the college as

supporting a sense of belonging. She described that attending only online courses challenged her sense of belonging with the college and her student peers “before, when I did just online classes with no Zoom®, it wasn’t the same as being able to meet a few people in my program...when it’s just online there’s not much sense of a community.

Whereas opportunities to meet peers in her program either in-person or during a Zoom® session “definitely helped.”

Shelby shared that in-class conversations that do not reflect that some students already have children may make ParentALs “feel left out, or on a different timeline.” She added that instructors “sometimes forget that the demographics of the student body are mixed in...a lot of conversations don’t reflect that some students aren’t very young or that some have kids. Sometimes conversations are hard to go back and forth.” She mentioned that the community college offered several activities and events that sought to build students’ sense of belonging “I feel welcome, but I am a little surprised at the lack of participation from the students as to what is offered at the school.” Patience shared that she felt a sense of belonging from being in a community college environment where many of her student peers were also older and had children. “The regular college should be a lot of younger students, like teenagers and the 17-20-year-old students, but at community college, the students have families and kids.” This theme introduced the background characteristics and college factors that may lead ParentALs to experience community college differently than traditional and non-parenting students (Hubbard, 2019). The next theme describes how factors, experiences, and perceptions may intersect to influence ParentAL persistence.

## **Theme 2: Characteristics and Intersectionality of Factors, Experiences, and Perceptions that may Influence ParentAL Persistence in Community College**

The second theme that emerged during the literature review is that ParentALs experience shared challenges and circumstances that differentiate them from traditional and non-traditional non-parenting students which place them at higher risk of attrition (Ascend at the Aspen Institute and The Jed Foundation, 2021; Cho et al., 2021). Family, work, housing, transportation, childcare, finances, time management, socio-emotional factors, and obligations uniquely intersect and are experienced differently by ParentALs. ParentALs experience higher rates of basic needs insecurities and financial demands than traditional students (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020; Kienzl et al., 2022). ParentALs tend to be navigating college enrollment without the family understanding and social capital experienced by traditional students (Wladis et al., 2018; Program Evaluation and Research Group, 2020).

### ***Basic Needs***

The financial costs of transportation to class, clinical and practicum sites, work, and their children's childcare or school are a difficult barrier for ParentALs who often lack a safety net to resolve unexpected financial barriers (Generation Hope, 2020; Wagner et al., 2021). The need to provide for both themselves and their child(ren) and the likeliness to have basic needs insecurities (e.g., housing, food, childcare, transportation) may cause ParentALs to take on more student debt and be more likely to withdraw from college before degree completion than non-parenting students (Archer et al., 2020; Institute for Women's Policy Research & Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2019; Kienzl et al., 2022). Every participant described experiencing challenges in affording basic needs while enrolled in community college. Four participants shared that finances have been increasingly harder to manage due to rising costs. The most mentioned basic

needs challenge is related to transportation. Three participants were challenged by unexpected car repairs and adding an unplanned car payment to their thinly stretched financial budgets.

“Within the past year, I actually had two cars break...it was pretty stressful” (Madison).

Lorrie and Shelby shared difficulty in getting to school due to one-way home-to-school commutes of one and two hours which are sometimes increased depending on the location of their clinical placement. Lorrie shared:

Because I live so far away, I spend about \$200 to \$300 per week on gas. When we were online it was completely fine. I only had to drive in for my clinical days and maybe a few labs, so it was manageable. But now I'm driving six days a week and spending so much money on gas I haven't been able to pay both my gas and my mortgage so that became a big problem. I applied for extra funding from the federal government, and I applied for all the scholarships with the college. I wasn't able to get anything extra, so it was kind of to the point where I was like, I either need to drop out and work for a while so I can save another year's tuition or drop down to part-time again and work part-time to try to pay for my tuition.

Three participants discussed the rising cost of fuel oil and housing prices. Alison and Patience described doubling of rent and oil expenses which were described to make everything more difficult to manage financially. Three shared financial challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Allison shared:

It has been challenging with COVID and everything. In October my rent doubled. Oil has tripled. I bought a car last year because I needed one but I wasn't expecting rent to go up and so I added a car payment then with everything else it has been a challenge and of course, everything trickles down.

Wladis (2018) found that inadequate financial aid resources exacerbate time poverty as ParentALs are forced to work more, study less, and take longer to complete their degrees.

Allison shared:

I have been able to get some help from the school which has eased some of it, but they can only give so much so I've still had to work more and working more is what cuts into the time to do schoolwork.

Allison is also the participant that shared that her academic advisor/instructor frequently encouraged her to take additional courses (15 or more credits instead of 12) per semester to complete her degree sooner. Allison shared that she has to inform her advisor/instructor "I can't do that because of my workload. I can't handle that much of a course load and focus and get the grades that I personally need to achieve for myself." Allison shared that she takes 12 credits per semester, the minimum number of credits required to meet the full-time guidelines for financial aid eligibility because "I have to be full-time to keep all of my Pell grants and scholarships."

Although her tuition is funded through financial aid programs, Katie stated that she was ineligible for community programs to help with basic needs because she has a prior bachelor's degree. Katie said:

I had money through the grant and financial aid that helped to pay for the courses, so I didn't have to worry as much. But recently, it's been a lot harder. Recently I've been trying to figure out how to get help with all of these things but because I have a bachelor's degree, I am not eligible for the HOPE [Higher Opportunities for Pathways to Employment] program.

### *Social Capital*

Social capital is positive reciprocal networks, connections, and relationships with people, resources, knowledge, and opportunities (FrameWorks Institute, 2019). Social capital positively influences persistence, especially for underserved and/or at-risk students (Kirk and Lewis, 2015). Five of the six participants shared that they had strong social capital. Allison shared that she developed a large support system after enrolling in community college “I’ve actually built quite a support system, and it’s a lot larger than it was when I started.”

Five participants listed family members that provided support by listening, giving advice, watching children, doing household tasks, and helping with coursework. Allison shared “my parents and my brother are actually on board now. My brother actually calls me quite often to ask me how I am doing which is helpful.” Siblings, aunts, uncles, parents, grandparents, children, spouses, and partners were also mentioned when discussing social capital. Five of the six participants provided details about the support that their spouse/partner provided. Patience affirmed that her most important resource was “having a good partner that does a lot of things for me and the family.” Lorrie and Shelby shared that they have had to ask their partners to take on more household and family responsibilities. Three participants shared that they have been frustrated by their spouses and wish they would help more. When asked “Is there anything that you found that does help you to balance your responsibilities?”, Madison responded: “trying to get my husband to help more.” Another participant offered “My husband sometimes is helpful.”

Two other participants described instances in which they were positively surprised by a supportive gesture from their partner that helped with time and/or financial resources. Lorrie does not live with her partner. She described feeling the need to withdraw from her program due

to financial challenges and then being supported by her partner who is now paying for both his rent and her mortgage until she graduates:

I was very thankful that he agreed to pay the mortgage payments for me for this year, so I can keep going full-time. I don't want to extend my degree because every month basically that I am extended it, that is just more debt I'm incurring and with everything with gas, groceries, and other payments. I'm also not young either, I'm in my mid-30s so I would like to get this degree finished. So, I was so very grateful that he would do that for me, but it was a bit of a frustrating process exhausting all those options, and even my bank wouldn't really do anything about it either unless I had a cosigner, and it was kind of a big deal. It was hard to get support from anywhere. So, if he wouldn't have offered that then I probably wouldn't even be here right now. I was very grateful for that, but then again here comes the guilt, right? It's like oh now you have to pay your rent, which is not cheap, and my mortgage and I feel very guilty about that and also very grateful.

Three participants shared challenges with communicating with and getting support from family members but described that eventually, the family members provided much more support than anticipated to help the ParentAL to reduce stress and persist in their degree program. When asked about the things that help to balance responsibilities, Shelby shared:

having frank conversations with my son's dad about the importance of my dedication and helping him to see how dedicated I am. He's actually stepped up a lot more than he ever has as far as being there and being able to take the kiddo and do stuff with him or pick him up on occasion. But that has required a lot of digging in for me which I'm not used to. I'm used to just doing whatever needs to be done as a mom and so this is a whole new chapter where I've had to speak out a lot and make it really known how important what

I'm doing is but also seeking engagement from other family members, that it is not just my responsibility to take on family stuff.

Two participants with teenage children shared that they have frequently asked their children to help with homework, help with technology, watch online lectures to help the ParentAL to understand, and/or help with labs and math and science activities. Allison shared "I have an instructor that thinks it's great that my child helps me with my homework." When talking about her online science lab, Madison shared "I had to ask my teenager for help because I had no clue what I was doing." Allison and Lorrie discussed feeling that there had been a role reversal with their children. They describe that their child(ren) do a lot of the household chores including cooking, cleaning, scheduling, and babysitting, Allison shared "I'll come home and he's cooking supper and he's cleaning and he's doing all the dishes." Lorrie shared, "Sometimes...my kids are taking care of me."

Each of the six participants shared varying degrees of social capital that were connected to the community college. Allison, Madison, Katie, Patience, and Shelby included their academic advisor/instructor (each of these participants stated that their academic advisor is also their primary instructor) within their social capital. Allison shared "my instructors are usually the first place I go. I say, 'Can you explain this or what are your thoughts or where can I get the material that I need to understand it better?'" Shelby shared:

I feel like the College has been very helpful in a lot of ways. I think even more helpful than the University I went to, which was a much larger university and had a lot more resources. The University I went to had a lot and provided a lot of events and resources and things but there wasn't personal direction and personal connection to understand where and how to make those connections for each individual. The community college

has been a much more personalized experience and some of the staff and faculty I got comfortable opening up to, and with it all, to get what I need, and other staff have been very, very helpful in helping me to get resources for making things work when I have a family challenge that makes it hard.

Katie mentioned a non-academic school advisor in the Student Advising Center and “other resource people that I talked to for financial help or for support for time management.”

Madison shared “I haven’t used any college resources per se...the only major thing I really used at the college was the TRiO room and then my advisors from TRiO.”

Shelby and Lorrie discussed how student peers are helpful, especially in clinical and lab settings. Shelby shared “I think within the college, our program really that we’ve worked together a lot in labs, so we get to know each other pretty well. So, I’d say that helping and being there for each other has been great.”

Four participants mentioned community support persons such as therapists, social workers, and program coaches and navigators that provided support that fostered persistence. Two participants had community recourses (Community Action Program (CAP) and Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Higher Opportunities for Pathways to Employment (HOPE)) that assisted in the purchase of laptops, childcare, and transportation. Madison mentioned, “My whole degree was paid for with my Pell grants and then the HOPE program was used to help pay for my books, my childcare, and some of my expenses like helping towards a laptop.” When describing her two-generation coach, provided by the CAP program, Katie said “she spends time with me and my husband...she helps with that [academic plan] definitely. This computer, she was able to pay for that through her program. So, a lot of help through them.” Madison and Katie shared that they did not utilize many college resources because they had the

support of their community resources. Katie shared “I haven’t used a lot of the resources here. I haven’t really needed much...I get a lot of help through [the CAP program].” Madison shared that she had to enroll at least “three-quarters time for the summer because it was more beneficial for my children to stay in childcare, and not take a semester off, because having lots of continuity in childcare was important.”

Two participants indicated friends who listened, gave encouragement, and/or helped care for their children provided social capital. Madison appreciated that her best friend “reminds me that I want to show my son that I can graduate.” Allison shared “I’ve got my friends who are all very supportive even though they may not have a clue what I am doing, they still encourage me and support me.” Two participants indicated that work colleagues provided strong social capital that understood the field/program of study. Allison shared that her most valuable resource was two colleagues that are employed in the same field as her program major: “I’ve got a couple of clients that are very knowledgeable in the field I’m going into, so they’ve helped me tremendously.” Allison added:

I’m fortunate enough that there’s several of my clients that have an understanding of these programs because they’re in the field. They are huge resources for me to have, two of them specifically that I go to. They helped me not only navigate, how to get to where I need to go, but anytime I have a question, or I don’t understand something, or there’s just a specific class, especially if I don’t get an answer from my professor in a reasonable time, or if there is something I still don’t understand I go to them.

### ***Motivation***

Tinto (1993), Braxton et al. (2000), Bean (1980, 1982), and Bergman and Olson (2020) document that a student’s motivation and commitment to earning a degree is a strong indicator of

likeliness to persist. Literature affirms that despite unique barriers and experiences, ParentALs are especially motivated to achieve academic success (Goodman & Reddy, 2019). ParentALs are often motivated to enroll in college to set a good example as a role model for their children (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Sommer et al., 2018; Wladis et al., 2018). Questions related to the participants' motivations for enrolling in a community college degree program resulted in several themes emerging. Three participants were motivated to increase their income, financial stability, and provide for their children. A motivation to set an example for their children and be a role model for completing college and demonstrating the importance of education also came to light during the interviews. Three participants specifically shared that they chose to enroll in a community college because they experienced difficulties finding local employment and were motivated to become more employable in their current location.

Madison became unemployed right before the COVID-19 pandemic started. While unemployed she “took that opportunity to do some volunteer work at a childcare setting.” She described that as “put[ing] me back in a spot where I was like, you know what I can go back to school for this early childhood education and work at the place that my children have been going to school.” She enrolled in an early childhood education degree program to gain a local job in a career field that would “better our family [by] having a career that kept [her] financially stable and worked well for my family life.” She saw the positive aspects of having “the weekends with the kids and not having to worry, usually, [because] when there’s no school, I would have no work.”

Katie was involved with a two-generation program through her local Community Action Program Home Visiting Program. Katie shared “One of the things we talked a lot about were different career ideas for me and based on what I had said she suggested that I look into early

childhood education and so I began to take classes.” She hopes to build the skills to become financially stable and work in the field. She shared her goal to “open a school type of program for parents and their kids.” She shared that she felt that she may not have decided to go to college if she was not a parent, she wouldn’t have likely been as motivated to retrain. “I don’t know if I would be taking classes if I didn’t have a kid. I might be working...I had another career...when I got pregnant and had a baby I had to change.” She described having to move to a state that didn’t have employment opportunities that paid well and were related to her first degree. Katie described being motivated to persist by “wanting to finish the degree for me, myself, and my kids.”

Patience has a Master’s in Business Administration (MBA) that she completed prior to having children. She described an increased desire to study and learn after having children:

My bachelor’s is in business and English, and I have an MBA, but after earning my master’s I had my first child. I just want to learn more things. After that, I will know how to teach my kids, how to be a good mother, how to teach things to others, and how to be a good teacher. I picked early childhood education so that I can learn these things.

Shelby shared that she had prior university and life experience and “my main goal in going back to college was not for the experience, I’ve already done that.” She described “My main goal for going to college is to get the skills and the degree in which to get a job local to me. She “didn’t want to go to another long-term university and have a lot of costs.” She researched career opportunities and saw high demand for medical professionals in her area. She worked with a career counselor “and took all sorts of different career tests” and was informed that she would make a good therapist. She considered nursing, addiction counseling, and related careers but was not interested in those. She recognized that she is a “very physical person” and she

ultimately decided that because of her “experience with family that had experience in physical therapy [that she] was very excited to find a college that was a very reasonable distance to travel and so I went into the physical therapy assistant program.” When asked about how her experiences as a parenting student may influence her persistence in community college, she responded:

I can't say compared to other people, but I can from prior experiences in my own life, I feel that there is a lot more finite amount of time in which I need to finish and get going because I have a lot of responsibilities already in place.

Shelby also described being motivated by her son, “I also think it's nice for my son to see how much hard work it takes to get to where you want to be.” Allison chose their degree in psychology because it aligned with her passion to help others. She shared that she had wanted to pursue this career pathway since high school but had been talked out of it by others throughout the years:

Two years ago, I had an MRI on my neck, and I was told that if I don't take care of it, I could possibly be paralyzed so I decided that it is finally time for me to go into this field.

Allison is motivated by knowing that her degree program will help her connect her life experiences with increased knowledge and understanding to care for clients:

I feel that it will give me the ability to empathize with people a little bit more and understand where they're coming from. People with mental health really need somebody that they can connect with and somebody that truly understands what they are going through.

Lorrie chose to enroll in a nursing degree program because she is also passionate about helping people:

I really enjoy helping people and it gives me a lot of satisfaction. That's kind of what I was doing prior to coming into nursing, I spent over a decade in the health and fitness industry. I did personal training, sports team coaching, nutrition coaching, life coaching, CrossFit coaching or weightlifting, a bunch of stuff working with people, and I just really enjoyed the satisfaction that I got from that.

Lorrie learned about nursing shortages in her area and saw enrolling in college as an opportunity to learn to help more people. "I wanted to do something more and I figured that going into nursing would really build my knowledge and [give me] a better understanding and [make me] able to help more people." She shared that her self-employment was not necessarily financially stable and saw the college degree as an opportunity to improve her family's financial prosperity as well:

It wasn't very financially stable, being self-employed. I successfully did it as a single mom, but it's not the most stable option and I just wanted to have a career that was a little bit more stable, stable hours, and stable income, especially now that my kids are getting older. I have to start thinking about that. You know, like my oldest daughter is going to be driving in a year and a half that means a car. We live far away they're going to have to be driving in for university or college whatever they choose. So, it's going to be helping them with that and it's going to be helping them with university and college payments too.

Lorrie expressed remorse for giving up the flexibility of being able to bring her kids to work and build her own schedule but her long-term financial stability goals helped to motivate her.

being self-employed allowed me to always have my kids with me. They basically grew up in a gym with me, because it was just the three of us which was fantastic and it served

our needs at the time and I got great satisfaction from it, but I just kind of had to figure out that I want to provide for my kids a little bit more and I figured that nursing would be a good opportunity to do that but also still get that satisfaction of helping people.

When asked about their academic performance, related to GPA, participants discussed factors including confidence, self-determination, and a need to maintain financial aid eligibility. These responses align with Reason's (2009) findings that student confidence, self-determination, and belief in their academic abilities may also influence persistence. Each of the six participants quickly indicated that their competitive need to succeed, goal to do better than in prior academic programs, and/or overall self-determination were the primary factors influencing their current degree GPAs. Lorrie shared "I'm very driven to succeed. I've always been that way... that was kind of drilled into me at a very young age and so I think that my drive to do well is what has kept my GPA high." Madison expressed frustration in the juxtaposition of balancing her personal motivation for a specific goal GPA with "all the other factors that challenge your grade." She further discussed sometimes feeling her inner voice reminding her that she just needs to pass but then stated that she would soon renew her motivation to strive for the high GPA goal. Madison described her process of balancing the weight of attaining a "perfectionist GPA" and persisting in her degree by describing how her coworkers (part of her social capital network) help to calm her by reminding her "all the time that you don't have to be perfect. They remind me that C's get degrees and that your GPA, in the end, isn't a huge differentiator for working in the field."

Four of the six participants indicated that they felt that their GPA was connected to their financial aid eligibility. Patience explained "After becoming a parent, it became more important to study. I found that the key was focusing on my schoolwork to achieve a higher GPA so that I could earn more scholarships." These students expressed awareness that their grants and

scholarships could be reduced if their GPA fell below a certain threshold. Madison and Allison indicated that their personal GPA goals were higher than the financial aid threshold, but the minimum GPA to qualify for financial aid was still a factor that they kept in consideration.

Allison shared:

As far as my GPA I have always had this specific number in mind that I always strive for. I do get frustrated. Like with statistics, there were times that I was like as long as I pass this, I'm ok but then the next day, I'm like I've got to do this because I need that number. I do need to keep my GPA at a certain number for my scholarships, but that number is much lower than what my personal bar is and that's what drives me.

Three of the six participants shared examples of times when their grades suffered when instructor instructions were unclear and/or disorganized. These three participants described being frustrated by having to put extra time and effort into seeking support from work colleagues, student peers, and family members when they were unable to gain clarity and understanding from their course instructor. Shelby mentioned, "When the educational material is not presented well, it really affects not just what we learn but how we learn and what we get for grades, that has certainly affected my GPA." Allison shared "There has definitely been some stress as far as assignments or not understanding the work." Lorrie shared:

I do feel that you really have to be very self-motivated and self-driven in this program, as [the instructors] are not really interested in helping you move forward. It's kind of like you have to do that hard work and do it on your own.

### ***Attendance***

When asked if they had ever missed classes due to factors related to being a parenting student, participants discussed challenges navigating childcare, child illness/COVID-19,

childcare classroom quarantine, and children's sports. Two participants indicated they had missed classes or fell behind in assignments due to their children having COVID-19. Madison indicated that an instructor informed her she would be dropped from a course due to poor attendance while her children had COVID-19:

I missed last year during COVID, I had to miss in-person classes and because of the kids, either there was no childcare for my son's classroom, or one of them was sick and had to quarantine...I missed weeks at a time, two or three classes here and two or three classes there. It was a bad experience because it wasn't personally me that had the COVID stuff. I was threatened to be dropped for attendance. But I was like listen, it's not me, it is my kids that are sick. If I don't have someone to watch them, I can't come to school because their school is closed, or they are sick, that was frustrating.

Allison and Madison indicated that they have to keep good attendance to qualify for financial aid scholarships "Those types of things have impacted [my attendance] but I've not had to drop courses, I have to keep a certain number of courses to keep my scholarships, so that is kind of hard" (Allison).

Five of the participants indicated that being a parent had influenced their community college attendance. "Sports was the big thing" that impacted Allison's attendance." Allison shared:

I'm having to travel and chase the meets, and not wanting to miss the track meets, and then you know as they get older and get into regionals and states and that type of stuff, it gets to be a lot more. Traveling and having to miss [school] or bring my homework with me.

Participants enrolled in online courses stated the benefits of not having to go to campus while their child was sick but also shared the challenges of being disrupted and worried about a sick child while trying to focus on school. “If there’s a live lecture, I might have to go look in on him” (Allison). Katie, a part-time online enrolled student, indicated that parenting had not influenced attendance, “that’s why I’m only taking a couple of courses at a time.” Five out of six participants expressed that being a parent had influenced their community college attendance.

### *Challenges that Impact ParentAL Persistence*

This researcher found several themes emerge concerning the challenges shared by the ParentAL participants. Disrupted routines, having to ask family members for help with household responsibilities, challenges caused by distractions, lack of a dedicated study space, and finding time to complete coursework while juggling family, work, and household responsibilities were frequently discussed during the interviews. Table 5 demonstrates the most referred to challenges that emerged from the participant interviews.

**Table 5**

#### *Most Referred to Participant Challenges*

Most Referred to Challenges	Sample (of six participants)
Time-Related Challenges (overall)	6
Not having as much time with my child(ren)/Miss family time	4
Employed students finding time to balance school, work, family	3
Un/underemployed students would like to work but can’t	3
Routines are disrupted	5
Have to ask family for help with household responsibilities	6
Finding time to study/do assignments	6
Distractions (children and lack of dedicated study space)	6
Clinical/Practicum Full-Time requirement	3
Applying for financial aid	3
Commute > one hour	2
Financial Challenges (overall)	6
Housing	3

Most Referred to Challenges	Sample (of six participants)
Utilities	2
Affording Childcare	1
Affording Tuition & Fees	0
Stress-Related Challenges (overall)	6
Mom guilt	3
Sense of being behind	3
Not understanding the course materials or assignments	3
Transportation	3
Childcare only for full-time students/not available to online students	2

*Note:* This table highlights the challenges that the participant group described.

### ***Stress***

When asked if they had felt stress while enrolled in their community college degree program, 100% of the participants affirmed that they have experienced stress. Allison explained, “It’s kind of one of those questions that you really don’t need to ask, right?” She shared “some of it’s been school related as far as assignments or not understanding the work but some of it falls on the financial aspects.” Katie affirmed, “Yes, tons of stress, it’s been what, two years of stress now?” Themes emerged about specific courses such as geography, statistics, and lab science being more demanding, therefore stressful, than others. Participants shared examples of how advisors and instructors either relieved stress by providing deadline extensions, encouragement, and/or support needed to increase understanding and confidence in course materials and assignments. Madison shared an example of her academic advisor and instructor providing positive support and deadline extensions “I was struggling, taking care of the kids and doing school, I sat down and started submitting things and she was like yeah!” Katie shared that her academic advisor and instructor “has a lot of insight and that is really helpful, she’s definitely very understanding about timeline deadlines.” Conversely, participants described a connection

between stress and instructor inflexibility and rigid assignment deadlines. Lorrie described the challenges related to strict assignment deadlines:

In one of our courses this term, we have an assignment due two hours after class ends, and, well, number one I have a two-hour drive home and I still haven't even picked up my kids from their friends' houses and they want supper. You know, it's not like I can just get those things done immediately. I feel like the deadlines are very tight and there's not very much wiggle room for real life things...I feel like it's very rigid and there's no compromise...I just feel like we have a lot more to consider than just ourselves in our studies. You know you're not just leaving the house and going to school you are making sure that your kids have their homework done, their lunches are packed, and you know where they are going after school. I need to have a place for them to be if I have an evening clinical shift. As a parent you don't come home from school and just start doing homework instead you need to start making supper and begin taking care of your kids' needs above your own...you feel like you're being pulled in a lot of directions and that's sometimes hard when you have a paper due or an exam coming up and you would love to just get in the zone and just study and focus but you still have life things that are important as well.

Shelby shared:

I find with this college, compared to other places, is that it's very much dictated instead of giving you a choice for things. You know, we are adult learners, I feel like we should have some choice of things and there's not, so that kind of feels a little frustrating.

Allison, Lorrie, and Shelby listed uncertainty around course materials and assignments to be among their biggest stressors while enrolled in community college. Lorrie said, "I felt pretty

blindsided when I first started [about] the time that you have to spend studying and the level of expectations as well.” Shelby described feeling stressed about the intensity of her program and frustrated about “just learning to get through it rather than learning to know it.”

A sense of falling behind, potentially becoming ineligible for financial aid, and striving to meet personal GPA goals was also mentioned to be stressful for participants. When talking about GPA and stress, Lorrie mentioned “I have a drive to do well, I would never be okay with myself having a subpar grade.”

Every student referenced a financial stressor, especially when discussing basic needs insecurities. Patience shared:

We had some trouble with transportation because we only had one car and that was a big challenge. Now we have two cars but that requires a lot more money. It has been hard to afford transportation. Rent was cheap before COVID but now it is expensive. The added car payment and insurance are stressful.

Every participant shared that their tuition and fees were fully covered by grants and scholarships. Three students expressed significant feelings of stress when navigating financial aid applications and processes. When discussing that her financial aid was “really based on what I was able to dig up” Shelby shared “maybe there could be some more information on how to find good resources or what other people have done in the past.”

Stress was worsened if the participant experienced staff turnover amongst student navigators, coaches, and or navigators. In these instances, stress was exacerbated by the sense of loss of support and the need to commit more time and effort into finding and completing financial aid applications and processes. When describing a community resource, external to the college, Allison said “I had an Opportunity Center (OC) advisor at one point. She was helping

me with all [the financial resources] and they got rid of the program so now I'm kind of on my own." She described how she had previously applied for scholarships and financial resources because of reminders that had been sent by her OC advisor "that I don't have now so I don't really know how to go about getting those." She shared that another program provided a pathways navigator:

He has absolutely no clue what he's doing and has no idea what the resources are. So, I'm kind of stuck on my own trying to find resources and it's just that much added work on top of what I'm already doing trying to hunt down scholarships and know what I can apply for, and qualify for, and finding and filling out applications and gathering all of this information. I have to contact financial institutions directly myself now, so it has added a lot of extra work, not knowing resources or having anybody I can go to, to ask.

Navigating role strain and juggling the demands of being a parent and a student was connected to stress among the participants. Allison mentioned "trying to please everybody and make sure I can get all of my work in, all of my clients taken care of, and my son taken care of, and still keep up with everything." Madison described having to switch to online courses and leave her on-campus student tutoring job as a stressful decision she had to make "because it was too much." She felt that online courses and "meaningless discussion" board assignments were stressful but required for her to persist.

### ***Guilt***

Three participants mentioned mom guilt. When asked, "What do you feel is the biggest challenge in your life because you are now a student and a parent?" Allison responded:

I don't have as much time with my son. I am not as available at night. I find that my routine is completely disrupted...I am working on homework in the morning. Now, I

have to schedule blocks of time to see him. I'll come home and he's cooking supper and he's cleaning and he's doing all the dishes. He's doing all this household stuff that he shouldn't have to do so I can sit down and nail out a paper or focus on schoolwork.

Allison described having to schedule time with her son and "then I have to put my schoolwork aside, hoping that I don't fall behind so that I can give him the attention he needs. That's the biggest struggle, it's the time that I'm missing with him."

Lorrie shared "the biggest thing is just like the guilt that I had as a parent for not being able to always be there for my kids and also feeling like sometimes it's the other way around, where my kids are taking care of me. My girls are a little older, they both love being in the kitchen." Lorrie provided a recent example:

This past weekend, I had three papers that I needed to finish, and I was in front of my laptop from the moment I woke up until I went to bed, and my kids did all my Christmas baking for me. They made me lunch, they made supper, they cleaned up. I mean I feel so very loved when they do that for me, but I also just feel incredibly guilty because I feel like that's not their responsibility to take care of me. I just feel bad that they have to do those things. I mean, they love it and I'm not forcing them to do it... I think that's the hardest part about [college], just feeling like I'm not there for them. They have after-school sports games, but I have to be in clinical so I'm missing out on that. I do make every effort to be able to go to as much as I can. I wake up early to study or stay up late so I try to be there for them as much as possible. But yeah, you can't be there for them like you want to be... This has been a hard transition to not always be there for them.

### *Unexpected Experiences*

When asked about surprises she may have experienced as a parenting student Shelby responded:

I think just the overwhelming feeling, I mean I have had mom guilt forever, but that feeling of knowing that this is the right thing to do and that I have to be persistent, but my time and flow is a lot different, and explaining that to my kiddo. He is old enough to understand, and I feel that is helpful, but I wasn't expecting having to have those conversations so frequently.

When asked what aspects of persisting in college, if any, as a parent are different than you expected, participants pointed to time management challenges and the unanticipated volume of studying and coursework that would need to be completed. Two participants described that they had anticipated being able to complete their courses and assignments while their children were in school and found this to be impossible. Madison shared:

When I first enrolled, I thought I was going to be able to take everything in person and be able to go [to college] when my children were in school and do the schoolwork while they were in school and not have to be doing homework on nights and weekends...it ended up being my in-person classes were canceled and put online. There was a lot more work than I thought there would be. One of my math classes literally took me, like I would sit there for a full two days doing math homework and it was a lot.

Alison shared:

I didn't expect it to take as much time away from him. I kind of knew it would, but not to the extent that it actually has. This is not my first trip through school with children...so I kind of knew what I was getting into but not to the extent that it has actually turned into.

Participants compared prior college and university experiences with their current community college experience. Madison shared that she had previously attended two online colleges and universities and one online employment training program. "I hated doing online

classes...that is what I wanted to avoid when I was going to a community college.” However, she found that she had to enroll online because some of her courses were only available online and some of the in-person courses did not fit within her work schedule “I don’t like it but it has to work... because I am working I have to take everything all online next semester, I don’t even have a live Zoom® option next semester.” She shared that before accepting a job within her degree field she “didn’t realize how stressful that was going to make [her] life between work and kids and a college schedule.” Shelby and Lorrie are enrolled in allied health programs and shared that they did not expect the uncertainty around the logistics of clinical placements and the last-minute nature of being informed where you would be required to complete your clinical and how far away the clinical would be from your home. Lorrie shared “In other programs you get to have a family life and hobbies and interests outside of school but with this program, you can’t because you are 100% dedicated to studying 24/7.”

Shelby shared that her self-confidence had unexpectedly increased because of her community college experience:

I found, actually, a benefit that I hadn’t realized was increasing my self-confidence. So, it’s a really really difficult program that requires a lot personally, you can’t really sit back and hope that someone else is going to help pull you through and you have to show up and prove yourself in person and physically, not just behind paper. I have found that to be kind of a benefit as I’m finding it difficult going back to school. At this point in my life, I have gone through periods of ups and downs as far as competency to be really confident and there were long periods of my life where I’d become less confident, and the program has boosted my confidence.

When asked if there was anything that the participants would have been helpful for them to know ahead of time, Shelby, Lorrie, Allison, and Madison mentioned wishing that they had an opportunity to learn about the realistic time commitment that would be needed to be successful. Shelby answered, “I think it would have been helpful for me to understand how much more intense my program is.” Lorrie shared:

My kids are super busy... I don't want to take away from their life experiences because I really think that at this age that they are in is really kind of figuring out who they are and what they like...I'm trying not to hinder that for them, but it's also very challenging to figure out what you prioritize sometimes, too. It's like I really need to study but okay, well, you know what, I know I need to be here for you too. So, I guess I'm staying up all night. So, it means a lot of no sleep.

### **Theme 3: the Practices that Support ParentAL Persistence**

This researcher sought to discover the participants’ experiences and perceptions about the practices that support ParentAL persistence in community college. The literature review suggested that institutional culture and sense of belonging (Naylor et al., 2018; Generation Hope, 2020), financial aid (Wagner et al., 2021; Wladis et al., 2018), student advising and coaching (Cox, 2015; Reichlin Cruse, Milli et al., 2019), and other supportive practices and resources (Ascend, 2018; Chen et al., 2020) play a role in ParentAL persistence. Naylor et al. (2018) found that an institutional culture that recognizes and is supportive of ParentALs may improve the likeliness to persist even when financial, role, emotional, and/or other stressors are faced. Generation Hope (2020) found that ParentALs who feel welcomed and identified in a college culture feel confident and better equipped to persist. When asked if they were aware of any resources, services, or policies that are specific to parenting students, three of the six participants

said they were not aware of any, two participants responded that their college allowed their children to attend online classes or practicum experiences, and one participant responded “yes” and referenced the HOPE offered through her State’s Department of Health and Human Services.

This researcher asked participants to describe their approach when they experience a challenge related to their college experience. The participant responses varied but aligned with the literature review findings that institutional culture, sense of belonging, student advising, and coaching were all important factors in promoting ParentAL persistence. Allison shared that her first approach is to go to her academic advisor/instructor. She shared that her advisor is very responsive and understanding of the responsibilities which ParentALs manage. If the advisor is unable to provide the full support needed to resolve the challenge, Allison turns to her work colleagues and her teenage child for support. Katie shared that her first reaction when facing a challenge is to connect with her two-generation family support coach through the local Community Action Program (CAP). She shared that she infrequently utilizes college resources because the CAP support generally meets her needs. When she does seek support from college resources, she turns to a non-academic advisor in the college’s Student Advising Center. Madison shared that she finds the advisors in the college’s TRiO program to be supportive. Patience, Shelby, Katie, and Lorrie each shared that they felt that the opportunities to connect with other students, parenting students when possible, through mentoring, lab support, and opportunities to talk about college and shared experiences were very helpful and appreciated. When enrolled in on-campus courses Madison appreciated student events and shared, “the college had cool events, student services put on fun events that were like stress relievers.” Patience suggested that the college “should have a parenting group for students to support each other, we are all connected by having kids.” Shelby shared that she signed up for a parenting

group at her college but “I think one other person did in the whole school and that was really surprising.” Lorrie shared that she is a peer mentor:

I do peer mentorship for students who come in and I go over some of those things of what they can expect that they're not told to, so they're not blindsided. I also try to help them through that first term of trying to figure everything out and figure out scheduling and testing and support because I didn't know about a lot of the supports that we had. So, I'm just trying to let them know those things right away and get them involved. So, I think the peer mentorship program is great. I really enjoy being part of it. It makes me feel like I'm helping because I know I felt pretty blindsided when I first started.

This researcher asked each participant about the role of college faculty or staff in supporting degree persistence. Four of the six participants shared examples of how they benefited from having their academic advisor also be their primary instructor. They shared that this improved their sense of belonging and understanding of the program and course expectations and helped them to build confidence, trust, and a positive working relationship with their advisor/instructor. When clustering the response data, this researcher noted the following words and phrases to emerge in conversations related to the participants' academic advisors/primary instructors: encouragement, understanding, availability for questions and support, providing clear expectations and assignment instructions, knowing what resources are available, providing time management support and deadline extensions. Allison described academic advisor and primary instructor as “very good at directing me on what classes I need to take as well as the timeframe. She is also very receptive to my needs.” Allison felt supported by her statistics teacher:

She was pretty awesome. She was available for literally everything 24/7. I could message her and she would get right back to me and walk me through it. I think that is really the only reason why I passed that class.

Allison also found audiobooks to be helpful:

One of the things that was really helpful was online textbooks. I mean I hate the online textbooks, but when I can get the ones that you can listen to, I can pop my earbuds in and listen while I am working. I still have to go back and read them but I can skim and get the understanding aster so that is really helpful.

The five participants with prior college or university experience shared the perception that their community college experiences were more supportive than their prior experiences, despite knowing that the larger colleges and universities they attended had more available resources. The participants discussed building relationships with their instructors and connections with their peers at the community college in ways they had not experienced in their prior academic history. They appreciated the individualized personal connections and a sense that their instructors generally understood them and wanted to connect them to resources and support. Despite the positive connections, participants almost always followed a discussion of supportive practices with a shared sense of frustration towards inflexible schedules, deadlines, and lack of full understanding of the responsibilities associated with a long commute and navigating the roles of being a parent and a student.

### ***ParentAL Perspective on Supportive Community College Experiences***

As themes emerged through the interview conversations, this researcher appreciated the opportunity to raise the student voices by asking “What do you wish faculty knew about parenting students?” Alison shared “I wish that [instructors] had training on non-traditional

versus traditional students [specifically] to understand those of us that are older and going back to school.” Lorrie responded, “If you can just somehow describe how tough it is to have such tight deadlines and such a rigid schedule when you are a parent.” Shelby shared her wish for “Teachers [to] really understand that it's important to have some flexibility because our kids are important too to kind of give us some flexibility in assignments and then schedules and some choice, you know, that's the biggest thing.”

Katie shared:

Everybody deserves the same flexibility to be able to choose classes that work and meet their needs. Because a lot of the time parenting students have jobs and the reality is that, if you are working, it's going to be nearly impossible to do schoolwork and you will be forced to take online classes at that point, if you are working and parenting.

Lorrie responded:

I wish that we had some choice in our schedule or choice in class time. I'm an early rise, I would prefer early morning classes, instead of later classes and just so I could be home by the time my kids are done school but there's no choice in that and no choice in clinical site which would be nice to choose a location that wasn't so far to drive to.

Madison shared, “I wish they knew how much having a lab online is not really possible to do at home...I'm doing lab assignments where I had to do chemical reactions and set things up...having kids and doing online classes and working full-time, and I'm a full-time student, it's a lot. There's a lot of work.

Katie added:

So much of the faculty that I worked with, so far, have seemed like they already do know a lot about [parenting students]. I guess, it's kind of hard to imagine but if they knew

there are a lot of unpredictable things about being a parenting student. I have one small child and I can't even imagine juggling even two kids, especially if they had activities going on. Time management is definitely different now and the kid is now our first responsibility. The kid is more important, always.

Katie then reflected on her prior college experience: "I know from a different perspective of when I was younger and didn't have kids and went to college. Then, school was definitely my number one priority. It's definitely different now with school not being my number one priority."

Lorrie shared that she wished that faculty and staff knew that "When we go home it's not just open our laptops and do homework." She also shared, "I just feel like the deadlines are very tight and there's not very much wiggle room for real life things. So, I just wish that there was a little bit more consideration in that regard." She elaborated by saying:

People can't sit down as soon as they get home and do homework. So maybe just having a little bit more leeway on that. And also, just being a little bit more understanding when situations come up like, if my kids are sick and I can't come into class well, there's no accommodations, there's no we'll give you notes, or we'll catch you up with class or anything like that. Even when I had COVID, it was like 'well your whole family has COVID, but you know we're not giving you anything to catch up on any classwork. You missed class that's your problem,' Which I understand, you know, adults have their own responsibility to show up to school, but it just would be nice if there was like, a little bit of flexibility when it comes to situations like that.

Allison provided a great example that describes how although the experiences of ParentALs are unique and varied due to child age, number of children, employment, and other

factors, the shared experience of having dependent children while enrolled in college influences and challenges a ParentALs persistence. Alison shared:

I think parents have it a little more difficult because there's so much more involvement, you're not just this kid out of school that gets to go to college, and school isn't your main focus anymore...back when we graduated high school, if you went into college then you would be focused on college and would still have the support of our parents, and their financial support, and we wouldn't have all these other things going on that kind of create this chaotic world of how do I get all of this done by myself.

### ***Resources that Reduce Role Strain and Time Poverty***

Each of the six participants provided examples of how flexibility, within college or instructor policies and behaviors, helped to create a more positive college experience. Patience recalled:

I think the good thing about [my community college] is that it's more flexible. I can pick on-campus classes or in-person, or hybrid because it is flexible. I can pick what works for me. That is really good for me and my kids.

Allison and Lorrie found that asynchronous online courses helped to balance role strain and time poverty. Allison shared that asynchronous courses were:

Definitely a lot easier. I can kind of do it at my own pace and go in and watch lectures when I have time and do the work as I can when I have the time, as long as I have it done by a specific time.

Allison shared that "having a little bit more flexibility with opening assignments for those of us that can work ahead, but also giving us a little bit more leeway to get stuff done, I think that's definitely helpful." When discussing her two-hour one-way community and assignment

deadlines that were scheduled for one hour after class ended, Lorrie felt supported by instructors that “will listen to some requests.” She shared that a few instructors allowed small deadline extensions but also shared “but after asking, I would say not too many of them would do that.”

Katie shared “For my next practicum I will be able to bring my daughter with me. That is a help for parents.” Katie shared that she wished that the college had:

A daycare center for just the time that I needed...I didn't enroll my daughter in childcare because she couldn't go at just certain times...Drop-in care and being able to have your kid watched for a period of time while you are in class or doing schoolwork would be helpful.

Madison shared that ParentALs should have the “opportunity to have some of the classes in person at night.” She indicated that she would have appreciated an opportunity to complete her science labs in person rather than online.

Lorrie shared “With our tuition, we get a certain amount of group tutoring and student tutoring. I've actually really benefited from that from the college. I've been working with a one-on-one tutor, and I find that helpful.” She shared that the tutor she's consistently been working with since enrolling, is “very like-minded and she is fantastic.” Lorrie found that tutoring:

helps me get a deeper understanding of what I'm learning, which I really like. And I also like the group tutoring sessions which have been really good too because it's more of like a discussion. And I find that that really helps with learning and retention because you know, you're talking about things, and you hear other people's perspectives. So, it's not just what only you learned.

Lorrie described her online experience:

Over COVID it was very much like you learn out of a textbook and you teach yourself, so you weren't really getting those other perspectives. So, I really look forward to our group tutoring every week. Just because it gives me an opportunity to have the ability to have that discussion a little bit with the topics we are talking about in class and working with some other peers and connecting that way. So yeah, I would say that the tutoring services of the college have been very beneficial to me being successful.

When asked if the tutoring was offered online or on-campus, Lorrie responded “They have all been online. I haven’t done any in person which has been especially helpful for me with my hectic schedule.” When closing the interview, this researcher asked Lorrie if there was anything else she would like to add to her interview and she responded:

I think with my college program having access to those tutoring services with my tuition really enhanced my learning and application as a nurse for sure. It has really been good at helping me just apply what I've learned and just be successful in clinical and just become a better nurse by connecting the dots on a lot of things and the discussions are really good as well. I really liked the tutors that they have here. I've worked with the same two tutors my whole entire nursing and they're fantastic.

### ***Financial Aid Resources and Opportunities***

Although financial aid eligibility requirements can challenge ParentALs (Palacios et al., 2021), ParentALs must often overcome food, housing, and financial insecurities to persist in postsecondary education (Archer et al., 2020). Financial aid including emergent need grants and scholarships, flexible funds, and other monetary resources are essential to ParentAL success (Chen et al., 2020; James, 2020; Remenick, 2019; Wagner et al., 2021). Allison shared “I have to be full-time to keep all of my Pell grants and scholarships.” Alison wished that community

colleges offered more financial help, “I’ve got to maintain this house and oil, and everything has tripled since COVID. I wouldn’t have to work quite as much, and I could focus more on school if I had financial help.” Lorrie shared that “because I don’t work, I rely solely on my student loans for everything. My tuition, my gas, my mortgage, everything.” She shared that “I apply for as much as I possibly can...I look at the college’s website to look for awards that I might qualify for. I’ve gone on different websites to look for different scholarships to apply for.” While she depended on her financial aid resources, she described frustration with resources that were not awarded until the end of the semester. Lorrie described:

We are having an issue with getting our tuition money in time. The past two terms I’ve had to pay my tuition on my credit card waiting to get money for my tuition from the government. It’s not just me it’s every student, so that’s kind of frustrating because then you’re paying interest on your credit card and incurring extra expenses just because those resources are not coming in on time. The scholarships with the college, typically come towards the end of the year. It would be really nice if they did those at the beginning of the year. That would help so that I would have that support for tuition costs at the beginning instead of at the end of the year.

Lorrie added that it would be helpful if the college:

Recogniz[ed] that you are a parenting student, and you may have more expenses than a student just living at home. I ended up getting the same amount of money as one of my peers who is 20 years old and living at home with their parents. I just don’t think that’s fair.

### **Summary**

This researcher listened to the experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses of these six adult learners that were connected through their shared experiences of being enrolled in community college while parenting. This researcher developed this qualitative phenomenological study to explore the lived experiences of ParentALs enrolled in United States community colleges. This researcher sought to discover the characteristics and factors that influence the postsecondary persistence of community college ParentALs. The interview participants shared descriptive responses about their experiences as ParentALs. The data collected and analyzed by this researcher reflected the lived experiences of the targeted student population. The findings were presented in this chapter. The next chapter, Chapter 5 provides a further review of the data, a comparative analysis of the interview data and the literature review, an interpretation of this researcher's findings, implications related to the findings, recommendations for future action and study, and the conclusion to this study.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The literature review reveals connections between the lived experiences of parenting adult learners (ParentALs) and their persistence (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). Although approximately 74% of postsecondary students are non-traditional adult learners, the U.S. higher education system is designed to fit a direct from high school to college experience (Lewis, 2021). While nearly four million undergraduate students in the United States are ParentALs, this group is often invisible in higher education policy, practice, and institutional culture (Generation Hope, 2020). The limited literature available is indicative of increasing awareness of the unique experiences of ParentALs and casts doubt on the effectiveness and relevance of policies and practices developed from theories and concepts based on the traditional college student (Ardissone et al., 2021). Given that 42% of all U.S. ParentALs are enrolled in a public community college, these institutions are uniquely situated to respond to the need to improve outcomes amongst this student population. This study aimed to fill this gap in understanding.

### **Interpretation and Importance of Findings**

This study conducted six semi-structured interviews to answer the following research question:

What are the lived experiences of parenting adult learners in community colleges?

Six participants responded to the questions in the semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix D). This researcher asked this question with the expectation that the experiences described by study participants would align with the community college persistence factors expressed in the literature review. This study was designed to examine the elements of the theory of adult learner persistence (Bergman, 2012; Bergman et al., 2014; Bergman & Olson, 2020) and The Terenzini and Reason framework (Reason, 2009). The theory of adult learner persistence (Bergman et al.,

2014) is grounded on the premise that entry characteristics (e.g., prior college experience, educational motivations, children, marital status, etcetera), the external environment (e.g., finances, family support, social capital employment, etc.), and internal campus and academic factors (e.g., enrollment status, GPA, institutional support, financial aid, etcetera) may have a direct influence on adult learner persistence. The study confirmed that each of the elements of the theory of adult learner persistence had some influence on participant persistence.

One way in which this study confirms the theory of adult learner persistence is demonstrated in the discussion of social capital in Chapter 4. Five of the six participants shared that they had a strong support system that influenced their persistence in community college. Patience affirmed that her most important resource was “having a good partner that does a lot of things for me and the family.” Participants discussed being surprised by the support they received from their families. Lorrie indicated that she “probably wouldn’t even be here right now” if her partner had not begun paying her mortgage so she could complete her nursing degree. Five participants described ways in which their support systems increased while they were enrolled in community college. Allison said, “I’ve actually built quite a support system, and it’s a lot larger than it was when I started.”

Bergman et al. (2014) found that persistence can be correlated to student goals and motivations, role conflict, number of courses/credits enrolled, and relationship with faculty and/or advisor. Data gathered from this study confirmed this finding. This is most strongly recognized in Allison’s statement about her relationship with her academic advisor/primary instructor. Allison described her as “pretty awesome” and shared that the support she received from her instructor was “really the only reason why I passed.”

This study confirmed Markle's (2015) finding that females tend to internalize an ideal standard for both the role of mother and student as demonstrated by Allison's description of "trying to please everybody and make sure I can get all my work in, all my clients taken care of, and my son taken care of and still keep up with everything." However, because each of the participants identified as female, this study was unable to confirm Markle's (2015) finding that role conflict negatively impacts the persistence of female parenting students more than male parenting students. This study confirmed Markle's (2015) theory that students who are mothers often epitomize role expectations to an intensity that challenges their ability to achieve the standards which they set for themselves as mothers, students, spouses, and employees. Madison demonstrated this by expressing her frustration in balancing her personal motivation for a specific goal GPA with "all the other factors that challenge your grade." She described her process of balancing the weight of attaining a "perfectionist GPA" and juggling multiple roles and responsibilities.

Bergman et al. (2014) indicated that guilt and frustration related to the balancing act of role conflict influence persistence. Markle (2015) found that students that are mothers tend to perceive that their educational goals are selfish and detract from their ability to care for their family; they express guilt for investing in their own learning. This study affirmed that guilt, described by the participants as "mom guilt" impacted their community college experiences. Allison shared "I don't have as much time with my son. I am not as available at night. I find that my routine is completely disrupted." Allison described guilt related to her son taking on responsibilities "He's doing all this household stuff that he shouldn't have to do so I can sit down and nail out a paper or focus on school work." Shelby referenced "the overwhelming feeling" of

mom guilt which she described as “that feeling of knowing that this is the right thing to do and that I have to be persistent.” Lorrie provided a similar sentiment:

The biggest thing is just like the guilt that I had as a parent for not being able to always be there for my kids and also feeling like sometimes it's the other way around, where my kids are taking care of me. My girls are a little older, they both love being in the kitchen.

Bergman et al. (2014) found that a college with an institutional culture that was responsive and supportive of the needs of adult learners and sought to reduce internal and external barriers had a positive impact on adult learner persistence. The theory includes internal campus and environmental factors that Bergman (2012) found to strongly correlate with adult learner persistence (GPA, flexible scheduling, financial support, full- or part-time enrollment, advising, etcetera). This study confirmed that flexible scheduling and other factors related to institutional culture influenced participant persistence. Each of the six participants discussed how flexibility, within college or instructor policies and behaviors, provided important support. Patience shared “I think the good thing about [my community college] is that it’s more flexible. I can pick on-campus classes or in-person, or hybrid... I can pick what works for me. That is really good for me and my kids.” Conversely, Lorrie and Shelby discussed the negative influence of inflexibility in selecting their clinical sites. Shelby shared that the process of being placed at a clinical site was “very secretive.” She added “I don’t know why it was so closed for us, I thought that was ridiculous. I’ve been told in the past by other people who’ve been through the program that they actually picked where they were going.” When discussing the short notice, she was provided about the clinical location that was 90 minutes away from her home she said “when you have a family and people that rely on you to do all the running around, I was so stressed out I felt like I was going to throw up every day. It was awful.”

The theory of adult learner persistence recognizes that institutions often inadequately support adult learners and that practices designed to serve traditional students negatively influence adult learners (Bergman, 2012; Bergman et al., 2014; Bergman & Olson, 2020). This study confirmed that three of the six participants were unaware of resources and practices designed to support ParentALs and two participants could name a resource, service, or policy that was specific to parenting students that was provided or facilitated by the community college. The two participants that responded favorably indicated that their college allowed their children to attend online classes or practicum experiences and provided no other example of ParentAL-specific support. Madison affirmed that daytime college events were more accessible to traditional students, rather than ParentALs because “their life revolved around their school life.” Madison described feeling like “there’s nothing for me. I can see the pictures and I can’t go to anything.”

The Terenzini and Reason framework is based on the premise that persistence is a positive progression of individual student goal attainment, rather than an institutional objective to retain and graduate students (Reason, 2009). The data collected in this study affirmed that student motivation is a powerful influence on the participants. Katie described “wanting to finish the degree for me, myself, and my kids.” The foundation for the Terenzini and Reason framework is a belief that students enroll in college with diverse personal, educational, and social background experiences and perceptions that either help or hinder them from participating and persisting in higher education (Reason, 2009). This study affirmed that ParentALs have unique background factors that influence their college experience. Allison highlighted this by saying “Everything is different for student parents.”

Reason (2009) found that the intersectional way a student's characteristics and experiences interact significantly influences persistence. This study affirmed that participants experienced compounding challenges of juggling a variety of factors and responsibilities. Katie described how role strain decreased her capacity to manage time effectively. "It's hard because you can't predict exactly when you get to do your homework or whatnot." Allison demonstrated how ParentALs often do not have the option to reduce the burden of working while juggling the responsibilities of being a parent and a student by saying "I still have to work because I have to keep this home and my kid and everything else for my kid going" Lorrie summarized how the factors related to being a ParentAL lead to time poverty by saying "Time is just split in more directions." Challenges related to role strain and time poverty were combined with the socio-economic factors that led to 100% of study participants experiencing basic needs insecurities while enrolled in community college. Shelby and Lorrie were further challenged by living in a rural location that placed them 90-120 minutes, one-way, from their clinical site placements. Lorrie described her frustration about the compounding weight of not being able to choose her clinical site by sharing "I spend four hours a day driving now, those were four hours that I could spend studying."

Reason (2009) and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that the degree of change on any variable may not be as influential as the overall extent of interconnected changes that a student may experience. Participants affirmed that the overall influence of intersectional challenges and barriers influenced their college experiences. Madison described how a variety of factors intensified to the point where she "started to really struggle with school." When describing role strain, time poverty, the need to work full-time, the need to complete a field

practicum, and then becoming sick with COVID-19, she said “I felt like I didn’t have time to do anything. I got really behind and thought I was gonna fail.”

The Terenzini and Reason framework (Reason, 2009) recognized that persistence is connected to a student’s defined goal and therefore subject to influence by the individual’s experiences, environment, and motivation as they persist towards degree completion. Katie provided an affirmative example “I don’t know if I would be taking classes if I didn’t have a kid. I might be working...I had another career...when I got pregnant and had a baby I had to change.” In addition to pre-college background characteristics, Reason believed that academic experiences, chosen majors, internships, practicum experiences, hours available for assignments and studying, and teaching styles and instructor behaviors may influence persistence. The participants’ discussion of their practicum and clinical experience, time spent on coursework, and perceptions of instructor behaviors confirmed these factors influence ParentALs.

Lorrie shared “I can barely find time to sleep.” Madison reflected that the time she has to study is unpredictable “because something else comes up with the kids.” Four of the six participants mentioned that the parenting status of the instructor influenced instructional behavior. Shelby shared “I think that a lot of the faculty already have children so they can relate.” Allison described non-parenting instructors as rigid and said, “they don’t get it.”

This study affirmed Tinto’s (2006) and Reason’s (2009), findings that an institution’s culture and ability to foster students’ sense of belonging and effectively communicate clear educational pathways are important to student outcomes. Patience compared her university experiences with her community college experience and described an increased sense of belonging at community college where “the students have families and kids.” Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) also found that students perceived their connection to and sense of belonging

with faculty and peers to be related to persistence. Three of the six participants provided examples of times when their grades suffered when instructor instructions were unclear and/or disorganized. These three participants described being frustrated by being unable to gain clarity and understanding from their course instructor. Shelby mentioned, “When the educational material is not presented well, it really affects not just what we learn but how we learn and what we get for grades, that has certainly affected my GPA.” Allison added, “There has definitely been some stress as far as assignments or not understanding the work.” Lorrie mentioned that her instructors were “not really interested in helping you move forward.”

The participant interviews affirmed that student confidence, self-determination, and belief in their academic abilities may also influence persistence (Reason, 2009). All participants indicated that their confidence and self-determination were the primary factors influencing their current degree GPAs. Lorrie shared “I’m very driven to succeed.” Shelby shared “a benefit that I hadn’t realized was increasing my self-confidence.” Her self-determination influenced her success in a very challenging allied health program “you can’t really sit back and hope that someone else is going to help pull you through and you have to show up and prove yourself in person and physically, not just behind paper.”

The findings shown in Table 1 demonstrated that the participation group represented diversity in enrollment status, course methodology, employment status, program major, and prior educational attainment. The data shown in Table 2 reflected the variety of participant background entry characteristics that Reason (2009) and Tinto (2006) believed may influence their postsecondary persistence and their perception of their college experiences. The Terenzini and Reason framework (Reason, 2009) framed the concept of persistence as a positive progression of individual student goal attainment. The theory of adult learner persistence

(Bergman et al., 2014) described persistence as correlated to student goals and motivations, role conflict, number of courses/credits enrolled, and relationship with faculty and/or advisor. This researcher noted four themes that emerged related to participant motivation to earn a community college degree. Shelby, Madison, and Katie were motivated to find a local job. Madison was seeking to retrain for a new career after a layoff. Katie was seeking to retrain after finding it difficult to find employment in her current state of residence with her prior bachelor's degree in geology. Shelby, Madison, and Patience described being motivated by showing their child(ren) the importance of completing a degree and by showing their child(ren) that they were determined to persist. Madison, Lorrie, and Katie chose to enroll in community college to increase their opportunity to earn a stable income for their families. Shelby, Lorrie, and Allison shared how they were motivated by their passion to enter their field of study to help other people and to solve challenges experienced by others. Allison was retraining after a medical diagnosis that required her to avoid heavy lifting and physical labor and shared "I've wanted to do this since I was in high school." Allison added:

I want to be able to use my experiences and my learning over the last 30 years to help other people in the way that I can. I feel that it will give me the ability to empathize with people a little bit more and understand where they're coming from.

Reason (2009) believed that internships and practicum experiences may influence a student's persistence. Lorrie, Shelby, and Patience listed the full-time clinical requirement as a challenge. Lorrie and Shelby both shared that the logistics of their full-time clinical placements are among their biggest stressors as they each live 90 to 120 minutes, one-way, from their clinical placement sites. Madison shared that her field practicum experience led to her full-time employment before graduation. However, Madison also informed this researcher that her

employment caused a lot of stress and reduced her sense of belonging to her community college. She shared “I didn’t realize how stressful that was going to make my life between work and the kids and a schedule.” Katie provided a favorable mention of her field practicum. She shared “For my next practicum I will be able to bring my daughter with me. That is a help for parents.”

Reason (2009) believed that the hours available for assignments and studying may influence persistence. Ascend (2018), Wladis et al. (2018), and Chen et al. (2020) found despite being highly motivated to succeed, ParentALs have major constraints on time. Time poverty is defined as the “byproduct of student parenthood” (Wladis et al., 2018, p. 810) that decreases both the quality and quantity of time that ParentALs can dedicate to college studies. Allison, Patience, and Madison described significant fluctuations in the amount of time spent on studying and completing assignments dependent on the number of credits and difficulty of courses. Madison indicated that some days require eight or more hours to complete assignments but overall, the time commitment varies from a few hours to up to twenty hours per week. Allison indicated that difficult courses may require 15 hours or more just for the one course on top of the time requirements for the other courses while less challenging semesters may only require about eight hours per week. Overall participant responses to the average amount of time spent on studying and completing assignments ranged from three hours per week (Shelby and Katie) to up to 64 hours per week (Lorrie).

Martinez et al. (2021) found that time commuting to college increased exhaustion, stress, and time poverty. Coordinating transportation to college, clinical sites, and child sports and school events also caused stress above and beyond the financial stress associated with car repairs and needing to unexpectedly purchase a vehicle. Patience, Madison, Alicia, Lorrie, and Shelby each listed transportation as a major challenge. Madison shared “Within the past year, I actually

had two cars break...it was pretty stressful.” Lorrie and Shelby shared difficulty in getting to school due to one-way home-to-school commutes of one and two hours which are sometimes increased depending on the location of their clinical placement. Lorrie shared “Now I’m driving six days a week and spending so much money on gas I haven’t been able to pay both my gas and my mortgage.” Participants were challenged by the logistics of their children’s schedules including school drop off and pick up sports, and medical appointments. Lorrie described her experience as “having a go to a building when you have kids really is hard because you are subject to whatever their schedule is and if you have things that come up, it’s just really hard.”

Giurge and Whillan (2020) describe time poverty as an often-overlooked threat to physical and mental well-being, productivity, and prosperity. Markle (2015) suggested that perceptions of success in a particular role, such as student, parent, employee, and head of household, are often incompatible with the time, physical, and emotional energy, and capacity available, causing time poverty for ParentALs. Dill (2020) suggested that ParentALs who feel overwhelmed by role strain may be less likely to persist. Each of the participants provided examples of how the pressures of role strain impacted their college experience. Madison described balancing the weight of attaining a “perfectionist GPA” and persisting in college. Allison described being overwhelmed by “trying to please everybody and make sure I can get all of my work in, all of my clients taken care of, and my son taken care of, and still keep up with everything.” Madison described having to switch to online courses and leave her on-campus student tutoring job as a stressful decision she had to make “because it was too much.” Lorrie described the pressure of needing “to be very self-motivated and self-driven in this program, as [the instructors] are not really interested in helping you move forward.”

The data shown in Table 3 demonstrated the external environmental characteristics that may influence a student's ability to persist in postsecondary education (Bergman, 2012; Bergman et al., 2014; Bergman & Olson, 2020). Four of the six participants were employed, or self-employed. Madison shared "I didn't realize how stressful that was going to make my life between work and the kids and a schedule and so I semi-regret getting a job." Madison described stress related to switching to online courses "because I'm working, I have to take everything all online." She was also frustrated with having to leave her paid student tutoring position when she "started working at the childcare center. I couldn't do both, it was too much." Allison described her stress from "trying to please everybody and make sure I can get all my work in, all my clients taken care of, and my son taken care of and still keep up with everything."

This study affirmed the theory of adult learner persistence (Bergman et al., 2014) premise that the external environment (e.g., finances) influences students. Five of the six participants indicated that they had experienced basic needs insecurities while enrolled in community college. Generation Hope (2020) found that the financial costs of transportation to class, internships, practicums, work, and their children's childcare or school significantly challenged ParentALs. Five of the participants had experienced transportation barriers. Madison shared "within the past year, I actually had two cars break...it was pretty stressful." Three participants shared that affordable housing was a challenge. Allison shared that her rent doubled during her most recent fall semester. Allison shared that increased costs and inadequate financial aid have caused her to have "to work more and working more is what cuts into the time to do schoolwork." Two participants shared that oil or heat was a financial barrier. Allison said, "I've got to maintain this house and oil...I wouldn't have to work quite as much, and I could focus more on school if I had financial help." Patience shared that her housing and transportation

“were more manageable before, but right now oil is expensive.” One participant indicated that they had experienced food insecurity. Lorrie described that her finances were manageable when her courses were online and only her clinical practicums and labs were on campus. Conversely, she shared “now coming back to campus...and spending so much money on gas I haven’t been able to pay both my gas and my mortgage.”

One participant’s response confirmed the Institute for Women’s Policy Research & Ascend at the Aspen Institute’s (2019) findings that the need to provide for both them and their child(ren) and the likeliness to have basic needs insecurities may cause ParentALs to take on more student debt than non-parenting students. Lorrie affirmed this by saying “I can barely find time to sleep, let alone work.” She added “because I don’t work, I rely solely on my student loans for everything. My tuition, my gas, my mortgage, everything.”

This study affirmed the theory of adult learner persistence (Bergman et al., 2014) premise that the external environment (e.g., social capital) influenced students. Five of the participants shared that they felt they had a strong social support system (social capital). In addition to the family support previously mentioned, 83% mentioned a college support person(s). Allison shared “my instructors are usually the first place I go.” Shelby mentioned building relationships with some of the faculty and staff whom she described as “very helpful in helping me to get resources for making things work when I have a family challenge that makes it hard.” Five participants listed family members in their social capital. Patience informed this researcher that “having a good partner that does a lot of things for me and the family” was her strongest source of support. Allison and Lorrie shared that their child(ren) do a lot of the household chores. Allison said, “I’ll come home and he’s cooking supper and he’s cleaning and he’s doing all the dishes.” Lorrie shared, “Sometimes...my kids are taking care of me.”

Kirk and Lewis (2015) found that social capital positively influences persistence, especially for underserved and/or at-risk students. Four of the six participants described a community support person(s) such as a therapist, social worker, two-generation coach, or program navigator as being a part of their social capital. Two participants included student peers and/or work colleagues in their social capital. Shelby shared “we’ve worked together a lot in labs, so we get to know each other pretty well.” Two participants mentioned friends. Allison shared “I’ve got my friends who are all very supportive...they still encourage me and support me.”

The data shown in Table 4 demonstrated the participants’ internal college and academic factors that influence their community college experience. Four of the six of the participants were enrolled full-time, three were enrolled primarily in online courses and three mostly attended courses on campus. Three of the participants were federal Pell Grant recipients. Two of the participants said they were “familiar” with financial aid resources, and four indicated that they were “somewhat familiar” with financial aid resources.

This study affirmed the theory of adult learner persistence (Bergman et al., 2014) premise that internal campus and academic factors (e.g., enrollment status, GPA, institutional support, financial aid, etcetera) impacted the participant experience in community college. It was not a surprise, to this researcher, that participants discussed the connection between their GPA and their financial aid eligibility. The importance of financial aid and other monetary resources are well documented in the literature review as essential to ParentAL persistence (Chen et al., 2020; James, 2020; PERG, 2020; Remenick, 2019; The Graduate Network, 2019; Wagner et al., 2021; Wladis et al., 2018; Zarifa et al., 2018). Katie and Shelby were ineligible for a Pell Grant due to their prior bachelor’s degrees. Patience was ineligible due to her status as an international

student. Katie shared that her bachelor's degree also excluded her from receiving community program benefits to help with basic needs insecurities. Each of these three Pell-ineligible participants expressed that they had experienced basic needs insecurities while enrolled in community college.

Reason (2009) and Cox (2015) demonstrated that teaching and coaching styles and behaviors may influence persistence. This researcher did not discover any literature review that connected an instructor's parenting status to their students' college experience or postsecondary persistence. However, Allison, Shelby, Patience, and Katie shared that they believed that they had a positive community college experience because their instructors were parents and were perceived to understand the factors and characteristics that are unique to ParentALs.

When describing their instructors who were also parents Shelby said, "They can relate." Allison said, "We've [both] had that relationship with having to navigate it all." Patience shared that her instructor "has kids so she gets it." The participants shared that flexibility, encouragement, communication, organization, insightfulness, understanding, and responsiveness were helpful instructor behaviors. Conversely, participants shared that rigid, young, fresh-out-of-college, inflexible, strict, and unresponsive instructors create challenges that negatively impact the community college experience.

Tinto (2006) and Reason (2009) determined that an institution's culture and ability to foster students' sense of belonging and effectively communicate clear educational pathways are important to persistence outcomes. Allison shared that she appreciated the instructors that helped her to "understand the material." She described her academic advisor and primary instructor as "be[ing] very good at directing me on what classes I need to take...she is also very receptive to my needs." Although Allison described her statistics courses as "the one I got stressed out about

the most,” she described her statistics instructor as “pretty awesome.” Allison shared that her statistics instructor “was available for literally everything 24/7. I could message her, and she would get right back to me and walk me through it. I think that is really the only reason why I passed that class.”

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that students perceived their connection to and sense of belonging with faculty and peers to be related to persistence. Participants expressed variances in their sense of belonging and engagement with the community college. Allison indicated that she felt a sense of connection/belonging when saw her instructor’s child on her lap during a meeting. Madison described the feeling that the community college offered a lot of opportunities for students. “I feel like they do a lot.” However, participants described college activities that were only available during the day and on campus as inaccessible to online, working, and/or parenting students. Madison shared “I am an online-only student, and I don’t get to enjoy the same benefits as some of the students that have the ability to go to campus on a regular basis. I’m missing all of the activities.” Madison described feeling “welcome until I started working” and now feels like “there’s nothing for me.” Katie described meeting peers via online Zoom® course sessions to feel connected. Conversely, she said, “When it’s just online there’s not much sense of a community.” Shelby shared that she felt welcome at her college but was “a little surprised at the lack of participation from the students” when referencing engagement opportunities that her college had offered, such as parenting groups. Shelby also described that she had “felt left out, or on a different timeline” when conversations didn’t reflect that ParentALs were integrated into the courses. She said that her instructors “sometimes forget that the demographics of the student body are mixed in... a lot of conversations don’t reflect that some students aren’t very young or that some have kids.”

Hensly et al., (2021) found that 35% of U.S. adults that have an unfinished college degree have dependent children. These 12.2 million parents who have college experience but no degree are key to the achievement of state and national educational attainment goals (Hensly et al., 2021; Ward et al., 2020). This study confirmed Hensly et al. findings that ParentALs are rarely acknowledged or intentionally included in college completion plans as affirmed by only two of participants being able to name a resource, service, or policy specific to parenting students that was provided by their community college. Hensly et al. and Ward et al. (2020) call on postsecondary institutions to solve economic and workforce challenges by developing policies and practices that help adult learners complete unfinished degrees. Community colleges are unequivocally positioned to support ParentALs with prior college experiences due to their affordability and ability to respond to workforce needs to develop or adapt programs (Juszkiewicz, 2017).

Community colleges should be more equipped to respond to ParentALs as community college students, overall, tend to be non-traditional in age, have prior college experience, and enroll part-time (Juszkiewicz, 2017). This study confirmed that participants described their community college experience as different from other college and university experiences. Patience shared that her prior colleges and universities had a lot of younger students “But at community college, the students have families and kids.” Patience said, “I think the good thing about [my community college] is that it’s more flexible.” Madison said, “I feel like the community college instructor worked with me, I don’t know if any of the major colleges might [have].” Katie shared that her community college experience was very different from her prior college experience. Katie described her prior college as strict and inflexible about assignment deadlines. She described her community college as “a lot different” and more flexible and

understanding of unexpected family circumstances. She said, “I think that it helps a lot to have leeway to be able to get done a day or two days late.” Shelby shared “I feel like the college has been very helpful in a lot of ways. I think even more helpful than the university I went to.” She described the community college as “a much more personalized experience.”

This study successfully answered this study’s research question. Further this research supported the theories, concepts, and findings presented in the literature review. Through the exploration of the lived experience of ParentALs, this study affirmed that entry characteristics, student motivations, the external environment, internal campus and academic factors, and student sense of belonging influence ParentALs college experience as supported by the Theory of Adult Learner Persistence (Bergman, 2012; Bergman et al., 2014; Bergman & Olson, 2020) and The Terenzini and Reason Framework (Reason, 2009).

### **Implications**

The gap in information regarding the experiences of community college ParentALs is correlated to the lack of data collection and the avoidance of identifying ParentALs as a unique student population group (Lin et al., 2021; Reed et al., 2021). Although more than one of every five postsecondary students in the United States are parenting, they continue to be treated as “a deviation from the norm” (Eddinger, 2019, p. 1). ParentALs experience postsecondary education differently than traditional and non-parenting students and have unique responsibilities and persistence challenges (Hubbard, 2019). The lived experiences of a ParentAL are uniquely related to their roles, responsibilities, and motivations as parenting students enrolled in higher education (Markle, 2015; Wladis, 2018) as evident with this study’s participants.

Community college faculty, staff, and administrators must recognize the unique work, family, and life responsibilities that ParentALs face (Bergman et al., 2014). Community college

leaders must understand the aspects of role strain, time poverty, financial and basic needs insecurities, and sacrifices that ParentALs make related to juggling multiple roles and navigating complex intersectional stressors (Lin et al., 2021; Markle, 2015; Martinez et al., 2021). When describing the challenge of full-time clinical placement, Shelby shared that she and her parenting peers “really wish it was part-time so that we could function.” Lorrie shared that the primary factor that she would like to have her college change would be “flexibility in course [and clinical] times.” She added “We get our course schedule, and it is what it is...It's very rigid. I just wish that there was like a little bit of flexibility in the course schedule itself.” Allison shared “I have to be full-time to keep all of my Pell grants and scholarships.” Alison wished that community colleges offered more financial help, “I’ve got to maintain this house and oil, and everything has tripled since COVID. I wouldn’t have to work quite as much, and I could focus more on school if I had financial help.”

Despite increased barriers and challenges, ParentALs are particularly motivated to persist in postsecondary education to ensure that their child(ren) have a better life (Goodman & Reddy, 2019 & Wladis, 2018) as evident with this study’s participants. In the United States, a postsecondary degree is essential to an individual’s economic stability, upward mobility, and quality of life (Chase-Landsdale et al., 2019; Gault et al., 2019). When the individual seeking to persist in postsecondary education is a ParentAL, the benefits of completing a degree are multiplied across generations (Gault et al., 2020). Reducing the persistence gap between parenting and non-parenting students is key to closing student equity gaps (Wladis et al., 2018). Madison shared that she chose to retrain with an early childhood education degree to combine her goal to find a local job that would “better our family [by] having a career that kept [her] financially stable and worked well for my family life.” Shelby described being motivated by her

son, “I also think it’s nice for my son to see how much hard work it takes to get to where you want to be.” Lorrie shared “I just wanted to have a career that was a little bit more stable, stable hours, and stable income, especially now that my kids are getting older.”

To improve ParentAL outcomes, community colleges, and postsecondary institutions must recognize the unique lived experiences of ParentALs. The findings of this study indicated that the participants experienced community college differently than their traditional peers. Characteristics such as family size, marital status, employment, and motivation were described in ways that uniquely represented the participants’ status as ParentALs. Factors such as role strain, time poverty, financial insecurities, social capital stress, and guilt were experienced differently by ParentALs and impacted their college experience. Participants described their needs, challenges, perceptions, and experiences in a way that only a parenting student could. Table 4 depicted the most common challenges described by the participants. All participants described challenges related to inadequate time to balance all the responsibilities of being a student and a parent while some also juggled being a spouse, a partner, and/or an employee. 50% of the participants described “mom guilt” and four participants mentioned that they do not have as much, or enough, time with their children because the participants are enrolled in college. 100% of the participants stated that they have had to ask family for help with household responsibilities to complete college courses and assignments. All participants indicated that distractions caused by children and/or due to a lack of a dedicated study space negatively impacted their college experience. None of the participants indicated that affording tuition and fees was a challenge as every participant indicated that their tuition and fees were fully covered by grants and scholarships. However, all participants experienced financial challenges and basic needs insecurities while enrolled in community college.

This researcher's literature review documented the unique characteristics, factors, and challenges that ParentALs experience when enrolled in community college. The findings of this study aligned with the theories, concepts, and descriptions established by the literature. Community college faculty, staff, and administrators are more likely to overlook the distinct experiences and qualities of ParentALs in favor of practices that group ParentALs with traditional students and/or non-traditional students without children (Gault et al., 2020). When asked "Are you aware of any resources, services, or policies that are specific to parenting students?" only two participants responded "Yes." Katie responded, "For my practicum, I will be able to bring my daughter with me." Shelby responded, "I signed up for a parenting group and I think one other person did in the whole school...so we ended up not doing the group."

This researcher found it promising that four of the participants described that their community college experience was improved because their instructors were also parents and were described as understanding, responsive, relatable, and flexible. This is progress when compared to the literature review's findings that describe ParentALs as *invisible* (Chen, 2017; Generation Hope, 2020; Pendleton & Atella, 2020; Wladis et al., 2018), *understudied* (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Reed et al., 2021), and *underrepresented* (Archer et al., 2020; Gault et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2021). While this researcher suspects that college faculty, staff, and administrators who are parents may experience similar issues of role strain, time poverty, and stress, this researcher is hopeful that the compassion, understanding, and support shared between parenting students and parenting college employees may be a compelling factor to build awareness, understanding, and improved policies and practices that recognize the uniqueness of the ParentAL experience.

Improved policies and practices that foster a positive ParentAL college experience are not only good for the student and his or her family but are also important to the future of higher education in the United States as evident with this study's participants. Community colleges are often funded based on retention rates (Wagner et al., 2021) yet U.S. colleges are struggling to achieve retention goals (Bergman & Olson, 2020). Improving ParentAL outcomes is vital to an institution's ability to retain students, financial stability, and overall effectiveness (Hanson, 2021; Generation Hope, 2020). Further, retaining a college student is three to four times more financially effective than efforts to recruit and enroll new students. De Freitas et al. (2021). With nearly four million ParentALs in the United States, the retention of this vulnerable student group is valuable.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Community college faculty, staff, and administrators should seek to increase data, awareness, and understanding of ParentALs as evident with this study's participants. This researcher believes that a common understanding and a unified vision and mission to improve ParentAL experiences and outcomes must seek to reduce barriers and challenges, and accentuate the unique qualities, characteristics, and motivations of ParentALs. U.S. higher education projections are predicting declines in traditional student enrollment, with two-year colleges predicted to be the most severely impacted (Grawe, 2018). Public community colleges need to rethink the way that they recruit, enroll, respond to, and support non-traditional adult learners to minimize the risk of declining traditional student demographics and the changing landscape of the U.S. economy and workforce. Indicators forecast increased demand for postsecondary enrollment amongst nontraditional students (Gardner, 2019; Grawe, 2019). ParentALs play a key role in the survival of public two-year community colleges. However, higher education leaders

must quickly work to understand how their policies and practices are perceived by ParentALs and seek to take actions that increase ParentALs' sense of belonging and ability to persist (Tinto, 2017b).

Community colleges should evaluate their institutional culture for understanding and value of and responsiveness to enrolled ParentALs. Scholarships, grants, responsive emergent needs, transportation, and childcare funds, effective student advising and coaching, whole-family two-generation approaches, and other supportive policies and resources should be embedded within the organizational culture in a way that improves the ParentALs community college experience. Community college leaders should offer opportunities for faculty, staff, and administrators to better understand and problem-solve the unique qualities, characteristics, and needs of ParentAL students. Flexible course scheduling, a variety of course delivery methods, student input into field practicum and clinical site locations, and somewhat flexible assignment deadlines should be considered as a mainstay of institutional practice as evident with this study's participants.

Opportunities for online, working, and parenting students to engage with faculty, staff, and peers despite challenging external schedules are important to a ParentAL's sense of belonging and outcomes. Weekly recorded Zoom® sessions are one example of a positive resource that builds connection, engagement, belonging, and overall satisfaction among ParentALs. Even when the Zoom® session is optional and/or set on a specific evening time each week, ParentALs who can attend experience a benefit from connecting with their faculty and peers. ParentALs who cannot attend but can watch the recording benefit from seeing the faces (if cameras are on) and voices of their faculty and peers and experiencing another opportunity to hear and absorb course content. Faculty should also consider that allowing ParentALs to work

ahead in their course assignments is a positive support that may improve ParentAL outcomes by alleviating some challenges related to time poverty, role strain, and unanticipated family events such as sick children. If a ParentAL has worked ahead, they may not fall drastically behind when an unpredictable challenge arises. Community college leaders must also evaluate attendance and grading policies that may systemically place ParentALs at a disadvantage when compared to their traditional peers that do not navigate as many unexpected disruptors such as sick children and closed childcare centers as mentioned by this study's participants. Community college leaders should also explore tutoring, audiobooks, learning management systems (LMS), and printing and studying opportunities that will likely impact the ParentAL experience.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

This study explored the lived experiences of ParentALs enrolled in public two-year US community colleges. The data that was collected and analyzed into the presented findings related to this small group of ParentALs helped to reduce the problem of the lack of data and awareness about the lived experiences of ParentALs enrolled in community colleges. The impact of this study was limited by the size and scope.

A more robust study with a much larger sample representing a larger selection of community colleges could provide a deeper picture of the phenomenon. Although recruitment efforts to participate in this study were presented in a broad array of social media groups and settings, 100% of the respondents identified as female. Despite national recruitment efforts and recruitment assistance from community college presidents, academic deans, faculty, TRiO program directors, two-generation family support coaches, leaders, and Ascend at the Aspen Institute, participants were enrolled in only three distinct community colleges. Further study that is representative of a more diverse participant sample would provide greater credibility and

reflection of the ParentAL experience in community college. This researcher believes that there is a need for future studies to examine, and potentially compare, the experiences of ParentALs enrolled in community colleges, four-year public colleges and universities, private colleges and universities, and graduate and doctoral programs. Further, it may be enlightening to focus on ParentALs with some prior college experience but no degree, those who have a prior degree but are seeking to reskill, and/or ParentALs who transfer from a two-year community college program to a four-year college or university. Prior to this study, this researcher had not given much contemplation to the experiences of college faculty who have children. However, this researcher now feels that studying the experiences of faculty and staff with children and possibly their interactions with or perceptions of students with children would likely provide valuable insight into understanding the interconnections between parenting faculty, staff, and students and the role that this shared experience may have in institutional culture and faculty, staff, and student outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

Improving the understanding of the qualities, characteristics, and factors that influence a ParentALs community college experience is a necessary precursor to developing responsive and adaptive policies practices, and behaviors that improve outcomes for this vulnerable student population. Through the exploration of the lived experience of ParentALs, this study affirmed that entry characteristics, student motivations, the external environment, internal campus and academic factors, and student sense of belonging influence ParentALs college experience as supported by the theory of adult learner persistence (Bergman, 2012; Bergman et al., 2014; & Bergman and Olson, 2020) and The Terenzini and Reason framework (Reason, 2009). This study added additional perspective to the body of literature on the lived experiences of ParentALs

enrolled in postsecondary education, with a specific focus on those enrolled in public two-year community colleges in the United States.

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## APPENDIX A

## UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND'S INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



Institutional Review Board  
Julie Longua Peterson, Chair

Biddeford Campus  
11 Hills Beach Road  
Biddeford, ME 04005  
(207) 602-2244 T  
(207) 602-5905 F

Portland Campus  
716 Stevens Avenue  
Portland, ME 04103

**DATE OF LETTER:** November 4, 2022

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Michelle Webb  
**FACULTY ADVISOR:** Gizelle Luevano, EdD

**PROJECT NUMBER:** 1022-13  
**RECORD NUMBER:** 1022-13-01  
**PROJECT TITLE:** Perceptions of the Unique Challenges of Parenting Adult Learners Regarding Persistence in Two-Year Community Colleges

**SUBMISSION TYPE:** Exempt Project  
**SUBMISSION DATE:** 10/22/2022

**ACTION:** Determination of Exempt Status  
**DECISION DATE:** 11/4/2022

**REVIEW CATEGORY:** Exemption Category # 2(ii)

The UNE Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above referenced project and has determined that the proposed work is exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.104.

Additional IRB review is not required for this project as submitted. However, if any changes to the design of the study are contemplated (e.g., revision to the protocol, data collection instruments, interview/survey questions, recruitment materials, participant information sheet, and/or other IRB-reviewed documents), the Principal Investigator must submit an amendment to the IRB to ensure the requested change(s) will not alter the exempt status of the project.

Please feel free to contact me at (207) 602-2244 or [irb@une.edu](mailto:irb@une.edu) with any questions.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Kennedy".

Bob Kennedy, MS  
Director, Research Integrity

## APPENDIX B

## SOCIAL MEDIA LANGUAGE FOR RECRUITMENT POSTS

Are you a community college student enrolled while raising one or more children? Please consider participating in an interview study to help faculty, staff, and leaders better understand the experiences of parenting adult learners! Please contact Michelle Webb, doctoral candidate for more information [mwebb12@une.edu](mailto:mwebb12@une.edu). Thank you!

**PARTICIPATE IN A STUDY!**

**Perceptions of the Unique Challenges of Parenting Adult Learners regarding Persistence in Two-Year Community Colleges**

Provide feedback to a doctoral student researcher on your experiences as a parenting community college student.

**You can participate if you...**

- ▶ Attend a community college,
- ▶ Are enrolled in an associate degree program,
- ▶ Are taking 6 or more credits in current semester,
- ▶ Have completed 24 or more credits in current degree,
- ▶ Have 1 or more dependent children living with you,
- ▶ Are over the age of 18,
- ▶ Have roughly 45-60 minutes to complete a Zoom® interview with the student researcher.

**To learn more, please contact:**

Michelle Webb, University of New England Doctoral Candidate  
[mwebb12@une.edu](mailto:mwebb12@une.edu)



## APPENDIX C

## PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Information Sheet Version Date:	December 1, 2022
IRB Project #:	
Title of Project:	Understanding the lived Experiences of Parenting Adult Learners regarding Persistence in Two-Year Community Colleges
Principal Investigator (PI):	Michelle T. Webb
PI Contact Information:	mwebb12@une.edu

**INTRODUCTION**

- This is a project being conducted for research purposes.
- The intent of the Participant Information Sheet is to provide you with pertinent details about this research project.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions about this research project, now, during or after the project is complete.
- Your participation is completely voluntary.
- The use of the word ‘we’ in the Information Sheet refers to the Principal Investigator and/or other research staff.
- If you decide to participate, you have the right to withdraw from this research project at any time without penalty.
- If you decide to withdraw from this research project you will be asked if you consent to have any interview data already collected be utilized in the research study and findings.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT?**

- The general purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to establish an understanding of how the perceptions of the experiences of parenting adult learners enrolled in two-year public community colleges may influence their persistence.
- This study is being conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation project.
- This study seeks to compare and contrast data and information collected through a literature review and interviews with six parenting adult learners enrolled in community college degree programs to better inform faculty, staff, and leaders at two-year public community colleges about the experiences and perceptions of parenting adult learners with regard to persistence.

### **WHY AM I BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT?**

You are being asked to participate in this research project because you:

- are over the age of 18,
- have one or more dependent children residing with you,
- are enrolled at a two-year public community college located in the United States,
- are enrolled in an associate degree program,
- are enrolled in six or more credits in the current semester of study,
- have completed 24 or more course credits towards your current degree program.

### **WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT?**

As a participant, you will be asked to:

- Review this form and verbally agree to voluntarily participate in one 45-60 minute interview conducted by Michelle Webb (the primary investigator/researcher).
  - Michelle Webb is a Doctor of Education candidate at the University of New England.
  - The interview will be conducted via Zoom.
  - Interview questions will be related to your experiences as a parenting student while pursuing your associate degree.
  - You will choose a pseudonym for yourself and your college.
  - The interview audio and video will be recorded. However, you will not be required to have your camera on during the interview.
- Review your interview transcript and respond to confirm the accuracy or to clarify/correct inaccuracies within seven days after receiving the transcript.
  - If I do not hear back from you on day eight, then I will take it that you agree with your transcript as is.
- You have the right to withdraw from this study, before or during your interview, related data collected will be deleted and not used in the study.
  - It may not be possible to fully withdraw after the initial interview is completed as participation information will quickly be de-identified and may not be able to be removed from the aggregated data.

**WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS INVOLVED FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?**

The risks involved with participation in this research project are minimal and may include:

- There is a slight confidentiality risk. This risk will be minimized by replacing participant names with pseudonyms and safeguarding data with password protection. Please see the *What About Privacy and Confidentiality* section of this Information Sheet for steps that will be taken to minimize an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality from occurring.
- As a participant, you will have the right to skip or not answer any question, for any reason including questions regarding socio-economic, demographic, financial, academic, and/or other topics that may seem sensitive or personal. You will have the right to withdraw your participation at any time before or during the interview. It may not be possible to withdraw after the initial interview is conducted as your information will quickly be de-identified and may not be able to be removed from the combined data collected.

### **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?**

There are no likely benefits to you by being in this research project; however, the information we collect may help us understand the factors (positive and negative) that influence persistence amongst parenting adult learners enrolled in two-year public community colleges. Understanding the experiences and perceptions of parenting adult learners may help colleges and universities to develop and/or improve policies, practices, and strategies that promote the persistence of parenting adult learners. By taking part in this study, participants will contribute to the potential benefit of future adult learners that seek to complete a degree while raising children. This study is important to improving the overall understanding of how parenting adult learners experience college differently than traditional students or students without children.

**WILL YOU BE COMPENSATED FOR BEING IN THIS PROJECT?**

No, there will not be compensation for participation in this study.

**WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY?**

We will do our best to keep your personal information private and confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Additionally, your information in this research project could be reviewed by representatives of the University such as the Office of Research Integrity and/or the Institutional Review Board.

The results of this research project may be shown at meetings or published in journals to inform other professionals. If any papers or talks are given about this research, your name and your college's name will not be used. We may use data from this research project that has been permanently stripped of personal identifiers in future research without obtaining your consent.

**Privacy** refers to the right to control access to ourselves and our personal information.

Participants have the right to control the degree, timing, and conditions for sharing their bodies, thoughts, and experiences with others. Privacy must be protected before and during recruitment, the consent process, as well as during participation in research activities.

**Confidentiality** refers to agreements made between researchers and participants, through the consent process, about if and how researchers will protect information provided by the participants.

The following measures will be taken to protect your privacy and confidentiality:

Methods to protect participant privacy and confidentiality include:

- The Researcher will conduct the interview in a private setting to ensure others cannot hear the conversation.
- It is suggested that the participant also join the interview in a private setting.
- Participants will not be required to turn on their cameras if they choose not to be seen during any portion of the study including the online interview.
- The Researcher will not use the participant's name on any hand-written notes or paper records but will instead use a pseudonym for each participant. No participant, college, or college faculty/staff will be named.
- Electronic data, including the interview recording and transcript, will be safeguarded through the use of a password-protected computer, and restricting access to data.
- The Researcher will not ask the participant to state their actual name during the recorded portion of the interview. A pseudonym will be used instead of the participant's name.
- The Researcher will use a separate master key to record participants' personally identifiable information (e.g., name, e-mail, college affiliation, etc.) obtained for recruitment purposes. This will be stored via a password-protected computer separately from the study data. The master key and all personally identifiable information will be destroyed at the earliest opportunity during the project (after all interview transcripts have been coded and verified for accuracy).
- The Researcher will destroy the audio/video recording at the earliest opportunity during the project (after all interview transcripts have been coded and verified for accuracy).
- All other data will be deleted three years after the study has been concluded.
- Only the researcher's advisors and the IRB Committee at the University of New England have the right to access the data.

**WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS PROJECT?**

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research project. If you have questions about this project, complaints or concerns, you should contact the Principal Investigator listed on the first page of this document.

**WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?**

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Office of Research Integrity at (207) 602-2244 or via e-mail at [irb@une.edu](mailto:irb@une.edu).

## APPENDIX D

## SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS/PROTOCOL

**Introduction - Participant Information Sheet**

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this study, I appreciate your time.

Did you receive and read the Participant Information Sheet that I emailed to you?

Do you have any questions regarding the Participant Information Sheet, the study, or your role as a participant?

Before we begin, I would like to go over the Participant Information Sheet.

As mentioned, this interview will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes. You will be provided with a transcript following this interview. Once you receive it, you will have seven days to review it and have the ability to update, change, retract, or add to the content. If I do not hear back from you on day eight, I will take it that you are okay with your transcript. Additionally, you have the ability to withdraw from this study at any time.

Is there a pseudonym that you would like me to use instead of your actual name?

Please also use a fake name or acronym instead of your college's name or simply refer to it as "my college" or "the college."

You may turn your camera off during the interview to provide for an additional layer of anonymity if you wish.

**Introduction - Consent**

Do I have your permission to begin the interview and begin asking you questions related to your experience as a parenting adult learner enrolled in community college? Your consent includes permission to use Zoom's recording feature.

If you agree to participate, please verbally state "I consent to participate and begin the interview"

I will now start the recording

### **Participant Demographics**

I'm going to start with some demographic questions to help me better understand your college experience. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns about these questions.

Remember, you can always choose not to answer.

- Gender Identification- Do you identify as-
  - Male
  - Female
  - Non-Binary
  - Not provided
  - Prefer not to answer
- College Enrollment
  - How many credits have you completed towards your current degree?
- Enrollment Status
  - Are your courses primarily online or on campus?
    - *Probe...possible responses may be*
      - *100% on-campus*
      - *Approximately 75% on-campus- 25% online*
      - *Approximately 50% on-campus- 50% online*
      - *Approximately 25% on-campus- 75% online*
      - *100% online*
- Children
  - How many children reside in your home? What are their ages?

- Marital Status- how would you describe your current status-
  - Single not living with a partner (or less than six months living with partner)
  - Single living with a partner for at least six months
  - Married
  - Divorced, separated, or widowed
- Employment
  - Are you currently employed?
    - If so, about how many hours do you work per week?
    - If not employed now, have you ever been employed while in this degree program?

Now I am going to ask questions regarding your experiences at your current college and in your current degree program. As I ask the questions, please consider adding details about how these topics may have influenced your persistence in your current degree program.

### **Parenting adult learner identity**

- Motivation
  - Can you tell me about why you chose your degree program?
  - In what ways do you think this degree will benefit you?
    - Probe: *career, financially, family, quality of life, etcetera*
- How do you feel that students with children experience college differently?
- How might these differences influence a student's college persistence?
  - (*define persistence as continuous progress toward degree completion*)
- What do you wish faculty and/or staff knew about parenting students?

- What role has the college's, faculty and/or staff played in helping you move forward in your degree?
- Is there anything about your college environment that you particularly like or dislike in with regard to being successful as a student parent?
- Do you feel welcome at your college?
  - Is there anything that relates to your sense of belonging there?
- Have you ever felt isolated at your college or in your program?
  - If yes, what helped with this feeling?
- What is one thing you would like to see changed at your college?

Now I am going to move on to questions about barriers, challenges, resources, and/or supports that may relate to your college experience. Please consider adding details about how these topics may have influenced your persistence in your current degree program.

- Role Theory and Responsibilities
  - Tell me more about how being a parent impacts your college experience?
  - What do you feel was the biggest change in your life/routine because you are now a student?
  - What are some things that help or may help you to balance your responsibilities?
- Time
  - When and where do you complete your schoolwork typically?
    - *Probe for strengths and weaknesses*
  - How much time do you spend studying or doing homework each week?
- Stress

Have you felt stressed while enrolled in this degree program?

- *Probe: have you utilized any college resources to help with stress?*
- Social Capital
  - Do you feel you have a strong support system?
    - *Probe: family, friends, peers, etc.*
  - Do they influence your persistence in college? How so?
- Childcare
  - Where are your child(ren) while you are in class?
    - *Probe: on-campus, center-based, home-based, kith and kin...Is there an on-campus childcare option?*
- Financial Aid
  - Do you feel like you are very familiar with possible financial aid resources and opportunities that you may be eligible for?
  - Are your childcare expenses included in your financial aid award?
    - *If yes, did you have to apply separately for childcare funding?*
  - How might financial aid processes be improved?
- Basic Needs
  - In your current degree program, have you experienced any challenges in affording your basic needs (housing, food, healthcare, childcare transportation, etcetera) that made it difficult to stay in your courses?
    - *If yes, what did that look like?*
- Academics
  - What do you feel has most influenced your GPA?

- What is your strategy when your courses and academics are going well? Or not well?
- Similarly, to some of the questions above but not exactly the same - What are the characteristics of an ideal college experience for a parenting adult learner?

### **Parenting adult learner resources**

- Are you aware of any resources, services, or policies that are specific to parenting students?
  - Probe: are there any policies about bringing your child to class?
  - Are there any opportunities for students to be involved with developing or improving policies or practices?

### **General Questions**

I am now going to ask you a few general questions. Some may be in follow up to the questions I just asked. But please feel free to elaborate or let me know if you feel you've already answered the question. Please let me know how these areas may have influenced your college persistence.

- Similarly, to some of the questions above but not exactly the same - What are the characteristics of an ideal college experience for a parenting student?
- Have you ever considered leaving your degree program at any point?
  - What was that like?
  - What kept you moving forward?
- Have you ever taken a semester off or reduced the number of courses you were taking in this degree program?
  - What was that like?
  - How were you able to jump back in?

- How would you describe your typical attendance?
  - What has influenced this?
    - *Probe: how many days per semester have you missed do to lack of childcare? Sick child?*
- Overall, how would you describe your college experience at your current college and in your current degree program?
- What aspects of persisting in college, if any, are different than what you expected?
- What aspects of being a parenting student did you not anticipate?
- What would have been helpful to know before enrolling, that you didn't already know?

### **Concluding the Interview**

- Before we finish this interview, is there anything you would like to tell me about something I haven't asked about or would you like to add any details to any part of our conversation?
- Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you! I wish you the best in your studies and in achieving your family and career goals.

Please don't hesitate to reach out if you have any questions or just want to keep me updated on your progress. It was lovely to spend this time with you. I appreciate your time and thoughtful responses. As mentioned earlier, I will email a copy of this interview transcript to you. It would be wonderful if you could take a look to review if it agrees with how you responded to these questions today. Also, is it ok if I reach out to you if I have any clarifying questions or if a quick new question comes up?

Thank you again!

## APPENDIX E

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND'S INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL  
(AMENDMENT)

Institutional Review Board  
Julie Longua Peterson, Chair

Biddeford Campus  
11 Hills Beach Road  
Biddeford, ME 04005  
(207) 602-2244 T  
(207) 602-5905 F

Portland Campus  
716 Stevens Avenue  
Portland, ME 04103

DATE OF LETTER: December 12, 2022

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Michelle Webb  
FACULTY ADVISOR: Gizelle Luevano, EdD

PROJECT NUMBER: 1022-13  
RECORD NUMBER: 1022-13-02 (Amendment #1)  
PROJECT TITLE: Perceptions of the Unique Challenges of Parenting Adult Learners Regarding Persistence in Two-Year Community Colleges

SUBMISSION TYPE: Exempt Project  
SUBMISSION DATE: 12/9/2022

ACTION: Determination of Exempt Status  
DECISION DATE: 12/12/2022

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption Category # 2(ii)

The Office of Research Integrity has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above referenced amendment and has determined that the proposed work continues to be exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.104.

Due to difficulties with recruitment efforts, the investigator has modified participant inclusion criteria as outlined below in hopes of meeting the recruitment goal for this project. The research proposal summary, social media flyer, interview script, and the participant information sheet have been revised accordingly.

- Over the age of 18;
- Have one or more dependent children residing with the participant;
- Are enrolled in an associate degree program at, or have graduated with an associate degree within the prior five years from, a two-year public college;
- Are enrolled in six or more credits in the current, or most recent, semester of study;
- Have completed 24 or more course credits towards their current degree program or have graduated with an associate degree within the prior five years.

Additional IRB review is not required for this project as submitted. However, if any changes to the design of the study are contemplated (e.g., revision to the protocol, data collection instruments, interview/survey questions, recruitment materials, participant information sheet, and/or other IRB-reviewed documents), the Principal Investigator must submit an amendment to the IRB to ensure the requested change(s) will not alter the exempt status of the project.