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Experiences of Low-Income Student-Parents at a Community College During the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic

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EXPERIENCES OF LOW-INCOME STUDENT-PARENTS AT A COMMUNITY

COLLEGE DURING THE CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) PANDEMIC

by

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ABSTRACT

EXPERIENCES OF LOW-INCOME STUDENT-PARENTS AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE DURING THE CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) PANDEMIC

Marlena Yvonne Jarboe
Old Dominion University, 2021
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Twenty-two percent of United States undergraduate students are parents (Cruse, et al., 2020). Referred to as student-parents, they are most likely to have low-incomes and attend community colleges (Cruse, et al., 2019; Gault et al., 2014). They tend to reduce their course loads and drop out of college due to work-life balance challenges even though they typically have better grade point averages than their non-parent peers (Cruse et al., 2019; Manze, et al., 2021; Peterson, 2016).

The problem to be addressed was how community college instructors, leaders, and legislators can support low-income student-parents' persistence toward a postsecondary credential. There is a gap in the research about how the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic is impacting this large student population. Before the Pandemic, low-income student-parents already had financial insecurities with food, housing, and childcare (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). Now there are many more obstacles with school closures, lay-offs, and lack of childcare (Cruse et al., 2020).

This qualitative, phenomenological study focuses on the phenomenon of student-parents' experiences at a community college during Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic. Using reflective lifeworld research guided by van Manen's (2016) hermeneutic phenomenology thematic analysis (Vagle, 2018), I discovered four themes: (a) *Student-Parents Postsecondary Credential Completion Often Interrupted,* (b) *Student-Parents Need Mental Health Support,* and (c) *Student-*

Parents Need More Financial Support and Education, and (d) *Instructor Interaction, Support Services, and Course Delivery Methods are Essential to Student-Parents' Postsecondary Persistence*. Recommendations include how community college leaders can help increase persistence through a family friendly campus, childcare options, mental health support, flexible class schedules, and additional support services. Suggestions for legislators include reducing barriers to obtain and maintain social services funding assistance.

This dissertation is dedicated to:

My Jesus who gives me strength, wisdom, and peace. "Blessed is she who believes the Lord will fulfill all promises to her." – Luke 1:45.

My husband who is my encourager and the love of my life. Thank you for managing our family, our household, and making delicious homemade meals so I could pursue this dream.

My daughter who worked by my side, kept my glass of water filled, plugged up my heated blanket, and supplied me with bountiful loving hugs.

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My mom who demonstrated great work ethic and held high expectations for her children despite being a low-income single-parent. Your love and efforts to pull us out of poverty are the inspiration for this study.

My dad whose love is never ending. I am so happy that we all now hang out together with joy and laughter.

My stepdad, sister, brother, sisters and brothers-in-law, nieces, nephews, and cousins for your love and support throughout my life.

The student-parents who participated in this study and shared so openly with me. Keep persisting, you can pull yourselves out of poverty!

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To my community college work family for encouraging me to pursue this degree. To the leadership team, Dr. John Downey and Dr. Bob Young for your encouragement. You often believed in me more than I believed in myself. To my friend and colleague, Dr. Dave Urso, I am forever grateful that you challenge me to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. Thank you for your advice and peer review of my work. You not only make our workplace fun but were always willing to cover the office for us both when I needed time to commit to this study.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-two percent of all United States undergraduate students are parents (Cruse et al., 2020). These postsecondary students who have at least one dependent child, also called student-parents, are most likely to attend community colleges (Cruse et al., 2019). Even though most student-parents have low-incomes and are twice as likely to drop out when compared to their non-parent peers, they usually have higher grade point averages (GPA) (The Aspen Institute, 2021; Manze, et al., 2021; Zalaznick, 2021).

Postsecondary enrollment is declining across the United States (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021; NCES, 2021). In addition, student-parent credential attainment is decreasing (Gault et al., 2014). For the purposes of this study, a credential is defined as an Associate of Arts & Sciences (A.A.&S.) Degree, an Associate of Science (A.S.), Associate of Applied Science (A.A.S.) Degree, a Certificate (C), a Career Studies Certificate (CSC), or a Workforce Certificate. Staying true to their mission to "serve all segments ... of society" (Vaughan, 2003, p. B24) with a focus on open access to meet the needs of the community (Vaughan, 2003), community colleges in particular need to be aware of the factors influencing student-parent persistence in order to retain this significant student population. Increased enrollment and more revenue for postsecondary institutions is not the only benefit. Most postsecondary staff, faculty, and administration genuinely want students to succeed and improve their lives. Student-parents who desire to pull their families out of poverty not only provide a better life for themselves but for generations to come (Gault et al., 2018). Their ability to support themselves financially also has a positive economic impact in their community.

The COVID-19 Pandemic provides a unique opportunity for researchers of student-parents. Student-parents across the nation struggled more than their non-parent peers to meet the basic needs of their families, such as food, housing, transportation, and childcare during the Pandemic. "Among parenting students, 70% experienced basic needs insecurity; the rate among non-parenting students was 55%. Disparities in housing insecurity were especially prominent, with parenting students 15 percentage points more likely than non-parenting students to experience housing insecurity" (The Hope Center, 2021, p. 34). Parental responsibilities increased with the majority of educational institutions transitioning to online learning. Student-parents spent the majority of their time caring for and homeschooling their children while also trying to go to school themselves (Education Week, 2020; Heggeness & Fields, 2020). This chapter includes an overview of the background of this qualitative, phenomenological study of student-parents before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic, identification of the problem, purpose statement, research questions, professional significance, an overview of the methodology, delimitations, and definition of terms.

Background of the Study

Student-parents are similar to the majority of college students today. They often attend school part-time, work one or more jobs, and live off campus. They share the financial challenges of rising costs for tuition and basic living expenses. However, while many college students deal with the access barriers of having a low income, student-parent's situation is made more difficult due to the need for affordable and dependable childcare (Alon et al., 2020; The Hope Center, 2021; Kashen et al., 2020; Schumacher, 2015). They are less likely to borrow money for higher education purposes because they do not want more debt and are more likely to reduce their course loads as the semester progresses due to work-life balance challenges

(Peterson, 2016). Because they are unable to afford childcare and are the primary caretakers of their children, they spend most of their time caring for their children further decreasing the time they can spend on their postsecondary pursuits (Alon et al., 2020; Gault et al., 2020; The Hope Center, 2021; Kashen et al., 2020).

For those who do seek financial assistance, *Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965* has provisions for low-income students (Hegji, 2017). Students must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and provide proof of their income and assets as well as that of their family members (Hegji, 2017). The FAFSA is good at determining financial need for those who are in higher socioeconomic classes, but it can miss students who live near poverty and need more financial assistance (Goldrick-Rab, 2016), known as the ALICE population. ALICE is an acronym for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed and defines the struggles of households that earn above the Federal Poverty Level, but do not make enough to afford a bare-bones household budget (United Way, 2021). This can be due to previous attainment of a Bachelor's degree or additional family expenses that the FAFSA does not take into consideration which makes them ineligible for Pell Grants. If their income is low enough, they qualify for the Federal Pell Grant program and do not have to repay this aid (Hegji, 2017). Although Pell Grant distributions have increased over time, only 16.9% of community college students are Pell Grant recipients (NCES, 2019). For student-parents participating in college workforce programs, additional funding initiatives can help pay for most or all of the expenses of courses, books, and examinations that lead to certifications. Funding is dispersed to the postsecondary institutions and is offered to students on a first-come, first-served basis, which limits the number of students who benefit (Workforce Financial Assistance, 2020).

For students who receive Pell, this funding is not enough to cover the entire cost of attendance (COA) (Cruse et al., 2020). COA is the estimated cost of tuition, fees, books, supplies, transportation, rent, food, loan fees, allowance for childcare or dependent care, costs related to a disability and other miscellaneous expenses, and reasonable costs for eligible study-abroad programs (U.S. Department of Education Federal Student Aid, 2021c). To cover the COA many student-parents work multiple part-time jobs. However, these jobs are often low-wage and are not likely to provide flexible scheduling options, health insurance, or opportunities for promotion with higher wages. As a group, student-parents did not want to take on more debt and were hesitant to have student loans (Wilson, 2008). In fact, one study (Dowd & Coury, 2006) showed that students in two-year colleges and those who took out loans to pay for college were less likely to persist. Together, this combination has a negative impact on their higher education credential completion (Dowd & Coury, 2006).

Federal assistance programs such as Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) (USDA, 2021a), Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021a), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021b), and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (USDA, 2021b) allow low-income student-parents the opportunity to focus on their studies instead of worrying about how to feed their families and pay for other living expenses. However, TANF has *work first* rules which make employment a priority over education (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020a). Policies like *work first* undermine state and federal investments in higher education and workforce development programs and make it harder for student-parents to meet their households' basic needs (Goldrick-

Rab et al., 2020a). In addition student-parents working in low-wage, low-growth jobs create obstacles toward financial mobility and security (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020a).

Although there are many obstacles along the postsecondary credential completion journey, there are also several motivating factors for student-parents to persist and complete a postsecondary credential. Higher incomes, increased employment, better health, and more civic engagement positively impacts their future and that of their children (Gault et al., 2018). Student-parents will also likely no longer need local, state, and federal financial assistance. Social mobility due through postsecondary credential attainment continues to improve the lives of families for generations to come (Harding et al., 2015).

Postsecondary institutions that are welcoming, offer flexible course schedules, and provide support services to student-parents make them feel socially accepted and more likely to continue to enroll (van Rhijn et al. 2016). Support services specifically targeting student-parents are imperative, since these students are often not aware of the policies and procedures involved when pursuing a postsecondary credential (Peterson, 2016). Postsecondary institutions also need to communicate that continuous enrollment is the best avenue to meet their educational and career goals (Jobe et al., 2018).

Flexible online programs are appealing to busy adult learners (Jobe et al., 2018). However, students are vulnerable to the hazards that flexibility inherently possesses. In asynchronous online classes, they may feel detached from the postsecondary institution (Jobe et al., 2018). Adult learners have higher student satisfaction in synchronous online classes that have more live interaction with the instructor (Kuo et al., 2014). Accelerated or advanced-level courses that have more peer to peer interaction allow adult learners to achieve a deeper level of

understanding on the subject area and have a higher level of interaction and collaboration among online students (Kuo & Belland, 2016).

Motivation and appropriate support services has a positive impact on student-parents' postsecondary persistence despite the challenges. But then in March 2020, the COVID-19 Pandemic created even more hardships and increase the barriers to student-parents' pursuit of a postsecondary credential. By April 2020, 43% of the world population (over 3.4 billion people) was in lockdown (Marinoni et al., 2020). Economic and health related shocks varied systematically by socioeconomic factors (Aucejo et al., 2020). Social distancing measures halted most face-to-face classes and campus activities (Marinoni et al., 2020). Ninety-one percent of two-year postsecondary institutions transitioned some or all instruction online (Johnson et al., 2020).

The theoretical framework for this study is Tinto's (1993) theory of student retention. This theory includes internal factors, or those within the postsecondary institution's control, and external factors which are outside of the postsecondary institutions' control which impact student persistence. Tinto (1993) emphasized that students' uncertainty of their educational and occupational goals is more common than postsecondary institutions realize. He contended that students must be committed to their education, occupational goals, and desire to stay at the postsecondary institution. Institutional commitment may come from a family tradition, peer pressure, or perceptions of graduating from a certain postsecondary institution will improve future occupational outcomes (Tinto, 1993).

Students who believe they are part of the college community have a sense of belonging (The Aspen Institute, 2021; Tinto, 2017). Positive engagement with other students, faculty, staff, and administrators on campus increases their motivation (The Aspen Institute, 2021; Tinto,

2017). Frick et al. (2009) reasoned that students want to feel that their time and effort is well spent. Tinto (2017) concurred and explained that students must believe they are getting a quality education through relevant curriculum. However, he added that it is possible that even if students do not feel a sense of belonging or perceive relevance of the curriculum, motivating factors in their lives external to the college, can cause them persist (Tinto, 2017). Tinto's theory of retention and persistence applies to all undergraduate students, including student-parents. This study will specifically build upon the retention and persistence data of student-parents who are pursuing a postsecondary credential at a community college during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Identification of the Problem

The problem to be addressed was how community college instructors, leaders, and legislators can support low-income student-parents' persist toward a postsecondary credential. There is a gap in the research about how the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic is impacting low-income student-parents. Before the Pandemic, low-income student-parents already had financial insecurities with food, housing, and childcare (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). Now there are many more obstacles with school closures, lay-offs, and lack of childcare (Cruse et al., 2020).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the phenomenon of the lived family, financial, and educational experiences of 23 student-parents who live in or near poverty at a community college during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic. During this study, the definition of persistence was defined as continuing to take courses consecutively or from one semester to the next until credential completion is acquired. Focus was on successive fall and spring semesters since many students do not enroll during the summer.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the family, financial, and educational experiences of low-income student-parents as they persist toward a postsecondary credential at a community college during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic?

2. What are the family, financial, and educational experiences of low-income student-parents as they persist toward a postsecondary credential at a community college in synchronous versus asynchronous courses during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic?

Professional Significance

Student-parents who attain a postsecondary credential improve the social and economic mobility not only for themselves but for their children (Gault et al., 2018). Postsecondary credential attainment helps end the cycle of poverty. This benefits student-parents, their families, and the communities in which they live due to increased economic contributions. In addition, there are positive mental health impacts on student-parents (cite) not to mention the pride of their family, friends, peers, as well as the community college staff, faculty, and administration.

With declining enrollment across the nation (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021; NCES, 2021), information about low-income student-parents will provide opportunities for college leaders to retain this significant student population not only during future unexpected emergencies or natural disasters, but beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic. Because the majority of higher education courses and support services moved online during the COVID-19 Pandemic, this provides a unique insight into online course delivery methods and accessibility of support services.

Enrollment officials will benefit from knowing the preferred course delivery methods of student-parents as they manage their family and finances while pursuing a postsecondary credential. Vice Presidents and Deans of Student Services can use the data collected in this study to know the support services that student-parents need and when they need them. They can reflect on existing student services at their own institutions and implement the additional services needed to help student-parents persist toward credential completion.

Vice Presidents and Deans of Academic Affairs can promote retention, credential completion, generate more tuition, and improve outcomes (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). They can learn about opportunities to expand credit for prior learning and encourage persistence through earlier credential attainment. Teaching faculty can gain knowledge of class policies, procedures, and learning styles that promote success and retention of student-parents. Most postsecondary staff, faculty, and administration genuinely want students to succeed and improve their lives. Graduation day is a treasured day as postsecondary employees and students celebrate not only credential achievement, but also see the positive impacts on the students, their families, and the community.

Legislators can use these data to promote changes to policies, budgets, programs, existing laws or passing new legislation based on the low-income student-parents' needs. Researchers and scholars who are interested in this student population will also benefit from the familial, financial, and educational information collected from this research. In addition, although this study focuses on community college student-parents, most of this research should be transferable to any postsecondary institution with student-parents enrolled.

Overview of Methodology

Through a qualitative, phenomenological study, I conducted interviews of 23 low-income student-parents as they persisted toward a postsecondary credential at a community college in the Southeastern United States. It is a medium size, rural community college with approximately 5000 students. The College's service area includes three counties and three small cities with an estimated population of 263,000. The study occurred during the Pandemic over several consecutive months in 2021. The first interviews began at the end of February, the second interviews began in mid-March, and the third interviews began at the end of March. All of the interviews concluded at the end of April 2021. After concluding an interview with a participant, I scheduled the next interview to occur one to two weeks after the previous interview. Some interviews occurred more than two weeks after the previous due to schedule conflicts of the participants or the researcher. The problem to be addressed was how community college instructors, leaders, and legislators can support student-parents who live in or near poverty persist toward a postsecondary credential during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic. The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the family, financial, and educational experiences of low-income student-parents as they persisted toward a postsecondary credential at a community college during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic.

Participants

The student-parent participant pool included multiple cultures/ethnicities as well as student-parents of low-socio-economic status as identified through the community college's Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) records and Workforce Financial Assistance records. A purposeful sampling method, specifically criterion sampling, was used to identify students who met the criteria via the community college's financial aid and workforce aid records. The Director of the

community college's Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness (OIRE) Department contacted the students via email. The students who expressed interest in participating in the study completed a form with their name and email address. The OIRE Director sent the names and email addresses to the researcher. The researcher then sent emails to all who responded in an effort to recruit 25 student-parent participants. The researcher planned to randomly select participants if more than 25 students responded; however, this was not needed since some participants did not participate in all three interviews. A total of 23 student-parents participated in the study.

Instrumentation

Through a three-interview series (Seidman, 2013), participant interviews occurred over several months. The first interview focused on their experiences as low-income student-parents before the COVID-19 Pandemic. A second interview focused on their experiences as student-parents during the COVID-19 Pandemic and clarified specific details about experiences shared from the first interview. The third interview focused on student reflections of their experiences from the first and second interviews and participants shared their ideas for ways to improve the student-parent experience with community college instructors and leaders as well as legislators.

Data Analysis

Through reflective lifeworld research, I remained as open as possible to the COVID-19 Pandemic phenomenon and the student-parents' lived financial, familial, and educational experiences by focusing on both description and interpretation (Vagle, 2018). I identified themes in the interview transcripts of student-parents guided by Vagle's (2018) "phenomenological walks" (p. 93) using van Manen's (2016) hermeneutic phenomenology thematic analysis. I asked myself where, what, how, and why a phenomena exists in multiple spaces and places. I drew

upon my own comprehension of the phenomenological research as well as organically explored the place to identify cultures, everyday practices, dialogues, and systems. My goal was not to discuss everything, but to find meaningful things and examine them deeply. This walk led to rich descriptions with many characteristics and distinctions of the phenomenon (Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle, 2018).

Delimitations

As a social constructivist, I believe that there are multiple realities of a student. In addition, my epistemological stance is that both the researcher and the participants construct knowledge. I focused on my own values as the researcher, the values of the student participants, and the postsecondary education setting. The participants' voices consumed the majority of the narrative (Hays & Singh, 2012). Using a qualitative, phenomenological perspective, I focused on the phenomenon of student-parents, who live in or near poverty, experienced their own lives in pursuit of a postsecondary credential at a community college before and during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic. I discovered the financial, family, and postsecondary educational experiences during this Pandemic.

Participants included student-parents who were enrolled in at least one credit or non-credit course at the community college. They had at least one dependent child aged birth to 18 years. They were also eligible for Pell Grants, Workforce Financial Assistance, or were part of the ALICE population. The sample population was representative of the student population who were pursuing a postsecondary credential at the community college who applied for financial aid. Variables of interest included: living situation, number of children, ages of all in household, gender, race, marital status, grade point average, the number of courses and credits taken each semester, the course delivery methods, the household income before and during the COVID-19

Pandemic, as well as the employment status and household responsibilities of the student-parents before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Definition of Terms

Key terms and concepts in this study included:

- *ALICE population*: an acronym for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed; defines the struggles of households that earn above the Federal Poverty Level, but do not make enough to afford a bare-bones household budget (United Way, 2021)

- *Asynchronous course:* a course that does not require real-time interaction; instead, content is available online for students to access when it best suits their schedule

- *Credential:* Associate of Arts & Sciences (A.A.&S.), Associate of Science (A.S.), Associate of Applied Science (A.A.S.), Certificate (C), Career Studies Certificate (CSC), or Workforce Certificate

- *Cost of attendance (COA)*: the estimated cost of tuition, fees, books, supplies, transportation, rent, food, loan fees, allowance for childcare or dependent care, costs related to a disability and other miscellaneous expenses, and reasonable costs for eligible study-abroad programs (U.S. Department of Education Federal Student Aid, 2021c)

- *COVID-19 Pandemic:* an outbreak of a contagious respiratory virus across the world, which put a large portion of the population at risk of severe illness; also known as Coronavirus

- *Dependent child:* child to whom a parent or guardian is responsible for more than half of their support (U.S. Department of Education Federal Student Aid, 2021a)

- *FAFSA:* Free Application for Federal Student Aid (U.S. Department of Education Federal Student Aid, 2020)

- *FANTIC*: Financial Aid for Noncredit Training leading to Industry Credentials (Workforce Financial Assistance, 2020)

- *Horizontal stacking:* accumulation of short-term credentials allowing employees to expand into other specializations (CCRC, 2021)

- *Last-dollar program*: pays for the remaining cost of tuition, books, and fees that the students' financial aid and scholarships do not cover (SCHEV, 2021)

- *Lifetime Eligibility Used (LEU)*: The LEU limits Pell Grant disbursement to no more than 12 terms or the equivalent (roughly six years) (U.S. Department of Education Federal Student Aid, 2021d)

- *Live in or near poverty*: Based on United States (U.S.) Federal Poverty Levels, single students who live in poverty earn less than $11,670 per year and a family of four who live in poverty earn less than $23,850 per year (NCES, 2019). Near poverty is defined as 100-199 percent of the federal poverty line (USDOE, 2018). In dollars, this means that single students who live near poverty earn less than $23,340 per year and a family of four who live who live *near* poverty earn less than $47,700 per year (NCES, 2019)

- *Low-income:* students who earn up to 100% of the poverty level

- *Pell Grant*: Federal Financial Aid awarded only to undergraduate students who display exceptional financial need and have not earned a bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree. It does not have to be repaid, except under certain circumstances (U.S. Department of Education Federal Student Aid, 2021b)

- *Persist*: continuing to take courses consecutively toward the goal of earning a postsecondary credential

- *Postsecondary credential*: one or more of the following: Associate of Arts & Sciences (A.A. & S.), Associate of Science (A.S.), Associate of Applied Science (A.A.S.), Certificate (C), Career Studies Certificate (CSC), workforce certification or licensure

- *Stackable credential*: part of a sequence of occupational education credentials; each credential can be obtained in short amount of time and stand alone; provide pathway for career advancement (CCRC, 2021)

- *Student-parent*: a postsecondary student who is also a parent of at least one dependent child

- *Synchronous courses:* courses that meet at a scheduled day and time via video conferencing software

- *Vertical stacking*: a short-term program with a pathway to a higher-level degree or credential (CCRC, 2021)

Chapter Summary

Student-parents who attain a postsecondary credential improve the social and economic mobility not only for themselves but for their children (Gault et al., 2018). They are more likely to participate in cultural events, which makes them well-rounded parents. Future generations positively benefit as well since parents who earn a credential are more likely to read to their children and participate in activities in the child's life (Gault et al., 2018). This positive cycle of change continues into future because the expectation for their children to attend college as well. Postsecondary credential attainment can help end the cycle of poverty. This benefits their families and the communities in which they live due to increased community involvement and economic contributions. Student-parents are making more money and have more disposable income.

Community college leaders can benefit from learning why it is important to retain this significant student population to help elevate student-parents' economic mobility and security. Even though credential attainment leads to increased enrollment and tuition dollars, community college leaders want to learn the best student success strategies because they genuinely want the

members of their community, including student-parents and their families, to have the best life possible. This research can also help guide legislative change by the knowledge of the impacts of government support services on student-parents' persistence toward postsecondary credential completion and ultimately their ability to pull themselves out of poverty. The next chapter includes empirical research of student-parents' challenges, support services, motivation, as well as their experiences with the college culture and course delivery modalities before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Twenty-two percent of all United States undergraduate students are parents (Cruse et al.,
2020). These postsecondary students who have at least one dependent child, also called student-
parents, are most likely to attend community colleges (Cruse et al., 2019). Even though they
have higher grade point averages (GPA) than their non-parent peers (Zalaznick, 2021); they are
more likely to drop out (Manze, et al., 2021).

For nearly all college students, familial and financial challenges increased during the
COVID-19 Pandemic. COVID-19 exacerbated socioeconomic disparities in higher education by
delaying graduation for 13% of undergraduate students and 40% of undergraduate students lost a
job, internship, or a job offer (Aucejo et al., 2020). Digital inequalities also intensified for
students who lacked access to the required electronic devices and internet in order to participate
in online courses (Johnson et al., 2020). Parental responsibilities saw similar increases as
student-parents took on teaching their dependent children when secondary schools transitioned to
online learning (Garcia & Weiss, 2020). Lower-income students were 55% more likely to delay
graduation due to COVID-19 than their higher-income peers and 41% more likely to report that
COVID-19 impacted their major choice (Aucejo et al., 2020).

Problem Statement/Purpose

The problem to be addressed was how community college instructors, leaders, and
legislators can support low-income student-parents' persistence toward a postsecondary
credential during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic. The purpose of this qualitative,
phenomenological study was to explore the family, financial, and educational experiences of
low-income student-parents as they persisted toward a postsecondary credential at a community

college during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic. For the purposes of this study, the definition of persistence is continuing to take courses consecutively from one semester to the next.

Method of the Literature Review

The method for this literature review was the use of Old Dominion Library's Monarch OneSearch to access EBSCOhost. I chose the following databases: Academic Search Complete, Associates Programs Source, Child Development & Adolescent Studies, Education Research Complete, Education Source, ERIC, Family Studies Abstracts, Gender Studies Database, Health Source-Consumer Edition, Legal Collection, Old Dominion University Catalog, Newspaper Source Plus, Newswires, Race Relations Abstracts, Regional Business News, Teacher Reference Center, and Web News, Women's Studies International. I searched for current peer reviewed articles, dissertations, conference presentations, case studies, and government documents from 2015-2020. General keywords are: "Community Colleges or two-year colleges or junior colleges" AND "low-income or poverty" AND "parents or student-parents or mother or father or dependent child" AND "persistence or retention or graduation." All of these keywords were also used in combination with keywords "COVID-19 or Coronavirus," "adult learners or adult students," and "synchronous vs asynchronous." Additional Search Modes and Expanders included Boolean/Phrase, applied equivalent subjects, and applied related words. Search results were limited by English language only, peer reviewed articles, dissertations, conference presentations, case studies, and government documents from 2015-2021.

Synopsis

This chapter begins with Tinto's (1993) theory of retention and persistence as it relates to adult learners and working class postsecondary students. It includes a review of the challenges

faced by student-parents and motivations of student-parents who persist in their postsecondary journey. It reveals additional challenges faced by undergraduate students due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Chapter II concludes with an overview of support services that best serve student-parents in postsecondary institutions as well as a summary of strengths and weaknesses of synchronous versus asynchronous online courses for adult learners.

Theoretical Foundation

Tinto (1993) theory of retention and persistence was in response to the startling fact that the majority of undergraduate students left their postsecondary institution before completing a degree. In the 1960s, student attrition was blamed on the student, not the postsecondary institution (Tinto, 2006). However, in the 1970s, postsecondary institutions began to realize that the college environment impacted student retention (Tinto, 1993, 2006). The consequences of this lack of persistence negatively impact the revenue stream of postsecondary institutions as well as the future income and success of the student (Tinto, 1993). Many smaller tuition-driven postsecondary institutions have closed as a result (Tinto, 1993). In order to be successful, institutions need to focus on retention to remain open and increase degree completions (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto's (1993, 2006) theory of student retention included internal factors, or those within the postsecondary institution's control, and external factors which are outside of the postsecondary institutions' control. Students' intention and commitment are two external factors. Tinto (1993) stated that students may not intend to pursue a degree at all, but instead want to improve their skill level for employment. Perhaps they wanted to learn because they enjoy it or they decided to transfer to another institution. Tinto (1993) emphasized that students' uncertainty of their educational and occupational goals is more common than postsecondary institutions

realize. He contended that students must be committed to their education, occupational goals, and desire to stay at the postsecondary institution. Institutional commitment may come from a family tradition, peer pressure, or perceptions of graduating from a certain postsecondary institution will improve future occupational outcomes (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto (1993) asserted that internal influences, or experiences directly within the postsecondary institution, are usually more significant to student persistence than external factors. He observed four categories that led to students' lack of persistence toward degree completion: (1) adjustment, (2) difficulty, (3) incongruence, and (4) isolation (Tinto, 1993). Adjustment to the postsecondary institution can be challenging, even for the most socially mature students. Grice and Grice (2007) supported Tinto's retention theories on first-generation, working-class adults who are also postsecondary students. These students were intimidated by the idea of seeking support from faculty.

Lack of familiarity and comfort with college life, and social isolation cause some to leave before the end of the first semester (Tinto, 1993). The majority of students leave voluntarily, although some are forced to leave by the postsecondary institution due to poor academic performance or disciplinary action. Minority students and those with a low socio-economic status are also less likely to be prepared for college (Tinto, 1993). They struggle to fit into the higher socio-economic college culture and may lack academic preparation. Tinto (1993) theorizes that the postsecondary institution must challenge students' academically to prevent boredom, provide good faculty interactions, and have opportunities for learning and interaction inside and outside of the classroom (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto (2017) emphasized that postsecondary students must be motivated to persist and their experiences with the institution can impact persistence (Tinto, 2017). As depicted in Figure

1, motivation is the sum of student goals, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perceived worth

or relevance of the curriculum (Tinto, 2017). Since student goals vary, they may have little

commitment to the postsecondary institution because they simply do not plan to stay there very

long (Tinto, 2017). However, if the institution is their first choice, they are more likely to persist

to degree completion (Tinto, 2017).

Students who believe they can succeed have self-efficacy and are motivated to persist

(Tinto, 2017). Even when they encounter challenges, they are more likely to be engaged, as well

as work harder and longer to complete tasks (Chemers et al., 2001). Students with little self-

efficacy have lower achievements (Yuong et al., 2010).

Figure 1

A Model of Postsecondary Student Persistence (Tinto, 2017)
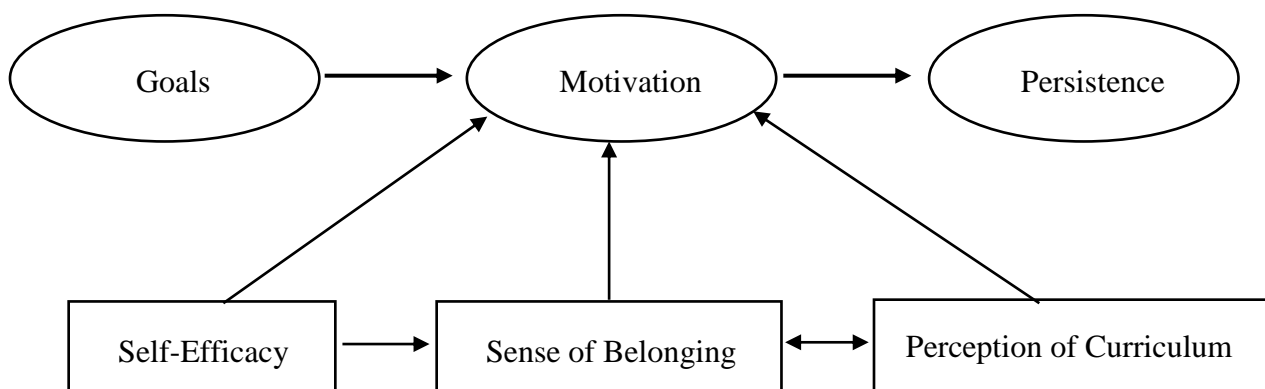
Students who believe they are part of the college community have a sense of belonging

(Tinto, 2017). Positive engagement with other students, faculty, staff, and administrators on

campus increases their motivation (Tinto, 2017). Unfortunately, faculty involvement with

student retention is limited (Tinto, 2006). Although postsecondary faculty are content experts in their fields of study, they are not trained to teach their students and need professional development to do so (Tinto, 2006). Faculty blame students for lack of motivation and skills as well as admissions staff for not admitting more qualified students (Tinto, 2006). Tinto (2006) claims that if faculty focus on their own actions to enhance student education, that retention will increase. Postsecondary institutions need to plan and implement reward systems for faculty to reach the goal of enhanced student retention (Tinto, 2006). Frick et al. (2009) reasoned that students want to feel that their time and effort is well spent. Tinto (2017) concurred and explained that students must believe they are getting a quality education through relevant curriculum. However, he added that it is possible that even if students do not feel a sense of belonging or perceive relevance of the curriculum, motivating factors in their lives external to the college, can cause them to persist (Tinto, 2017).

Tinto (2006) asserts that postsecondary institutions should have a model of institutional action to influence state policies and practices that impact student retention. Accountability and funding systems are of particular concern. Too often great ideas are not implemented and programs cease to exist when the originator leaves or due to lack of supportive administration (Tinto, 2006).

There is a critical issue of retention equity among student based on their socio-economic status. Although access to a postsecondary education has increased for low-income students, their degree completion rates are lower when compared to their high-income peers (Tinto, 2006). Students who live in or near poverty are more likely to attend two-year colleges part-time and work full-time compared to students from higher income families (NCES, 1999). Of two-year college enrollees, only eight percent of low-income students earn a Bachelor's degree within six

years compared to 25 percent of high-income students (NCES, 2003). Low-income students often have less academic preparation and are not only students of color, which is where much of the research lies (Tinto, 2006). Tinto's theory of retention and persistence applies to all undergraduate students, including student-parents. This study builds upon the retention and persistence data of student-parents who are pursuing a postsecondary credential at a community college during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Overview of Student-Parents

Student-parents are similar to the majority of college students today who attend college part-time, have a job, and live off campus. They share the financial challenges of rising costs for tuition and basic living expenses. However, the majority of student-parents have added burdens of being low-income (Gault et al., 2014) and needing access to affordable and dependable childcare (Schumacher, 2015). They are less likely to borrow money for higher education purposes due to poor credit, existing debt, or not wanting to increase their debt (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010). They are most likely to attend community colleges (Cruse et al., 2019) which is a wise choice to increase their employability and earn higher pay (Carnevale et al., 2020). However, they are also more likely to reduce their course loads as the semester progresses due to work-life balance challenges (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010). Because they are unable to afford childcare and are the sole caretaker, the spend most of their time caring for their children further decreasing the time they can spend on their postsecondary pursuits (Gault et al., 2020).

COVID-19 Overview: The Impact on Postsecondary Education and Student-Parents

As if student-parents did not have enough barriers to their pursuit of a postsecondary education, in December 2019 an outbreak of pneumonia of unknown origin occurred in Wuhan, China (Marinoni et al., 2020). By January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO)

announced discovery of novel Coronavirus: SARS-Cov2, an infectious respiratory disease called COVID-19 (Coronavirus). In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared it a worldwide Pandemic and by April 2020, 43% of the world population (over 3.4 billion people) were in lockdown (Marinoni et al., 2020).

Economic and health related shocks varied systematically by socioeconomic factors (Aucejo et al., 2020). U.S. unemployment rate was at an all-time high of 14.7% in April 2020 and reduced to 5.2% in August 2021 (U.S. DOL, 2021). Forty-two percent of the layoffs led to permanent job loss (Barrero et al., 2020). Housing and food insecurities increased and the United States Federal Government's Coronavirus Response Act of 2020 included a Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) to families of school-aged children (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020b). There were higher mortality rates due to COVID-19 in households with higher poverty, higher household crowding, higher percentage of populations of color, and higher racialized economic segregation (Chen et al., 2020; Gross et al., 2020). In addition, there were select conditions such as old age, diabetes, obesity, and the male sex which increased vulnerabilities and caused more severe COVID-19-related outcomes (Hooper et al., 2020).

One major impact on higher education caused by COVID-19 was the implementation of social distancing measures (Marinoni et al., 2020). Most face-to-face classes and campus activities halted (Marinoni et al., 2020). Ninety-one percent of two-year postsecondary institutions transitioned some or all instruction online (Johnson et al., 2020). Secondary schools and childcare centers also closed (The Hope Center, 2021; Kashen et al., 2020). Parents, primarily mothers, spent more time on childcare (Alon et al., 2020; Kashen et al., 2020). Mothers ages 25-44 were three times more likely to be unemployed due to childcare demands compared to fathers (Heggeness & Fields, 2020; Kashen et al., 2020; Madowitz et al., 2020). During the

spring 2020 semester, seventy-eight percent of student-parents were providing schooling for their children at home while they attended their own postsecondary classes (The Hope Center, 2021; Kashen et al., 2020). Three quarters of student-parents reported missing work or class due to lack of childcare (The Hope Center, 2021). Seventy-nine percent of student-parents reported that their children were at home due to lack of face-to-face school or childcare during the fall 2020 semester, six months after the Pandemic began (The Hope Center, 2021). Seventy-three percent of student-parents spend at least 40 hours a week caring for their children (Alon et al., 2020; The Hope Center, 2021; Kashen et al., 2020). If they could find childcare, it was likely not affordable because of their other essential needs such as rent and food (The Hope Center, 2021).

Technical infrastructure and accessibility, distance learning competencies and pedagogies, and fields of study were all dimensions impacting feasibility and quality of the online learning (Marinoni et al., 2020). Postsecondary institutions were in crisis management mode with changes in placement tests, proctored exams, pedagogical mindsets, instructional methods, and community engagement (Marinoni et al., 2020). Almost 50% of faculty decreased the volume of work assigned to students; many also used a pass/fail grading model instead of letter grades (Johnson et al., 2020). Faculty also increased support for student when compared to pre-COVID-19 (Johnson et al., 2020) by meeting them online via video conferencing software, texting, and talking on the phone in the evenings and on weekends.

Online learning experience during COVID-19 was an emergent response to a global crisis but it does not depict the profoundly studied field of online learning instruction (Patricia, 2020). Student motivation decreased due to increase anxiety and lack of interaction in online classes (Patricia, 2020). Little to no student preparation for online learning decreased student motivation, self-efficacy, and cognitive engagement (Patricia, 2020). Students perceived that the quality of

education decreased (Patricia, 2020). A quarter of students increased their study time by more than four hours per week; however, another quarter decreased their study time by more than five hours per week (Aucejo et al., 2020).

By the fall of 2020, over six months into the Pandemic, enrollment in postsecondary institutions was still down especially from students at risk of basic needs insecurity, fewer students were completing the FAFSA, and retention rates decreased (Baker-Smith, et al., 2020; The Hope Center, 2021; National College Attainment Network, 2021; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021). Student-parents' took fewer courses during the Pandemic with only one-third enrolled full time at two year postsecondary colleges (The Hope Center, 2021).). Seventy percent of student-parents lacked basic needs such as food and housing compared to 55% of non-parenting students (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020b; The Hope Center, 2021). In addition, the Pandemic was challenging to the mental health of student-parents, details follow.

Mental Health

Over the years, studies have consistently shown that student-parents are more likely to have mental health issues (due to life challenges) than non-parenting students (The Aspen Institute, 2021; The Healthy Minds Network, 2020; The Hope Center, 2021, Shenoy et al., 2016). The Pandemic further exacerbated these mental health issues among adults 18 years of age or older in the United States (CDC, 2020; Son et al., 2020). By September 2021, the cumulative number of deaths in the U.S due to COVID-19 was 670,565 (CDC, 2021). Forty percent of undergraduate students had a friend or family member who was sick with COVID-19, and more than ten percent lost a loved one due to COVID-19 (The Hope Center, 2021).

Analysis of a 2020 Healthy Minds Study showed 43% of student-parents feel stressed all or most of the time, 40% feel overwhelmed, 29% have a hard time regulating their emotions, 28% feel depressed, and 28% feel socially isolated (The Aspen Institute, 2021; The Healthy Minds Network, 2020). However, younger adults ages 18-24 years, racial and ethnic minorities, essential workers, and unpaid caregivers like student-parents reported having experienced disproportionately worse mental health outcomes, increased substance use, and elevated suicidal ideation (The Aspen Institute, 2021; CDC, 2020; College Pulse, 2020; The Hope Center, 2021; Wilsey, 2013). Younger student-parents are more likely to have mental health issues, substance abuse, as well as feelings of isolation and low self-esteem (The Aspen Institute, 2021; CDC, 2020; The Hope Center, 2021; Wilsey, 2013). They typically struggle with their feelings about their life, their future, their academic performance; however, during the Pandemic they also worried about the health of their friends and families and had increased suicidal ideation (Active Minds, 2020; Blankstein, et al., 2020; CDC, 2020; The Healthy Minds Network & American College Health Association, 2020; The Hope Center, 2021). Older student-parents, ages 25 years or older, tend to feel more positive about their life (The Aspen Institute, 2021; The Hope Center, 2021). Older student-parents are more likely to advocate for themselves, demonstrate more resilience, and are less likely to have substance abuse problems compared to younger student-parents (The Aspen Institute, 2021; Wiley, 2013)

Many community colleges in the United States are defunding their on-campus mental health services (Anderson, 2019) and if campuses still have these services, student-parents are less likely to know about them compared to non-parenting students (The Healthy Minds Network, 2020). Campuses that have mental health care are often not equipped to counsel student-parents which further decreases their sense of belonging causing student-parents to seek

mental health counseling off-campus (The Aspen Institute, 2021). Unfortunately, community colleges are less likely to offer any student mental health services (IWPR, 2020) even though student-parents are more likely to attend community colleges over four year postsecondary institutions (Cruse et al., 2019). However, due to the increased mental health issues during the pandemic of Virginia Community College System (VCCS) students, VCCS presidents proposed and the state board approved policy change to allow Virginia's community colleges to contract with third party providers of mental health services for students (Babb, 2021; VCCS State Board, 2021). Student-parents have difficulty paying for mental health care compared to their non-parent peers (IWPR, 2020). Despite their overall resilience, about 30% of student-parents have emotional and mental health issues such as panic attacks and severe anxiety (The Aspen Institute, 2021; Baker-Smith, et al., 2020). They report feeling guilty for taking time away from their children to study. Even though they realize they are making a better life for their family by pursuing a postsecondary credential, they find themselves being short-tempered with their children due to the stress or pressured by another caretaker to spend more time with the children (The Aspen Institute, 2021).

Student-parents are also more likely than their non-parent peers to have a history of trauma as a result of lack of extended family support, sexual assault, and domestic violence, as well as basic needs insecurities (The Aspen Institute, 2020). This sizeable portion of the student-parent population is disproportionately female, non-White, and low-income (The Aspen Institute, 2021; Baker-Smith, et al., 2020). Their low socio-economic status as well as cultural stigmas may cause them to view therapy as a threat (The Aspen Institute, 2021; The Healthy Minds Network, 2020). Cultural trauma regarding police and mental health may make them wary of seeking assistance. They may also be resistant to mental health services because they are in a

domestic violence situation and know that their abuser will be reported by the mental health counselor to the authorities as required by law (The Aspen Institute, 2021).

Financial Challenges

There is a relationship between basic needs insecurity and depression or anxiety (The Aspen Institute, 2021; Baker-Smith, et al., 2020). Because student-parents are more likely to have increased stress due to paying rent, homelessness, buying enough food to feed their family, they are at higher risk for significant mental health problems (The Aspen Institute, 2021; Baker-Smith, et al., 2020). "Poverty exacerbates feelings of hopelessness and at the same time depression and other mental health issues can exacerbate barriers and challenges to making ends meet" (The Aspen Institute, 2021, p.4). These financial challenges have 21.3% of student-parents feeling continually stressed (The Aspen Institute, 2021).

Student-parents who live in poverty or who are considered low-income earn up to 100% of the U.S. Federal Poverty Guidelines depicted in Table 1. The ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) population earns above 100%, but do not make enough to afford a bare-bones household budget (United Way, 2021). The poverty guidelines in Table 1 help to determine financial eligibility for certain programs such as Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) (USDA, 2021a), Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021a), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (USDA, 2021b), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021b).

Table 1

U.S. Federal Poverty Guidelines – Annual Income (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021c)

Household/ Family Size	100%	200%	300%	400%
1	$12,880	$25,760	$38,640	$51,520
2	$17,420	$34,840	$52,260	$69,680
3	$21,960	$43,920	$65,880	$87,840
4	$26,500	$53,000	$79,500	$106,000
5	$31,040	$62,080	$93,120	$124,160
6	$35,580	$71,160	$106,740	$142,320
7	$40,120	$80,240	$120,360	$160,480
8	$44,660	$89,320	$133,980	$178,640
9	$49,200	$98,400	$147,600	$196,800
10	$53,740	$107,480	$161,220	$214,960

Student-parents are more likely to work full-time than their non-parenting peers and also struggled more during the Pandemic to pay their rent or mortgage and utilities (The Aspen Institute, 2021; The Hope Center, 2021). They were more likely than non-parent peers to borrow money from friends and family to pay bills, more likely to not have the fiscal resources to pay their bills and consequently were reported to a collection agency which adversely affected their credit scores (The Aspen Institute, 2021; The Hope Center, 2021). In addition, student-parents were more often worried of not having enough food to feed their families when compared to non-parent peers (The Aspen Institute, 2021; The Hope Center, 2021).

Financial Assistance

For those who do seek educational financial assistance, *Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965* has provisions for low-income students. Students must meet the financial need requirements and seek a degree or certificate at a postsecondary institution to qualify (Hegji,

2017). The financial need of a student is determined by the difference between the expected family contribution (EFC) and the total cost of college attendance (COA), including tuition, fees, books, and supplies (Hegji, 2017). Students must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and provide proof of their income and assets as well as that of their family members (Hegji, 2017).

The FAFSA is good at determining financial need for those who are in the upper-class, but it can miss students who live near poverty and need more financial assistance (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Although it does ask students if they are homeless, it does not take into consideration students who are living independently up to age 24 (U.S. Department of Education Federal Student Aid, 2020); these students are technically still considered dependents of their parents (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). However, student-parents under the age of 24 can be considered independent, if they themselves are parents and contribute at least 50% of the financial support for their own child (U.S. Department of Education Federal Student Aid, 2020).

Eligible students can receive aid for up to 12 full-time credits or prorated aid for the part-time equivalent (Hegji, 2017). If their income is low enough, they qualify for the Federal Pell Grant program. Money awarded via the Pell Grant is critical since students do not have to repay this aid (Hegji, 2017). Although Pell Grant distributions have increased over time, only 16.9% of community college students are Pell Grant recipients. The low percentage is influenced by (a) community college students who have already earned a Bachelor's degree and are not Pell eligible, (b) 22 percent of community college student families who earn more than $100,000 annually, and (c) some upper-class independent students also attend community college (Romano & Millard, 2006). Lack of information, concerns with income verification, and concerns that they make too much money with their current employment prevents low-income

community college students from completing the FAFSA (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). In addition, many community college students do not know that they have to complete the FAFSA application annually; as a result, up to 20 percent of first-year Pell Grant students do not resubmit the FAFSA (Bird & Castleman, 2016).

Federal Work-study Programs

Federal Work-Study (FWS) programs provide part-time employment to eligible students in need of additional income to pursue their education at a postsecondary institution. Students who demonstrate financial need can be awarded jobs on campus dependent upon the FWS funds available at the postsecondary institution. Although still low wage, FWS better prepared student-parents professionally for future employment opportunities (Wilson, 2008). Students must request employment and be willing to work (Hegji, 2017); however, many are unaware that they can work on campus and that these jobs are even available. They need to be encouraged to seek FWS opportunities early in the semester or before the semester begins to have an increased likelihood of obtaining a job. Working on campus allows them to attend class and study more because they do not have to travel to a job outside of campus. This also gives them an opportunity to know the employees of the college better and increase their social network (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

For student-parents participating in college workforce programs, there are additional funding initiatives can help pay for most or all of the expenses of courses, books, and examinations that lead to certifications. The short time span of these programs leads to high demand jobs and are an efficient way to pull student-parents out of poverty. Another federal financial assistance initiative called *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 is* intended to help job seekers access employment, education, training, and support services to

succeed in the labor market and to match employers with the skilled workers they need to compete in the global economy. This funding further reduced their academic financial burdens and relieved stress (Wilson, 2008).

Part D: William D. Ford Federal Direct Loan (Direct Loan) Program

Part D, the William D. Ford Federal Direct Loan (Direct Loan) Program, is the main source for federal student loans (Hegji, 2017). It includes Direct Subsidized Loans, Direct Unsubsidized Loans for eligible students, Direct PLUS Loans, and Direct Consolidation Loans. Direct Subsidized Loans are for undergraduate students who demonstrate a financial need (Hegji, 2017). The U.S. government pays the interest, and students pay the principle when they are no longer enrolled at least part-time or not under deferment (Hegji, 2017). Eligible students do not need to demonstrate financial need to obtain Direct Unsubsidized Loans (Hegji, 2017) and many low-income students pursue these loans to pay their living expenses.

Direct PLUS loans are available to dependent postsecondary students. Although applicants do not need to show financial need, they do have to have good credit to be approved. The U.S. government does not pay the interest on these loans either. Direct Consolidation Loans allow borrowers to combine several federal loans in to a single loan. This may reduce the interest and monthly payment (Hegji, 2017). Students on their own can only borrow an additional $5,500 to help with non-tuition expenses (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Parents can help by getting a Student PLUS Loan; however, approval is dependent upon a credit check and the interest rates fluctuate (Hegji, 2017). The federal government makes an assumption that parents are active partners in funding their children's education. In many cases, the parent cannot or will not help (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Currently, there is no adjustment available for this scenario.

As a group, student-parents did not want to take on more debt and were hesitant to have student loans (Wilson, 2008). In fact, one study (Dowd & Coury, 2006) showed that students in two-year colleges and those who took out loans to pay for college were less likely to persist. Pell Grant funding is not enough to cover the entire cost of tuition, fees, books, and living expenses. Yet student-parents often have low-wage jobs that are not likely to provide flexible scheduling options, health insurance, or opportunities for promotion with higher wages. Together, this combination has a negative impact on their higher education persistence (Dowd & Coury, 2006).

Workforce Financial Aid

There is also financial aid for community workforce programs. The *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014* reformed the public workforce system by connecting employers and skilled workers to in-demand jobs through education, training, and support services. Each state was required to create its own implementation plan. For example, the Commonwealth of Virginia, created a FastForward (2020) program to help Virginia residents cover the costs of tuition and fees in fields that lead to high-demand careers in their communities, such as skilled trades, healthcare, manufacturing, and information technology. With FastForward (2020), student only pay for one-third of the tuition and fees regardless of their household income. The state of Virginia pays the other two-thirds of the cost when the student completes the program. Since the implementation of FastForward in 2015, over 24,500 students, 93% of total enrolled in the Virginia Community College System (VCCS), have earned a short-term, stackable credential (CCRC, 2021). The majority of the VCCS students who completed a credential report 25 to 50 percent increase in their annual income (Zaleski, 2019).

In addition, the Financial Aid for Noncredit Training leading to Industry Credentials (FANTIC) program provides funding for students demonstrating financial need who are enrolled

in an approved noncredit workforce training program leading to the attainment of an industry recognized credential or licensure (Workforce Financial Assistance, 2020). Funding is limited and is offered to students on a first-come, first-served basis. Eligible student income levels are up to 200% of the poverty level; however, during COVID-19 Pandemic, this funding was extended to 400% of the poverty level (SCHEV, 2020). This financial assistance program pay for 90% of the student's cost for the first one-third of the FastForward (2020) program. Qualified students are responsible for 10% of the tuition amount at the time of registration (Workforce Financial Assistance, 2020).

Additional Financial Assistance

In addition to financial aid, some student-parents may qualify for federal assistance programs such as Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) (USDA, 2021a), Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021a), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (USDA, 2021b), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021b). These federal programs allow low-income student-parents the opportunity to focus on their studies instead of worrying about how to feed their families and pay for other living expenses. A brief summary of each follows.

WIC provides nutritious foods, promotes healthy eating, and makes health care referrals to low-income pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, infants, and children up to age five (USDA, 2021a). Qualified participants use WIC vouchers at authorized food stores. WIC food packages vary by the child's age and if the woman is pregnant, breastfeeding, and up to one year postpartum (USDA, 2021c).

The CCDF helps low-income families who are working or enrolled in an educational program to pay for childcare (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021a). Its purpose also includes improving child care and development of the participating children (Virginia Early Childhood Foundation, 2021). Even if the family has a temporary change in their job or educational enrollment, an eligible child qualifies for childcare for at least 12 months as long as the family income does not exceed 85% of the State Median Income (SMI) (Virginia Early Childhood Foundation, 2021). Families pay no more than seven percent of the childcare costs. Copayments vary from 5-10% of the family's monthly gross income; however are waived if they are TANF or SNAP recipients (Virginia Early Childhood Foundation, 2021).

SNAP supplements low-income family food budgets so that they can buy nutritious foods as they move to self-sufficiency (USDA, 2021b). There are three federal criteria to be eligible: (1) the monthly household gross income must be at or below 130% of the poverty line, (2) the monthly net income must be less than or equal to the poverty line, and (3) household assets must fall below certain limits (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2019). An eligible family of four can receive up to $782 per month. Instead of food stamps, eligible recipients now receive a card that they can use in authorized food stores (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021b).

TANF provides financial assistance for qualified parents for food, housing, and other living expenses for a limited period of time (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021b). Maintaining enrollment in programs like SNAP and TANF is arduous due to *work first* requirements which make employment a priority over education (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020a). Eligible participants must work a certain number of hours each week in order to remain eligible. Student-parents typically work in low-wage, low-growth jobs creating obstacles toward financial

mobility and security (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020a). Policies like *work first* undermine state and

federal investments in higher education and workforce development programs and make it harder

for student-parents to meet their households' basic needs (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020a). Working

student-parents may also be inadvertently harming their chances of receiving Pell Grants and

health insurance (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010).

SNAP and TANF recipients report that they still cannot meet the basic food needs of

their families, as well as challenges with eligibility requirements and their caseworkers (Gosliner

et al., 2020; Wilson, 2008). To maintain federal assistance recipients are required to meet with

their caseworkers every few months. The caseworkers evaluated whether the student-parents still

met the qualifications required to receive the government benefits. In one case, an appointment

time provided by the caseworker conflicted with a student-parent's class schedule. The

caseworker told the student to choose between food or an education (Wilson, 2008).

Some legislators and community and technical college leaders are focusing on pathways

for completion of high-demand, high-paying fields. Virginia has new legislation (H. bill 2204,

2021; S. bill 1405, 2021) to make tuition-free community college available for low- and middle-

income students seeking jobs in high-demand fields. The program, called Get Skilled, Get a Job,

and Give Back (G3), targets industries such as health care, information technology, computer

science, manufacturing, skilled trades, public safety, and early childhood education (Virginia

Governor, 2021). G3 began on July 1, 2021, and is a last-dollar program that pays the remaining

cost of tuition, books, and fees not covered by financial aid and scholarships (SCHEV, 2021). G3

programs are also stackable leading to immediate value in the labor market and includes a

pathway to an associate degree (SCHEV, 2021). Recipients must complete a FAFSA, be eligible

for Virginia in-state tuition, have an income less than or equal to 400% of the poverty level,

enroll in a minimum of six credits in an approved VCCS program (SCHEV, 2021).

G3 recipients include students who would qualify for Pell Grants but are deemed

ineligible because they already have a bachelor's degree. However, G3 still does not cover the

cost of attendance, such as rent, food, transportation, and childcare. Postsecondary institutional

changes to financial policies and practices can help support student-parents and increase their

persistence toward a postsecondary credential. One example includes reimbursement for

childcare or on-campus childcare (Gault et al., 2018). This childcare assistance can come in

many forms, such as childcare subsidies, helping student-parents find childcare, and creating

partnerships with private organizations to provide childcare assistance (Schumacher, 2015). In

addition to financial aid and grants, institutions can relieve some of their financial burden by

providing funds for food, shelter, and transportation emergencies (Beeler, 2016).

Pandemic Financial Assistance

The U.S. Federal Government disbursed an unprecedented amount of student emergency

aid to postsecondary institutions across the country via the Higher Education Emergency Relief

Fund (HEERF) during the Pandemic (U.S. DOE, 2021a). In March 2020, Congress passed the

Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, which included $30.75 billion to

help postsecondary students also known as HEERF I (U.S. DOE, 2021a). In December 2020,

HEERF II was authorized by the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations

Act (CRRSAA) and totaled $81.88 billion (U.S. DOE, 2021b). Then in April 2022, HEERF III

was authorized by the American Rescue Plan (ARP) providing $39.6 billion to postsecondary

institutions to serve students and ensure learning continues during the COVID-19 Pandemic

(U.S. DOE, 2021c).

Public and non-profit Title IV participating postsecondary institutions were eligible to receive HEERF funding and had one calendar year from the date of the award to expend the funds (U.S. DOE, 2021b). The CARES Act requirement for HEERF I, institutions could disburse funds to student who were eligible to receive financial aid whether they filed a FAFSA or not. The criteria to participate included, but was not limited to: U.S. citizenship or eligible noncitizen, a valid social security number, high school diploma or GED, and registration with the Selective Service if male (U.S. DOE, 2020). This funding is considered an emergency financial aid grant for unexpected expenses for in-person students related to the disruption of campus operations due to the Pandemic such as student's cost of attendance including food, housing, course materials, technology, health care, and childcare (U.S. DOE, 2020). Under HEERF I, postsecondary institutions could use funding to help with significant changes to the delivery of instruction due to the Pandemic.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act (2021) includes important steps to provide emergency aid to students, SNAP, and adjustments to financial aid rules (Goldrick-Rab & Welton, 2021). The CRRSAA required that HEERF II funding be prioritized for students with exceptional need such as Pell Grants and for student enrolled exclusively in distance education (U.S. DOE, 2021b). Postsecondary institutional funding was used to defray expenses such as lost revenue, reimbursement for expenses already incurred, technology costs associated with transition to distance education, faculty and staff training, and payroll (U.S. DOE, 2021b). The funding formula was improved over the CARES Act to include underfunded part-time students and their institutions (Goldrick-Rab & Welton, 2021). In addition, SNAP recipients also received a 15% increase in benefits to meet their basic need for food (Goldrick-Rab & Welton, 2021). Significant improvements in the FASFA process included, but are not limited to Pell Grant

opportunities for incarcerated individuals pursuing postsecondary education, removing the ban on prior drug convictions, simplifying the FAFSA process for unaccompanied homeless student and former foster care youth, amending eligibility factors to include student's family size and adjusted gross income compared to poverty levels, removing the selective service requirement, and increasing opportunities for additional funding for students based on the professional judgement of financial aid officers during the health crisis (Goldrick-Rab & Welton, 2021). Under HEERF III, the American Rescue Plan (ARP) also required institutions to implement evidence-based practices to monitor and suppress coronavirus and conduct direct outreach to financial aid applicants about the opportunity to receive a financial aid adjustment due to recent unemployment (U.S. DOE, 2021c).

Demographic Data

Completion rates and attendance of student-parents are decreasing (Gault et al., 2014). Only 37% of all student-parents complete a degree or a certificate within six years, compared with 59% of students without children (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020a). Marital status significantly impacts student-parents' postsecondary persistence as well. Single parents constitute the majority of student-parents, and they are often at a distinct disadvantage (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020a).

Eighty-eight percent of single student-parents live in poverty (Gault et al., 2014) and 52 percent dropout within six years of enrolling (Wladis et al., 2018). Younger student-parents were less likely than older student-parents to have enough food, to eat balance meals, and to have stable housing (The Aspen Institute, 2021; Baker-Smith, et al., 2020). Black and American Indian or Alaska Native women are more likely than women from other backgrounds to be student-parents. They face systemic racial barriers that contribute to disproportionately worse

outcomes in higher education (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020a). Figure 2 depicts the racial or ethnic

background of student-parents in two-year postsecondary institutions in the United States.

Older student-parents are more likely to be married than younger student-parents. Marriage often

means a higher income, shared parenting support, and more time to study leading to higher

grades, higher GPAs, and less financial stress (The Aspen Institute, 2021; Baker-Smith, et al.,

2020; Zalaznick, 2021). Figure 3 shows the age distribution of student-parents at two-year

postsecondary institutions across the United States.

Figure 2

Racial or Ethnic Background of Student-Parents in U.S. Two-Year Postsecondary Institutions

(Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020b)
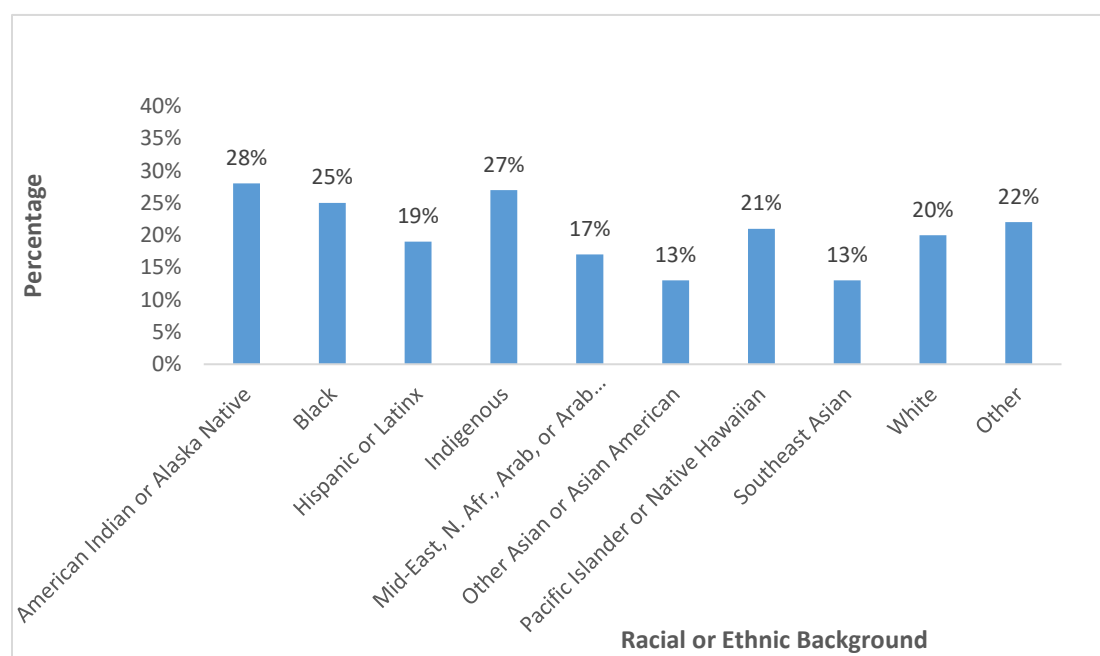
Figure 3

Student-Parent Age Distribution at U.S. Two-Year Postsecondary Institutions (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020a)
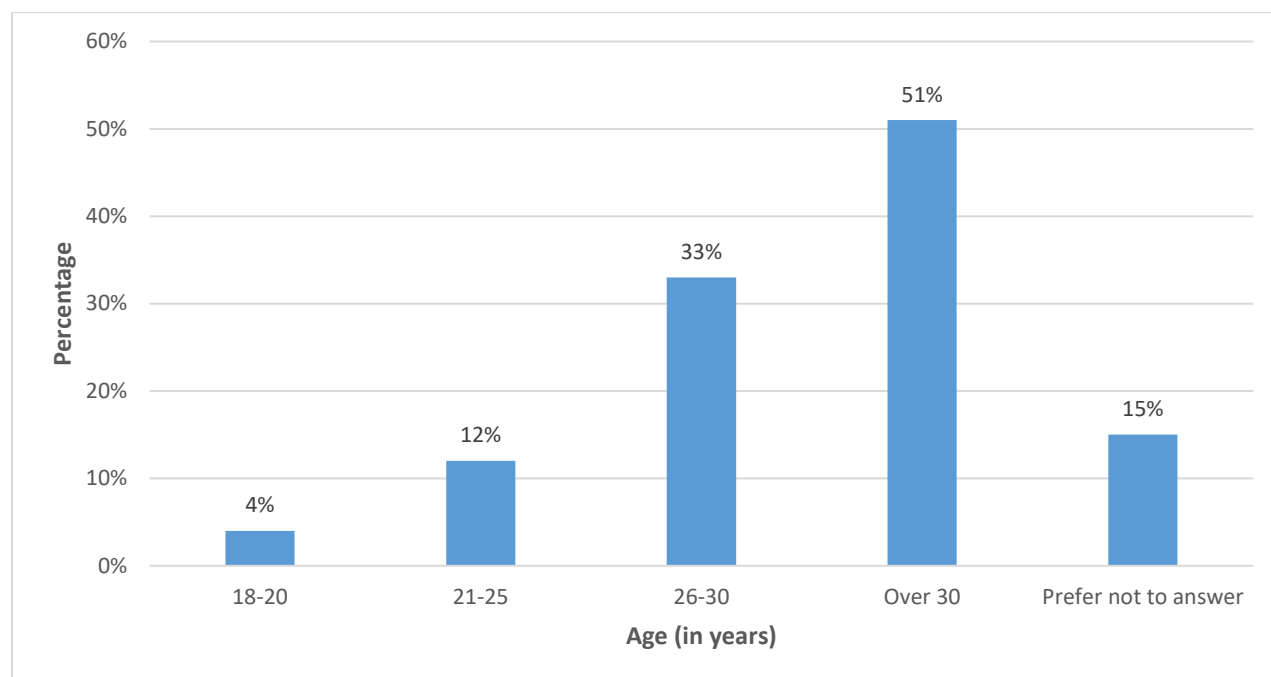
Motivation

Although there are many obstacles along the postsecondary degree completion journey, there are also several motivating factors for student-parents to persist. They want to increase their income and be great role models for their children (Costello, 2014). There are positive impacts on their future and that of their children with a higher incomes, increased employment, better health, and more civic engagement (Gault et al., 2018). In terms of social mobility, working class parents who pursue a college degree are more likely to participate in higher socio-economic status cultural activities, such as theater or museum visits, with their children and have postsecondary expectations for their children than parents who do not pursue a postsecondary

degree (Roksa & Potter, 2011). Student-parents also access more resources and are more likely to purchase homes, be of a non-traditional age, live with a partner, and earn more money annually than parents who do not pursue a college degree (Roksa & Potter, 2011). Upon degree completion and employment with a higher income, student-parents do not need to depend on local, state, and federal financial assistance. In fact, single student-parents' lifetime public assistance reduces by $25,600–$40,000 (Reichlin et al., 2019). With an associate's degree, single student-parents contribute a minimum of $71,400 to the federal and state tax base over their lifetimes (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020a). This not only improves the social mobility of the student-parents and their families, but helps the local and state economy.

Another motivating factor is that the social mobility continues to improve not only for the student-parents, but for their children as well. Harding, Morris, and Hughes (2015) share that children of student-parents are more likely exposed to other people who have a postsecondary degree making it an expectation for their own future. Postsecondary levels improve one's psychological well-being resulting in better awareness and control of one's mental health, self-efficacy, and ability to handle stressful situations (Harding et al., 2017). These student-parents also provide more printed materials at home, focus on cultural activities, and have greater cognitive stimulating activities and involvement with their children which results in less TV time (Harding et al., 2017). Gault et al. (2018) support this premise and add that student-parents are more likely to participate in activities outside of their academic responsibilities than are parents who do not pursue a postsecondary degree.

Postsecondary Institutional Responsibilities

Much of student-parents' persistence toward degree completion depends on postsecondary institutions. Tinto's (1993; 2017) theory of student retention includes internal

factors, or those within the postsecondary institution's control. These internal factors include students' self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perception of the curriculum. An in-depth review of these internal factors in literature reveals qualitative and quantitative research of student-parents and strategies postsecondary institutions can use to retain the significant student population.

Self-efficacy and Sense of Belonging

Higher education institutions that are welcoming, offer flexible schedules, and provide support services to student-parents make them feel socially accepted and more likely to continue to enroll (van Rhijn et al. 2016). Student-parents are more likely than their non-parenting peers to feel that they do not belong on campus (The Aspen Institute, 2021; Healthy Minds Network & American College Health Association, 2020). Postsecondary institutions should have policies as well as trained faculty and staff that create a friendly environment (Jobe et al., 2018; Schumacher, 2015). Family friendly campuses have intentional plans in place to learn about students who are also parents. The should learn about their experiences, collect data, implement best practices, make evidence-based plans to improve the experiences of student-parents, and locate helpful resources in the community (Oshe & Karp, 2020). Positive interactions with faculty along with online and hybrid course offerings also increase persistence among student-parents (Schumacher, 2015). There is a positive correlation between faculty who were willing to accommodate students because of their work-life balance challenges and the persistence of student-parents to continue their postsecondary education (The Aspen Institute, 2021; Peterson, 2016). Interactions with professors influence student success and persistence. Fifty-seven percent of student-parents reported having a negative experiences with an instructor who was not sympathetic to their children's needs and were unwilling to make accommodations for them (The

Aspen Institute, 2021). This caused them to have to retake the class due to a missed exam or not be able to make up an assignment. They feel singled out for being a parent and perceive the college culture as a whole as not being supportive of student-parents (The Aspen Institute, 2021). Sensitivity training is also a must for college personnel (The Aspen Institute, 2021). Students-parents need encouragement, flexible class schedules, and understanding from faculty when life's challenges happen.

Postsecondary institutions need to educate their faculty and staff about student-parents and their unique mental health and financial stressors (The Aspen Institute, 2020). Initial conversations and institutional documentation need to inquire if students have dependent children. In addition, student-parents' situations need to be considered when decisions and policies are made (The Aspen Institute, 2020). Postsecondary institutions need to have mental health counselors equipped to support student-parents. Licensed clinical social works as well as community resources are also imperative to supporting their mental health needs (The Aspen Institute, 2021).

Based on long-term trends of decreased adult student enrollment, community colleges need to create, implement, and market programs and services in order to increase adult student enrollment (The Aspen Institute, 2021; CCRC, 2021). Support services and campaigns initiated by the postsecondary institutions specifically targeting student-parents and incorporating their families are imperative to help them feel connected especially since these students are often not aware of the policies and procedures involved when pursuing a postsecondary degree (The Aspen Institute, 2021; CCRC, 2021; Peterson, 2016). Specific consideration should be given to adult students who are in historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups (CCRC, 2021). To relieve student anxiety, postsecondary institutions need to communicate clear expectations to

achieve positive outcomes all while building their confidence in their ability to accomplish it (Jobe et al., 2018). They can ease student-parent transition stress by providing a variety of support services such as application assistance, academic advising, tutoring, peer support, mentoring, as well as financial and mental-health counseling (Schumacher, 2015). They also need to communicate that continuous enrollment is the best avenue to meet their educational and career goals (Jobe et al., 2018).

Again there is a difference among younger and older student-parents. Older student parents are more likely to take use academic support services when compared to younger student-parents (The Aspen Institute, 2021; Wilsey, 2013). Student-parents are more likely to visit faculty during office hours, seek tutoring, and go to writing centers than their non-parent peers (The Healthy Minds Network, 2020; Wilsey, 2013). However, student-parents report more difficulty managing their time than their non-parent peers (The Aspen Institute, 2021; The Healthy Minds Network, 2020). Postsecondary institutions that provide student-parent support to provide assurance, encouragement, and a sense of belonging have a positive impact on student-parents' persistence toward their postsecondary degree (The Aspen Institute, 2021; Costello, 2014; Schumacher, 2015). In addition, increased student-parent persistence is shown in colleges that target the younger student-parent population and encourage them to participate in support services which increases their academic success (The Aspen Institute, 2021; Costello, 2014; Schumacher, 2015). Student-parents also need lactation rooms, family study rooms, family friendly spaces across campus such as in the library or dining areas, as well as student-parent networking opportunities to increase their sense of belonging (The Aspen Institute, 2021).

Institutions need to have dedicated staff that focus on making families feel welcome on campus, often referred to as a family friendly campus, such as providing childcare at events or

incorporating the entire family in college initiatives. Student-parents can also benefit by spending time with each other for advice and to have connections with someone in a similar life situation (The Aspen Institute, 2021). Mentoring programs with older student-parents mentoring younger student-parents would be beneficial to increase self-efficacy and sense of belonging.

Curriculum

A 2020 survey showed that 25% of adult learners preferred a non-degree credential instead of an associate or bachelor's degree because it is efficient, leads to a career or promotion, convenient, it's stackable for future education, and costs less (Strada Education Network, 2020). Stackable credentials include a series of credentials that lead to a postsecondary degree and career advancement (CCRC, 2021). A credential can be earned in a short amount of time and has labor-market value by itself. The Community College Research Center (CCRC) (2021) research findings align with this survey and encourages both vertical and horizontal credential stacking. Vertical stacking leads to a higher-level degree or credential. Horizontal stacking is the accumulation of credentials allowing for career expansion into additional specializations (CCRC). Stackable credentials accompanied by a clear pathway to the next steps are particularly beneficial to low-income adults with little postsecondary experience (CCRC, 2021).

Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) received several U.S. Department of Labor Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grants to fund the creation of career pathways in high-demand fields (U.S. Department of Labor, 2021). Beginning in 2021 with $15 million grant funding, they began embedding industry-recognized certifications, certificates, diplomas, and other credentials in advanced manufacturing. During development, they collaborated with industry leaders. All 16 WTCS institutions participated and overtime new applied associate degree programs with high labor

market needs in their service community are reviewed for approval by the system office (CCRC, 2019). An external evaluation of some of the welding, machine tool, and industrial maintenance programs revealed 75% of students were new enrollees (Valentine & Price, 2019). The programs are well suited for adult students with little or no postsecondary experience participants and increased racial diversity. The evaluation showed that these students had better outcomes than a comparison group in terms of non-degree credential attainment, multiple non-degree credentials, and short-term certificates leading to diploma completion (Valentine & Price, 2019).

Virginia's G3 programs began July 1, 2021 and are stackable. They target industries such as health care, information technology, computer science, manufacturing, skilled trades, public safety, and early childhood education (Virginia Governor, 2021). G3 programs are also stackable leading to immediate value in the labor market and includes a pathway to an associate degree (SCHEV, 2021).

Synchronous versus Asynchronous Online Learning

Flexible online programs are appealing to busy adult learners (The Aspen Institute, 2021; Jobe et al., 2018). A 2020 survey revealed that low-income adult learners value the convenience of course offerings when compared to adult learners who live above the poverty level (Strada Education Network, 2020). The benefits of online courses include the option to login anywhere there is an internet connection. Student-parents can use a variety of different devices from laptops, to tablets, to cell phones; although, some devices have more functionality than others. Student ability to navigate online courses relates to their resiliency and can increase student persistence (The Aspen Institute, 2021; Jobe et al., 2018). However, students are vulnerable to the hazards that flexibility inherently possesses.

Asynchronous online classes (AOC) do not require real-time interaction; instead, content is available online for students to access when it best suits their schedule. AOCs are still likely to have established due dates for assignments, quizzes, exams, to keep students on track for course completion. However, when students need assistance or interaction in real time, they may not be able to connect immediately to a faculty member or peer. This may leave them feeling detached from the postsecondary institution (Jobe et al., 2018).

Synchronous online classes meet on a regularly scheduled basis via web conferencing software. The instructor meets the students in real-time online and leads them through lecture and activities, similar to a face-to-face class meeting. This learner-instructor interaction showed significant influence on student satisfaction (Kuo et al., 2014).

The duration and the content of the online courses influences student satisfaction (Kuo & Belland, 2016). One study showed that the depth of interaction African American students had with the course content in online accelerated courses had significant student satisfaction (Kuo et al., 2015). In fact, students who are confident in their internet skills perceived more interaction with their instructor, peers, and the course content (Kuo & Belland, 2016). Accelerated or advanced-level courses have more peer to peer interaction when compared to a typical schedule or entry level courses (Kuo & Belland, 2016). Because students are meeting more often in a condensed period of time as well as the need to achieve a deeper level of understanding on the subject area in advanced-level causes a higher level of interaction and collaboration among online students (Dennen & Wieland, 2008). Students are more likely to know each other from other classes and have more experiences taking advanced courses (Kuo & Belland, 2016).

Chapter Summary

Before the COVID-19 Pandemic, low-income student-parents already had financial insecurities with food, housing, and childcare (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). Now, there are many more obstacles with school closures, lay-offs, and lack of childcare (Cruse et al., 2020). The review of the literature and empirical data revealed a gap in research of student-parents' family, financial, and educational experiences as they persist during their postsecondary journey during the COVID-19 Pandemic. There is also a gap in federal and institutional data collection: the Federal Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS) does not collect any data on parental status (Gault et al., 2020). In addition, most colleges and universities do not identify which students are parenting on their campuses, nor assess their needs (The Aspen Institute, 2021; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020a).

There is a gap in the research about how low-income student-parents' experiences affect persistence toward completion of a postsecondary credential at a community college related to financial and family related challenges due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic. Another gap in the research include low-income student-parents' experiences that affect persistence toward completion of a postsecondary credential at a community college in synchronous versus asynchronous online classes related to financial and family related challenges due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic.

With declining enrollment across the nation (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021; NCES 2021), information about low-income student-parents provides opportunities for community college leaders to retain this significant student population should future unexpected emergencies or natural disasters occur. Community colleges can retain federal financial aid, promote retention, degree completion, generate more tuition, and improve

outcomes (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). They can also leverage and promote new online teaching strategies. Legislators can use these data to promote changes to policies, budgets, programs, existing laws or passing new legislation based on the low-income student-parents' needs. Researchers and scholars who are interested in this student population can also benefit from the familial, financial, and educational information collected from this research. The next chapter contains the methods for the research including the role of the researcher, participant description, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, and limitations.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the family, financial, and educational experiences of low-income student-parents as they persist toward a postsecondary credential at a community college during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic. This chapter describes the role of the researcher, research methodology including participant selection, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, and limitations and related to this study. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the family, financial, and educational experiences of low-income student-parents as they persist toward a postsecondary credential at a community college during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic?

2. What are the family, financial, and educational experiences of low-income student-parents as they persist toward a postsecondary credential at a community college in synchronous versus asynchronous courses during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic?

As a social constructivist, I believe that there are multiple realities of a student. In addition, my epistemological stance is that both the researcher and the participants construct knowledge. I focused on my own values as the researcher, the values of the student participants, and the postsecondary education setting. The participants' voices consumed the majority of the narrative (Hays & Singh, 2012). Using a qualitative, phenomenological perspective, I focused on how student-parents, who live in or near poverty, experience their own lives in their pursuit of a postsecondary credential at a community college before and during the Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Pandemic. I discovered the financial, family, and postsecondary educational related issues during the Coronavirus Pandemic.

Role of the Researcher

I conducted this study at my institution of employment in which I hold a position of power as an Academic Dean. I shared this information with participants and reassured them that all communication would remain anonymous and would not impact their standing in the institution. I am the child of a low-income student-parent as well as a student-parent seeking a doctoral degree. I shared these facts with participants to establish rapport. Hermeneutic phenomenology philosophy assumes the researcher's mind and the lifeworld are intertwined (Vagle, 2018). Guided by this philosophy, I became familiar with my own personal judgments to remain open minded. I continually identified and questioned my own viewpoints during data collection and analysis of the participants' lived experiences, called bridling, since the researcher's thoughts and the lifeworld cannot be separated (Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle 2018).

I increased data trustworthiness through four key components: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Hays & Singh, 2012). I used several strategies during the research process, data interpretation, and report writing to best demonstrate the rigor of this study to show credibility and confirmability. I kept field notes and memos to record details and analyze findings from interviews with students. To reflect on my experiences as a researcher, I kept a reflexive journal. This journal included ideas about findings and thoughts about how the students, interviews, data analysis are affecting me personally, as well as any changes (Hays & Singh, 2012).

I conducted the majority of the interviews using an online meeting software Zoom to ensure the participants had an equal chance of participation and to ensure safety during the

Coronavirus Pandemic (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). To ensure credibility and confirmability, the interviews were transcribed and included member checking to ensure transcript accuracy (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). To be respectful of the participants' time, I emailed the interview transcripts and requested their comments via email. I also asked the students if my data analysis accurately reflected their experiences.

I conducted semi-structured interviews to increase the credibility as well as the dependability of the data. I avoided leading questions and instead used open-ended questions to decrease the likelihood of overlooking important variables. To have a productive interview, the initial questions and potential follow up questions were prepared in advance. The three-interview method increased dependability (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). This prolonged engagement over several months with the students allowed me to build and maintain a relationship with them (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Participant Description and Sampling

The site for the research was a community college, a rural community college located in the Southeastern United States. There are approximately 5000 students enrolled. The College's service area includes three counties and three small cities with an estimated population of 263,000. Participants included students who are parents of at least one dependent child age 18 years or younger. They were enrolled full-time or part-time at the community college, lived in or near poverty, and were seeking a postsecondary credential. These purposeful parameters, referred to as criterion sampling, decreased the time to locate this specific population of student-parents.

For credit programs, the contact information for students fitting these criteria was collected by the community college's Director of Financial Aid using FAFSA data. The non-

credit program student contact information was collected by the community college's Workforce

Operations Assistant using FANTIC data. Each then forwarded the contact information to the

community college's Director of Institutional Research and Effectiveness (OIRE) who emailed

the students with *Participant Recruitment Letter* found in Appendix A. The Director of OIRE

then forwarded the contact information of the students willing to participate in this study to me,

the researcher. This process allowed for voluntary participation and kept the researcher from

having access to the confidential student data initially collected. Twenty-six student participants

were recruited. Since some participants did not continue participation throughout the entire

study, the study concluded with a total of 23 participants.

Data Collection Procedures

I submitted applications and awaited approval from Old Dominion University College of

Education and Professional Studies Human Subjects Review Committee and the Community

College's Internal Review Boards (Appendix B and C). After receipt of the participant contact

information from the Community College's Director of OIRE, I emailed the participants to

schedule a Zoom meeting when I informed them of the nature of the study, the plans to use the

results, as well as reviewed and asked them to digitally signed *ODU's Informed Consent*

Document (Appendix D). During the first Zoom meeting I explained the statement of

confidentiality and anonymity, voluntary participation, as well as potential risks and benefits.

While still in the Zoom meeting, I emailed the *Informed Consent Document* to participants using

the email address they provided when initially expressing interest to participate in the study. I

asked them to take their time to review it, and reply via email with a typed statement confirming

agreement to participate in the study along with their full legal name. After I received their

email, I began the first interview (Appendix F) via the same Zoom session. Participants were

encouraged to participate in a consistent, quiet, comfortable environment that was free from interruptions. The semi-structured interview allowed me to ask follow-up questions (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). At the end of the first and second interviews, I scheduled the next interview with the participant via Zoom. Participants could exit the study anytime without consequence; three of the 26 participants chose to do so. Interview questions were developed by the research guided by the literature review. Content validity was measured by assessing major themes in the literature review that comprehensively and adequately reflected the student-parents' perspectives of their family, financial, and educational experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The researcher took reasonable steps to keep private information, such as the participant's academic and financial student records from the community college. The researcher removed identifiers from all identifiable private information collected. Data were stored for up to five years in a locked, private office, or alternative protected space, of the researchers. In addition, electronic data were stored on a password-protected computer to which only the researchers have access. Digital audio files were destroyed. Only researchers approved as PIs or co-PIs on this study had access to the data. Identifiers were removed, and the de-identified information used for future research without additional informed consent from the participant. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications; but the researcher does not identify the participants. The records may be subpoenaed by court order or inspected by government bodies with oversight authority.

I began the first interview of the three-interview series (Seidman, 2013) with each participant in February 2021. The second interviews began in mid-March, and the third interviews began at the end of March. All of the interviews concluded at the end of April 2021. After concluding an interview with a participant, I scheduled the next interview to occur one to

two weeks after the previous interview. Some interviews occurred more than two weeks after the previous due to schedule conflicts of the participants or the researcher. During the first interview, my task was to put the participants' experiences in the context of their life history by asking them to tell as much as possible about their educational, financial, and family related experiences before the COVID-19 Pandemic. The purpose of the second interview (Appendix G) was to focus on concrete details of the participant's lived educational, financial, and family related experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic. I asked follow-up questions as needed based on my review and reflection of their first interview. During the third interview (Appendix H), I asked participants to reflect on the meaning of the experiences discussed in the first two interviews and how instructors, community college leaders, and legislators can best support student-parents as they persist toward completion of a postsecondary credential. I also asked follow-up questions from the second interview. Each interview was approximately 20-45 minutes in length.

The interview transcripts were downloaded from the Zoom software. I copied the text into a word processing document and edited to reflect the interview verbatim. As needed I referred to the Zoom audio recordings of the interviews for clarification during transcription. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, student names were changed to the student number, for example SP1 for student-parent 1, in the transcripts. I used a spreadsheet to track participant interview progress, member checking, number of children, ages of children, race, and gender using a spreadsheet. These data were collected from the first interview transcripts. Also included in the spreadsheet were participants' names, their alias, and a number to track the number of participants in the study. I only included the transcripts of the 23 participants who completed all three interviews.

Data Analysis Procedures

A phenomenon is something complex that occurs in the world in which we live or lifeworld (Vagle, 2018). "Phenomenologists are interested in trying to slow down and open up how things are experienced..." (Vagle, 2018, p. 23). Through reflective lifeworld research, I remained as open as possible to the phenomenon of student-parents attending a community college during the COVID-19 Pandemic. I focused on their lived experiences through description and interpretation (Vagle, 2018). Interpretation is a continual process made in relation to the circumstance(s) in which they occur, also known as the hermeneutic circle (Vagle, 2018).

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a human science that studies persons (van Manen, 2016). I identified themes in the interview transcripts of student-parents guided by van Manen's (2016) hermeneutic phenomenology thematic analysis. Vagle (2018) provides protocols for van Manen's (2016) hermeneutic phenomenology thematic analysis via "phenomenological walks" (p. 93). Guided by these walks, I asked myself where, what, how, and why this phenomenon exists in multiple spaces and places. I located a place to start my walk, took constant notes, and stayed as long as I was still collecting information. I asked myself "wondering questions" (p. 94) to reveal what was occurring; what was the purpose, the discussions, and the practices that happened in this space? I drew upon my own comprehension of the phenomenological research as well as organically explored the place to identify cultures, everyday practices, dialogues, and systems. My goal was not to discuss everything, instead I found meaningful things and examined them deeply. This required patience and led to surprising discoveries (Vagle, 2018). This walk led to rich descriptions with many characteristics and distinctions of the phenomenon (Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle, 2018).

"Validity [is] ... marked primarily by a consideration of the researcher's sustained engagement with the phenomenon and the participants who experienced the phenomenon" (Vagle, 2018, p. 72). Using a three-interview series (Seidman, 2013), participant interviews occurred during the COVID-19 Pandemic from February through April 2021. This allowed me to have prolonged engagement with the student-parent participants during the phenomenon to increase validity and trustworthiness. Through bridling I restrained my viewpoint as a child of a low-income student-parent as well as a student-parent myself pursing a doctoral degree (Dahlberg, 2006). I did not make assumptions or interpretations too quickly or carelessly, but instead took a reflective stance and loosened my ties to the lifeworld (Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle, 2018). I remained patient while observing and exploring the relationship between student-parents and the COVID-19 phenomenon as well as my relationship as the researcher and with the participants (Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle, 2018).

Measures that protect participants' identity were taken to the fullest extent allowed by law, keeping data in a secure place, reporting findings as themes (aggregating the data) and reporting individual responses using pseudonyms. The researchers masked other markers of identity (e.g., financial data, academic records). The names of individuals were not connected to participants' identities during analysis nor in the resulting manuscript. The researcher ensured confidentiality by assigning pseudonyms instead of each participants' name to identify the data and kept the key that matches participants and their data secured in a separate location. Information was kept confidential in a space that was inaccessible to the public and was kept locked. Only the researcher had access to both hard and electronic files. Pseudonyms were used instead of actual participant names during analysis. This prevented the disclosure of personal information of participants' responses. Data were stored for up to five years in a locked, private

office of the researchers. In addition, electronic data were stored on a password-protected computer to which only the researcher had access. Digital audio files were destroyed. Only researchers approved as Principle Investigators or co-Principle Investigators on this study had access to the data.

Limitations

There are internal and external limitations to this research project. The inability to conduct the interviews in person due to the COVID-19 Pandemic may have limited the interpersonal interaction between the researcher and the participants. This may have influenced participants' responses to the interview questions. Participant sampling was completed using FAFSA and FANTIC data. This allowed identification of the students who met specific criteria as a student-parent and confirmed their low-income. However, only 45% of this community college's students apply for financial assistance which excluded a large percentage of the student population who could have potentially met this criterion.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I addressed the methodological decisions for this study. The participants included 23 students who are also parents at a community college located in the Southeastern United States. Each participant was interviewed three times guided by the Seidman (2013) three-interview series, for a total of 69 interviews. These one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted online using Zoom video conferencing software during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The researcher edited the Zoom transcripts for each interview. Through reflective lifeworld research (Vagle, 2018) and guided by van Manen's (2016) hermeneutic phenomenology thematic analysis, I drew upon my own comprehension of the phenomenological research and explored

organically the cultures, everyday practices, dialogues, and systems. I did not discuss everything, instead I found meaningful things and examined them deeply.

In Chapter Four, I highlighted the findings of the study. I presented the family, financial, and educational experiences of low-income student-parents as they persist toward a post-secondary credential at a community college. I organized the findings by emergent themes, as they relate to the research questions and participant interviews.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS OF STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the family, financial, and educational experiences of low-income student-parents as they persist toward a postsecondary credential at a community college during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the family, financial, and educational experiences of low-income student-parents as they persist toward a postsecondary credential at a community college during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic?

2. What are the family, financial, and educational experiences of low-income student-parents as they persist toward a postsecondary credential at a community college in synchronous versus asynchronous courses during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic?

In this chapter, I present the findings from the study. Through reflective lifeworld research, I remained as open as possible to the COVID-19 Pandemic phenomenon and the student-parents' lived financial, familial, and educational experiences by focusing on both description and interpretation (Vagle, 2018). Guided by Vagle's (2018) protocols for van Manen's (2016) hermeneutic phenomenology thematic analysis via "phenomenological walks" (p. 93), I identified four themes: (a) *Student-Parents Postsecondary Credential Completion Often Interrupted,* (b) *Student-Parents Need Mental Health Support,* (c) *Student-Parents Need More Financial Support and Education*, and (d) *Instructor Interaction, Support Services, and Course Delivery Methods are Essential to Student-Parents' Postsecondary Persistence*.

Setting

Interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 Pandemic. By April 2020, 43% of the

world population (over 3.4 billion people) were in lockdown (Marinoni et al., 2020). Lockdown

was hard. The economic and health related effects were amplified for people of low-

socioeconomic status (Aucejo et al., 2020). Millions of Americans became unemployed, and

42% of the layoffs led to permanent job loss (Barrero et al., 2020). There were higher mortality

rates due to COVID-19 in households with higher poverty, higher household crowding, higher

percentage of populations of color, and higher racialized economic segregation (Chen et al.,

2020; Gross et al., 2020). In addition, there were select conditions such as old age, diabetes,

obesity, and the male gender which increased vulnerabilities and caused more severe COVID-19

outcomes (Hooper et al., 2020).

One major impact on higher education caused by COVID-19 was the implementation of

social distancing measures (Marinoni et al., 2020). Most face-to-face classes and campus

activities halted (Marinoni et al., 2020). Ninety-one percent of two-year postsecondary

institutions transitioned some or all instruction online (Johnson et al., 2020). Secondary schools

and childcare centers also closed. Parents, primarily mothers, spent more time on childcare (Alon

et al., 2020). Mothers ages 25-44 were three times more likely to be unemployed due to childcare

demands compared to fathers (Heggeness & Fields, 2020). During the spring 2020 semester,

seventy-eight percent of student-parent provided schooling for their children at home while they

attended their own postsecondary classes (The Hope Center, 2021). Three quarters of student-

parents reported missing work or class due to lack of childcare (The Hope Center, 2021).

Seventy-nine percent of student-parents reported that their children were at home due to lack of

face-to-face school or childcare during the fall 2020 semester, six months after the Pandemic

began (The Hope Center, 2021). Seventy-three percent of student-parents spend at least 40 hours a week caring for their children (The Hope Center, 2021). If they could find childcare, it was likely not affordable because of their other essential needs such as rent and food (The Hope Center, 2021).

Postsecondary institutions did what they could to acknowledge these issues and support students. Additionally, their focus was directed to technical infrastructure and accessibility, distance learning competencies and pedagogies, and fields of study were all dimensions impacting feasibility and quality of the online learning (Marinoni et al., 2020). Postsecondary institutions were in crisis management mode with changes in placement tests, proctored exams, pedagogical mindsets, instructional methods, and community engagement (Marinoni et al., 2020). Almost 50% of faculty decreased the volume of work assigned to students; many also used a pass/fail grading model instead of letter grades (Johnson et al., 2020). Faculty also increased support for student when compared to pre-COVID-19 (Johnson et al., 2020) by meeting them online via video conferencing software, texting, and talking on the phone in the evenings and weekends.

Participant Demographics

Four hundred sixty-five student-parents were identified as living in or near poverty through the community college's financial aid records. These students were labeled as such if they both (1) applied for financial aid and (2) qualified for Pell Grants, Workforce Financial Aid, or applied for the FAFSA with an income within 200% of the poverty level. These indicators also meant these student-parents are considered part of the ALICE population. The Director of

the community college's Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness (OIRE) emailed the

465 students briefly explaining the study (see Appendix A) and asked them to voluntarily fill out

a form with their name and email address if they had potential interest to participate in the study.

Sixty-three student-parents completed the form. The Director of OIRE shared the 63 names and

email addresses with me. I sent a follow up email to these 63 students explaining more about the

study (see Appendix E). Twenty-six responded confirming their willingness to participate in the

study. A total of 23 of the 26 student-parents participated in all three interviews. Table 1 outlines

the general information about the participants, replacing their actual names with pseudonyms.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race	Marital Status	No. of Dependent Children	Annual Household Income
Marsha	28	female	White	married	2	$123,000
Julie	34	female	Multiracial	married	5	$37,200
Lucy	19	female	White	single	2	$15,600
Trevor	31	male	White	married	3	$28,000
Donna	22	female	Multiracial	single	2	$5,000
Shannon	26	female	White	single	1	$29,120
Amy	30	female	Multiracial	single	2	$20,000
Maggie	47	female	White	married	2	$72,000
Chris	52	male	White	single	1	$35,000
Susan	27	female	White	married	1	$55,000
Denise	35	female	Black	single	1	$18,000
Rosa	26	female	Latinx	single	1	$30,000
Sheila	24	female	Multiracial	single	1	$21,600
Tonya	45	female	White	married	2	$100,000
Sharon	36	female	Black	single	2	$30,000
Mary	33	female	Latinx	married	3	$70,000
Madison	27	female	Multiracial	single	2	$33,000
Ashley	34	female	White	single	3	$45,000
Samantha	33	female	Black	married	2	$50,000
Kelly	25	female	White	single	2	$14,560
Amelia	32	female	White	single	1	$41,000
Melanie	25	female	White	single	2	$8,000
Tahir	46	male	Black	married	3	$80,000

Twenty female and three male student-parents participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 19 to 52 years of age. The average age was 32 years. Figure 4 shows the total number and percentage of student-parents by age group. The majority of student-parents were single (*n=14*) and the remaining were married (n=9). The participants were racially diverse: White (*n=12*), Black (*n=4*), Latinx (*n=2*), and Multiracial races (*n=5*). Their annual household income ranged from $5,000 to $123,000, with an average annual income of $41,786.

Figure 4

Total Number and Percentage of Student-Parents by Student-Parent's Age Group
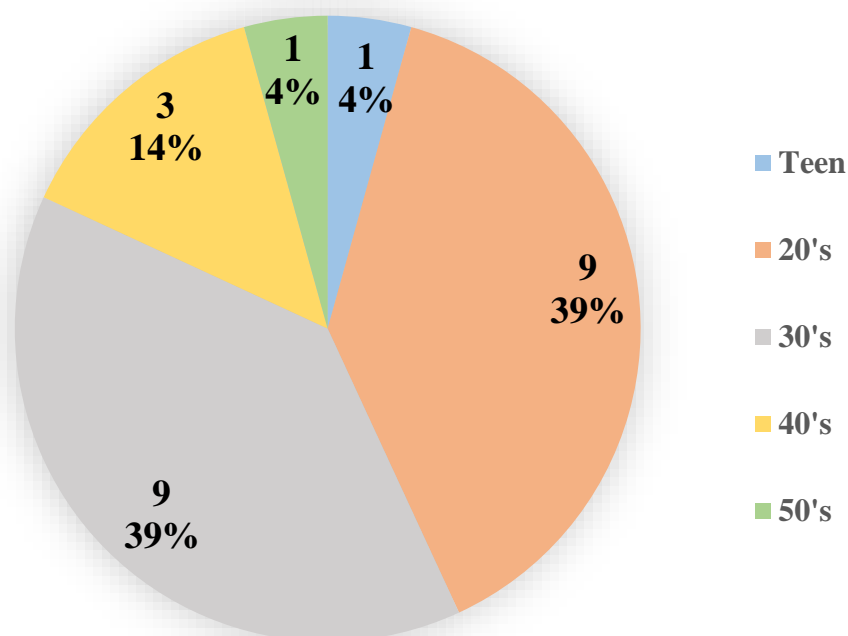
The number of dependent children varied from one to five, with an average of two children per student-parent. Seven student-parents have one child, ten student-parents have two children, five student-parents had three children, and one student-parent had five children. The

ages of the children ranged from one month old to 17 years of age. The average age of the

children was 7 years old. Below, Figures 5 and 6 depict the total number and percentages of

student-parents by number of dependent children and percentage of children by age group

respectively.

Figure 5

Total Number and Percentage of Student-Parents by Number of Dependent Children
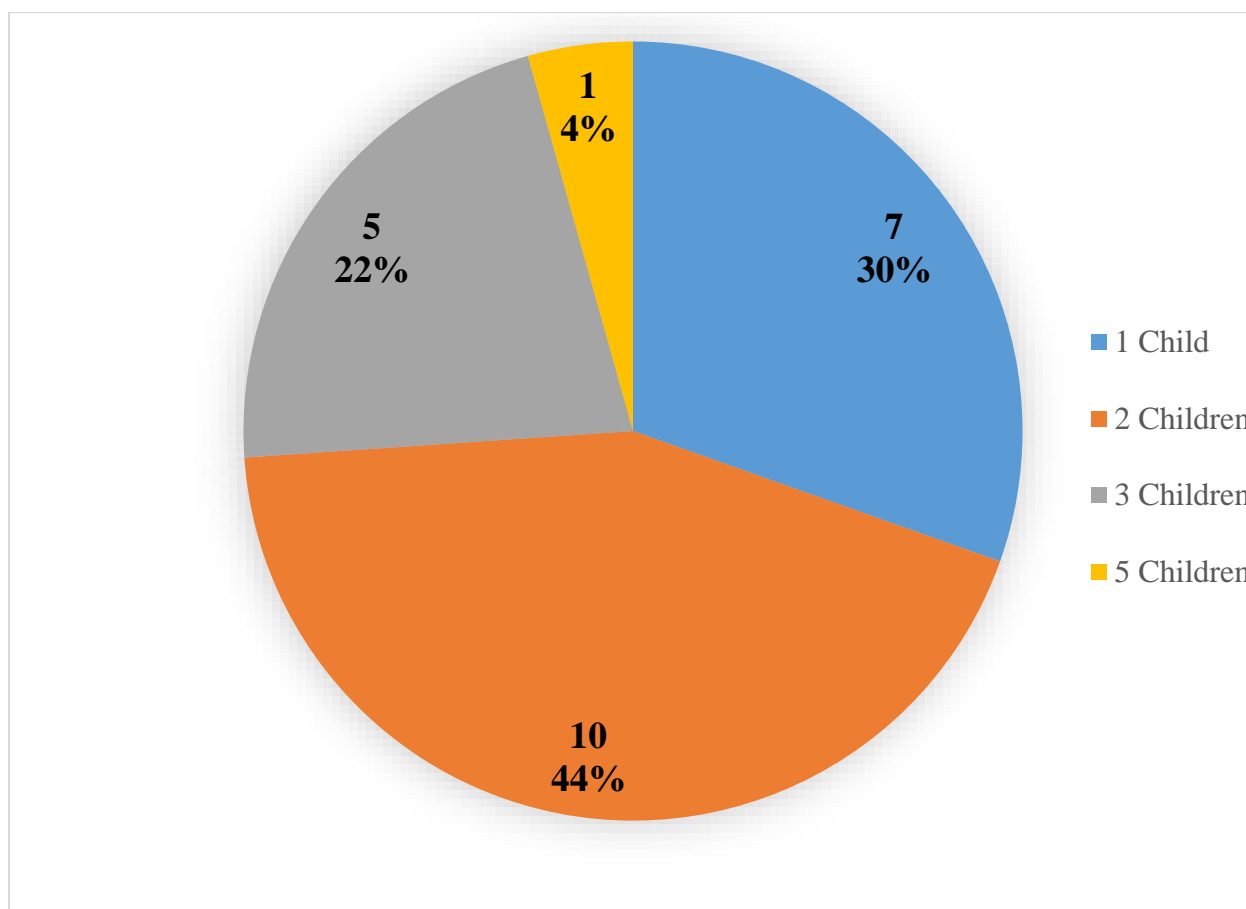
Figure 6

Total Number and Percentage of Children by Children's Age Group
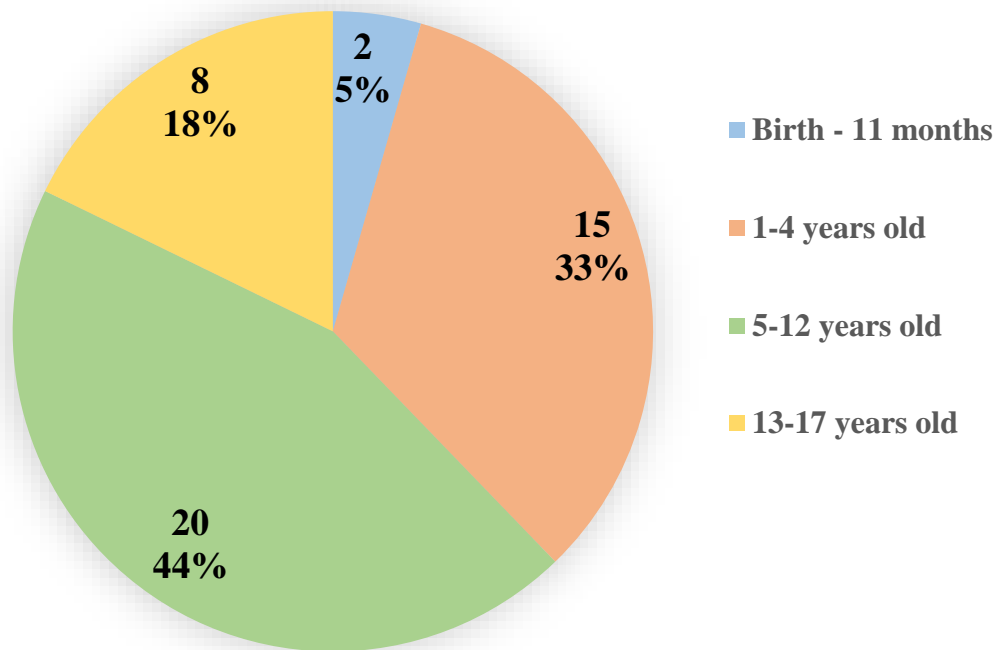
The average self-reported annual income of the student-parent participants in the study was $41,786. As shown in Figure 7, six student-parents were considered living up to 100% of the poverty level as depicted in Table 1, or earning up to $26,500 for a family of four. Nine student-parents' annual income was between 100% and 200% of the poverty level or between $26,500 - $53,000 for a family of four. Six participants earned between 200% and 300% of the poverty level or up to $79,500 for a family of four. Two participants earned up to or exceeded 400% of the poverty level of $106,000 for a family of four.

Figure 7

Total Number and Percentage of Student-Parents by Poverty Level
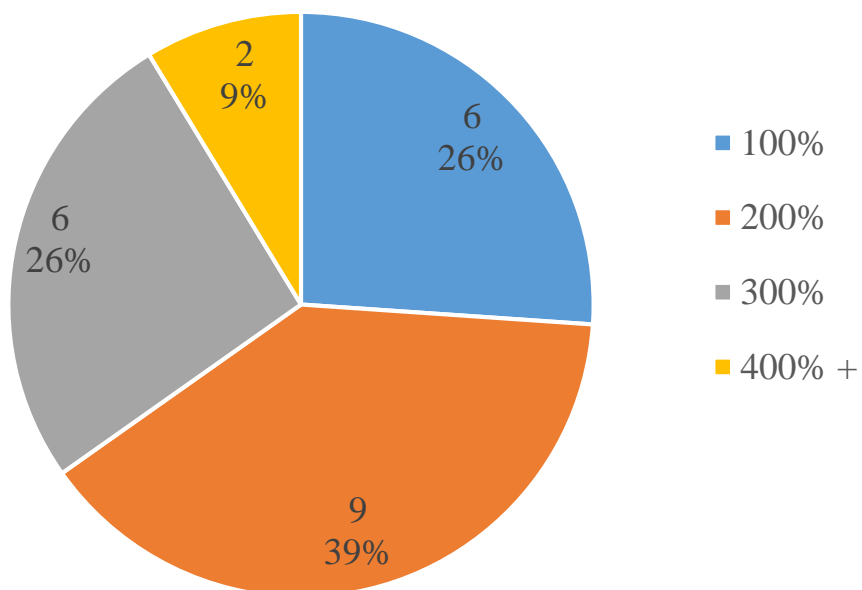
Participant Profiles

Participant profiles were created based on interview data. I created and used pseudonyms instead of participants' actual names. Included in each profile are the student-parents' age, race, marital status, number of children, household income, postsecondary enrollment status, employment status, and additional information to help get to know each participant better.

Marsha. Marsha is a 28 year old White female. She has been married for nine years with two children ages seven and one year old. Her annual household income is $123,000 (which is above 400% of the poverty level). She is a self-proclaimed introvert and socializes mainly with her close extended family. From 2013-2019, she worked at a daycare center. However, in 2019, she stopped working and stayed at home due to a high-risk pregnancy. She is motivated to earn a postsecondary credential because she wants to help people facing challenging situations. She believes her own life experiences will help her empathy for others. She wants to help children with their own insecurities so that they do not have to carry that burden into adulthood like she has. Marsha attends the community college part-time.

Julie. Julie is a 34 year old multiracial female. She is married with five children ages thirteen, eight, six, four, and one year old. Her annual household income is $37,200 (which is below the poverty level for a family of seven). Before the Pandemic she worked part-time, homeschooled her children, transported the kids to extracurricular activities, and actively participated in her church. She is responsible for all of the grocery shopping and her husband does all of the laundry. They share the rest of the household chores. During the Pandemic she began to do a combination of online, delivery, and in-person grocery shopping. She is a part-time student at the community college.

Lucy. Lucy is a 19 year old White female. She is single and has two children ages 3 years and two months. She has primary custody of her children, rents an apartment, and is responsible for all of the household chores, food preparation, and laundry. She began working during the Pandemic in March 2020 when her savings diminished. She earns $15,600 annually. She feels that she is different than other students because she is a young, single mom. As a result, she does not socialize with others on campus. She just wanted to blend in with everyone. Lucy works part-time and attends the community college part-time. Lucy is motivated to pursue a postsecondary credential because she wants a better life for her kids. She feels proud to succeed in classes and feels that she is often judged by other people for being 19 and having two kids. However, when she shares that she is caring for her kids, working, and attending college, those judgements seem to subside.

Trevor. Trevor is a 33 year old White male. He is married with three children ages nine, three, and one year. Since the Pandemic and the loss of his job, the roles of he and his wife have switched. He now cares for his kids while she is at work, as well as completes most of the household chores and meal preparation. Their current annual household income is $28,000 and his wife is the sole income provider for their family. Trevor is enrolled full-time at the community college.

Donna. Donna is a 22 year old multiracial female. She is single with two children ages three and one and a half years. Her annual household income is $5,000. She attends the community college part-time and is employed part-time.

Shannon. Shannon is a 26 year old White female. She is single and has an eight year old daughter. She works full-time and her annual household income is $29,120. She rents an

apartment and has primary custody of her daughter. She is responsible for all of the household chores, meal preparation, and grocery shopping. She attends the community college part-time.

Amy. Amy is a 30 year old multiracial female. She is single with two children ages ten and one year old. She works part-time in a nursing home and earns $20,000 annually. She attends the community college part-time and is determined to earn a postsecondary credential despite many life challenges and interruptions to her postsecondary journey.

Maggie. Maggie is a 47 year old White female. She is married with two dependent children ages 17 and 14 years old. She works part time as a dental hygienist earning $27,000 annually. Adding her husband's salary, their gross household income is $72,000. For a few weeks during the Pandemic, the dental office closed. She received Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) during this time which increased their annual income by a few hundred dollars. She attends the community college part-time.

Chris. Chris is a 52 year old White male. He is single and has a 17-year old dependent daughter. He works full-time for a private ambulance company and earns $35,000 annually. In early 2020 during the Pandemic, he tested positive for the COVID-19 virus. He was exposed to COVID on the job and symptoms included fever, chills, and body aches. His employer required him to quarantine at home for fourteen days. He was paid for 80 hours by the U.S. Government's Family First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) but made less due to loss of overtime wages. He contracted COVID again in 2021 and had to use personal and vacation time in order to get paid since he had already been paid for the maximum 80 hours through the FFCRA. Chris attends the community college part-time.

Susan. Susan is a 27 year old White female. She is married and has one five-year old son. She is a full-time Assistant Manager at a fast food restaurant and earns $30,000 annually. Her

combined household income is $55,000. She is an alcoholic but has been sober for two years. Her son is her motivation to stay sober and to pursue a postsecondary degree to make a better life for him. Susan attends the community college part-time.

Denise. Denise is a 35 year old Black female. She attends the community college part-time. She is single and has three biological children. Child Protective Services (CPS) removed the children from her home due to Denise physically abusing her teenaged son. She was unable to control her son's defiant behavior and admits that she was not her best self in those years and under a lot of stress. She gave her two oldest teenage children up for adoption and shared that they have both been adopted by good families. Her six year old son lives with extended family and she is trying to regain parental rights to him; this is her motivation to earn a postsecondary credential and obtain a better job. Before the Pandemic, she worked full-time as a bartender earning $18,000 annually. Due to Virginia's mandated restaurant closures based on CDC social distancing guidelines, she was out of work for four months. She received unemployment and additional Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA). When the restaurant reopened, she did not return due to the increased number of COVID cases in that geographical area. She lost PUA but continues to receive regular unemployment.

Rosa. Rosa is a 26 year old Latinx female. She is single and has a ten year old daughter. Before the Pandemic, Rosa worked full time with overtime at warehouse earning $40,000 annually. In March 2020, at the beginning of the Pandemic, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She had 16 chemotherapy treatments, a double mastectomy, and radiation treatments. She was unable to return to work because she was weak and her job requires a lot of physical strength. She began receiving short term disability benefits from her job but earned less money

because of lost overtime wages. She enrolled at the community college in the fall 2020 so that she would not just sit at home bored. Rosa attends the community college part-time.

Sheila. Sheila is a 24 year old multiracial female. She is single and has a five year old son. She currently earns $21,600 annually in military disability benefits due to a training accident during her service in the U.S. Marines. She attends the community college part-time.

Tonya. Tonya is a 45 year old White female. She is married and has 11 year old twins. Before the Pandemic, she worked part-time at her church and earned $10.50 per hour. Her husband works full-time and their combined household income is $100,000. Tonya has Cystic Fibrosis and had a double lung transplant in 2013. Most of her disposable income goes toward medical bills and anti-rejection medications. She attends the community college part-time and is pursuing a postsecondary credential to get a higher paying job so that her family's budget is not so constrained.

Sharon. Sharon is a 36 year old Black female. She is married and has two children ages five and one year old. She is employed at a retirement community and her annual household income is $30,000. She attends the community college part-time and works full-time.

Mary. Mary is a 33 year old Latinx female. She is married and has three children who are 13, ten, and one and a half years of age. She is a full-time student at the community college and became a stay-at-home mom during the Pandemic. Her annual household income is $70,000.

Madison. Madison is a 27 year old multiracial female. She is single and has two dependent children who are seven and three years of age. She attends the community college part-time and works as a medical assistant for a hearing center and earns $33,000 annually.

Ashley. Ashley is a 34 year old White female. She is single and has three children ages 16, 14 and nine years. She attends the community college part-time and works full-time in a nursing home and earns $45,000 annually.

Samantha. Samantha is a 33 year old Black female. She is married with two children ages three and one year. She attends the community college part time and is currently a stay-at-home mom. Her annual household income is $50,000. Samantha was a Medical Doctor in Africa before she and her husband won the Green Card Lottery and came to the United States in 2018.

Kelly. Kelly is a 32 year old White female. She is single and has two child ages 10 months and one month old. She is a part-time the community college student and stay-at-home mom. Her annual household income is $14,560 through unemployment benefits.

Amelia. Amelia is a 32 year old White female. She is single and has one child age 13 years. She attends the community college part-time and works full-time at a veterinary hospital. Her annual income is $41,000. She shared, "I always wanted to go to school. Not a lot of people in my family went to college... I just want to do something I love to do."

Melanie. Melanie is a 28 years old White female. She is single, and has custody of her two younger sisters. They all had a traumatic childhood and were taken away from their mother who was diagnosed with schizophrenia. She attends the community college part-time and works part-time at a horse farm. She lost her job during the Pandemic and went without pay for four weeks until she received PUA. Her annual income is $8,000.

Tahir. Tahir is a 46 year old Black male. He is married with three children ages nine, six, and two years. He attends the community college part-time and works full-time in a quarry. His annual household income is $80,000 which includes his wife's income as a clothing tailor. He

was an Engineer in the Democratic Republic of the Congo before moving to the United States in 2016.

Data Collection

I submitted applications and received approval from Old Dominion University College of Education and Professional Studies Human Subjects Review Committee and the Community College's Internal Review Boards (Appendix B and C). After receipt of the participant contact information from the community college's Director of OIRE, I emailed the participants and scheduled a Zoom meeting to inform the participants of the nature of the study, and the plans to use the results. I also reviewed and had each participant digitally sign *ODU's Informed Consent Document* (Appendix D). During the first Zoom meeting I explained the statement of confidentiality and anonymity, the nature of voluntary participation, as well as potential risks and benefits. While still in the Zoom meeting, I emailed the *Informed Consent Document* to participants using the email address they provided when expressing interest in participation in the study. I asked them to take their time to review it and reply via email during the same Zoom session with a typed statement stating if they agree to participate in the study along with their full legal name. After I received their email confirmation agreeing to participate, I began the first interview via the same Zoom session. Participants were encouraged to participate in a consistent, quiet, comfortable environment that was free from interruptions. Three of the participants were not able to interview in a quiet environment due to lack of childcare. The semi-structured interview allowed me to ask follow-up questions (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). At the end of the first and second interviews, I scheduled the next interview with the participants. Twenty-three participants completed all three interviews. Three participants did not complete all three interviews and exited the study without consequence. The data from these three participants were

removed from the study. Interview questions were developed by the research guided by the literature review. Content validity was measured by assessing major themes in the literature review that comprehensively and adequately reflect the student-parent perspective of their family, financial, and educational experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

I conducted the first interview of the three-interview series (Seidman, 2013) with 23 participants. Interviews occurred over several months during the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2021. The first interviews began at the end of February, the second interviews began in mid-March, and the third interviews began at the end of March. All of the interviews concluded at the end of April 2021. After concluding an interview with a participant, I scheduled the next interview to occur one to two weeks after the previous interview. Some interviews occurred more than two weeks after the previous due to schedule conflicts of the participants or the researcher. During the first interview, I put the participants' experiences in the context of their life history by asking them to tell as much as possible about their educational, financial, and family related experiences before the COVID-19 Pandemic. The purpose of the second interview was to focus on the concrete details of the participant's lived educational, financial, and family related experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic. During the second interview, I asked follow-up questions based on takeaways from the first interview as needed. During the third interview, I asked participants to reflect on the meaning of the experiences discussed in the first two interviews and how instructors, community college leaders, and legislators can best support student-parents as they persist toward completion of a postsecondary credential. I also asked any remaining follow-up questions based on takeaways from the first and second interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 20-45 minutes.

The interview transcripts were downloaded from the Zoom software. I copied the text

into a word processing document and edited it to reflect the interview verbatim. As needed I

referred to the Zoom audio recordings of the interviews for clarification during transcription. To

ensure anonymity and confidentiality, participant names were changed to an identifying number,

for example SP1 for student-parent 1, in the transcripts. I used a spreadsheet to track

participants' interview progress, status of member checking, number of children, ages of

children, race, and gender. These data were collected from the first interview transcripts. Also

included in the spreadsheet were participants' names, their pseudonyms, and a number to track

the number of participants in the study. I only included the transcripts of the 23 participants who

completed all three interviews. Participants performed member checks after all three interviews.

Data Analysis Procedures

Through reflective lifeworld research, I remained as open as possible to the phenomenon

of being a postsecondary student who is also a parent during the COVID-19 Pandemic. I read

and re-read the three transcripts of each of the 23 participants and focused on both description

and interpretation of the student-parent' lived experiences (Vagle, 2018). Guided by Vagle's

(2018) "phenomenological walks" (p. 93) using van Manen's (2016) hermeneutic

phenomenology, I began my walks by printing the 69 interview transcripts which totaled 348

pages. I initially read each participant's set of three interview transcripts and made entries into

my journal of potential themes. I asked myself where, what, how, and why the postsecondary

journey of student-parents during the COVID-19 Pandemic exists in multiple spaces and places.

I took constant notes until I was done collecting information. I asked myself questions such as:

What is happening here? What is the purpose of this place? What practices and conversations

take place here? I color coded my journal entries with different colored highlighting and matched

the same color using sticky note arrows on the transcripts where themes seemed to be emerging. I drew upon my own comprehension of the phenomenological research as well as organically explored the place to identify cultures, everyday practices, dialogues, and systems. My goal was not to discuss everything, instead I found meaningful things and examined them deeply. The colored sticky note arrows helped me to visually quantify the abundance of each color from which I eventually identified the themes. I returned to my journal to summarize what I learned, what I thought about, and how I could use the transcripts to identify the themes. Not all of the colors became themes but instead became sub-themes. During this part of my phenomenological walk, I discovered four themes: (a) *Student-Parents Postsecondary Credential Completion Often Interrupted,* (b) *Student-Parents Need Mental Health Support,* (c) *Student-Parents Need More Financial Support and Education*, and (d) *Instructor Interaction, Support Services, and Course Delivery Methods are Essential to Student-Parents' Postsecondary Persistence.*

While my color coded journal and colored sticky arrows were instrumental initially, I discovered that I needed another way to keep track of my discoveries as I continued my phenomenological walks to dive deeper into each theme. As shown in Figure 9, I began using a spreadsheet with each theme typed in its own spot in the first row. Each theme expanded over several columns and was separated from the other themes by a blank column. Each subtheme had its own column below the appropriate theme. For example, the subthemes of *Student-Parents Need More Financial Support and Education* included FAFSA, Scholarships, Pell Grants, COVID Funding, Employment Status, Existing Debt, Reasons for Financial Aid Denial, and Additional Government Assistance. The pseudonyms for each participant were each typed in their own row. I marked an "x" in the corresponding cell if the subtheme applied to the participant. If there was no connection between the participant and the subtheme, I marked the

cell with a hyphen " - ", indicating that I had reviewed it but there was no connection. If I had

follow-up questions for the participant, I marked the cell with a question mark "?" I also typed

notes to clarify how some subthemes applied to the participant.

Figure 8

Example of Color-coded Theme on Spreadsheet

I shaded the columns in the spreadsheet with the same color schemes used in the journal

and sticky arrows to help guide me through the expansion of the spreadsheet due to additions of

subthemes. I went back through each transcript guided by my previous color coding and updated

the subthemes for each participant in the spreadsheet. For example, I tracked the part-time

enrollment for each participant as one of the subthemes for *Student-Parents Postsecondary Credential Completion Often Interrupted.* The spreadsheet allowed me to track the total number and percentages of participants impacted by each sub-theme. This also led to richer descriptions of the phenomenon, the experiences of student-parents at a community college during the COVID-19 Pandemic, reflected in this chapter.

This walk required patience and led to surprising discoveries as well as rich descriptions with many characteristics and distinctions of the postsecondary journey of student-parents. I was surprised that 23 participants took time from their busy lives to spend several hours with me to conduct three interviews with each of them over several months during the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2021. This allowed me to have prolonged engagement with the student-parent participants during the phenomenon to increase validity, trustworthiness, and rapport with each participant. One student-parent told me she would miss our meetings together when we concluded the third interview. Perhaps the desire for addition interpersonal communication during an isolating Pandemic was also a contributing factor to the quantity and quality of interviews completed. I am grateful for the participants' willingness to help me with this study.

I was also surprised how openly participants shared deep, personal life experiences with me. Being an empathetic person, I fought back tears during some interviews due to the tragic events many student-parents endured. I had to continually remind myself about bridling my emotions and thoughts. I had to step back and take breaks from reviewing some transcripts all in one sitting. I restrained my viewpoint as a child of a low-income student-parent as well as a student-parent myself pursing a doctoral degree (Dahlberg, 2006). I did not make assumptions or interpretations too quickly or carelessly, but instead took a reflective stance and loosened my ties to the lifeworld (Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle, 2018). I remained patient while observing and exploring

the relationship between student-parents and the COVID-19 phenomenon as well as my relationship as the researcher and with the participants (Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle, 2018).

For the first theme *Student-Parents Postsecondary Credential Completion Often Interrupted*, I discovered that student-parents' life experiences included multiple interruptions in their postsecondary journey due to life's challenges. The Pandemic allowed some participants to slow down their hectic schedules and return to their postsecondary pursuits. Some of their homes were busy with toddlers while others were almost empty-nesters, but they were all motivated to make a better life for their families through a better job, better pay, and better benefits. Most were encouraged by at least one person in their life to pursue a postsecondary credential and further supported by the community college employees. Their families were their top priority and influenced the number of courses they took as well as their choices for course delivery methods and course length.

My walk with the second theme *Student-Parents Need Mental Health Support*, revealed that most participants suffer from depression, anxiety, and panic attacks. Student-parents shared challenging life experiences about child custody battles, raising their children alone, cancer, organ transplants, alcohol and drug abuse, as well as physical and emotional abuse. These experiences have taken a toll on the mental health of the student-parents. Some have been fortunate to receive counseling and are now able to better cope, while most have not and continue to suffer from depression, anxiety, and panic attacks.

I discovered that financial assistance is challenging to obtain and maintain from which I created the third theme: *Student-Parents Need More Financial Support and Education*. The lived educational and personal financial experiences of student-parents revealed that for those who qualify, Pell Grants are not enough to cover the cost of attendance including, but not limited to,

housing, transportation, food, and childcare. I was surprised by the reasons in which some did not qualify for Pell especially expenses for which the FASFA application does not account. Federal social services funding is challenging to obtain and maintain. The children's medical needs are often met, but many student-parents do not seek medical care due to the out-of-pocket expense. The system does not educate nor encourage them to be fiscally responsible which delays their socio-economic success.

Through my walk with the fourth and final theme *Instructor Interaction, Support Services, and Course Delivery Methods are Essential to Student-Parents' Postsecondary Persistence*, I discovered that student-parent persistence toward a postsecondary credential is influenced by their experiences with college employees, support services, as well as course delivery options. The College provides many support services, but some students were not aware of them. Student-parents also want to know that someone from the College cares about them and to have access to live support services beyond 5:00 p.m. on weekdays and throughout the weekend. They need flexible class schedules and instructors who are understanding when life's challenges occur.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

I took measures to protect participants' identity to the fullest extent allowed by law, kept data in a secure place, reported findings as themes (aggregating the data) and reported individual responses using pseudonyms. I also masked other markers of identity (e.g., financial data, academic records). The names of individuals were not connected to participants' identities during analysis and in the resulting manuscript. I ensured confidentiality by assigning pseudonyms to the data and by keeping the key that matches participants and their data secured in a separate location. I kept information confidential in a space that is inaccessible to the public

and was kept locked. Identifying information was also kept separate from data. I was the only researcher who had access to both hard and electronic files. I created and used pseudonyms instead of using the participants' names during analysis. This effectively prevented the disclosure of personal information of participants' responses. Data was stored in my locked, private office. In addition, electronic data were stored on a password-protected computer to which only I have access. Digital audio files were destroyed. Only researchers approved as Principle Investigators or co-Principle Investigators on this study have access to the data.

To increase data trustworthiness, I focused on four key components: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Hays & Singh, 2012). To demonstrate credibility I used reflective lifeworld research to remain as open as possible to the phenomenon of student-parents attending a community college during the COVID-19 Pandemic. I focused on their lived experiences through description and interpretation (Vagle, 2018). I demonstrated dependability or trustworthiness through bridling when I restrained my viewpoint as a child of a low-income student-parent as well as a student-parent myself pursing a doctoral degree (Dahlberg, 2006). I did not make assumptions or interpretations too quickly or carelessly, but instead took a reflective stance and loosened my ties to the lifeworld (Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle, 2018). I remained patient while observing and exploring the relationship between student-parents and the COVID-19 phenomenon as well as my relationship as the researcher and with the participants (Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle, 2018). I also kept field notes and memos to record details and analyze findings from interviews with students. To reflect on my experiences as a researcher, I kept a reflexive journal. This journal included ideas about findings and thoughts about how the students, interviews, and data analysis affected me personally. I reviewed and edited each Zoom transcript by listening to the recorded Zoom audio interviews to confirm the transcripts

accurately reflected the interviews. To further ensure confirmability, each participant reviewed and edited their own transcripts, called member checking. Even though I conducted this study at a community college, most of the data collected is transferable to any postsecondary institution with student-parents.

Findings

With regard to the first research question which addressed the family, financial and education experiences of the community college student-parents during the Pandemic, the first three themes were identified: (a) *Student-Parents Postsecondary Credential Completion Often Interrupted,* (b) *Student-Parents Need Mental Health Support,* and (c) *Student-Parents Need More Financial Support and Education.* With regard to the first research question in which I inquired about student-parents' educational experiences during the Pandemic as well as the second research question in which I inquired about the online delivery method of courses during the Pandemic, the fourth theme (d) *Instructor Interaction, Support Services, and Course Delivery Methods are Essential to Student-Parents' Postsecondary Persistence* was identified. Descriptions of these themes, participant characteristics, their stories, and quotes follow.

Student-Parents Postsecondary Credential Completion Often Interrupted

All of the 23 student-parents in this study were motivated to earn a postsecondary credential to have a better life for their family through attainment of a better job, higher income, as well as have medical and retirement benefits. They do not want to worry about how they are going to provide food and shelter for their families or have dependable transportation to travel back and forth to work and school. They are tired of working multiple low-wage jobs with little or no advancement opportunities. So they began pursuit of a postsecondary credential with aspirations to meet their educational goals. They perform well academically with a current

average Cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA) of 3.32, but then life happened causing interruptions delaying their postsecondary credential attainment. Since they live paycheck to paycheck with little to no savings, challenges like a vehicle breaking down can immediately interrupt their educational journey because they cannot afford to repair it immediately. It can take weeks, months, or even years for them to save the money for these repairs. Trying to find alternate transportation can be logistically impossible with their work, school, and juggling the rest of their families' busy schedules. This theme of *Student-Parents Postsecondary Credential Completion Often Interrupted* unfolds below with characteristics, stories, and quotes from the student-parents who participated in this study.

The postsecondary educational journey of 15 of the 23 student-parents' in this study was interrupted at least once for at least one semester, some for decades. Interruptions in their education included complete withdraw, dropping out and not enrolling in the next semester of courses. Maggie, Chris, and Tonya have an average of 28 years of interruptions in their postsecondary journeys without credential attainment. Chris attended college briefly after high school and also a technical school. He did not know what he wanted to do, did not earn a credential, and dropped out several times. He has worked multiple low paying jobs over the past 30 years to make ends meet. He shared, "[I have] a job, it's not a career. I need to find a career. I need to build a financial retirement." Maggie and Tonya both started their postsecondary journey after high school but dropped out to become stay-at-home moms. Now that their children are getting older, they are motivated to return to school to have a career, and have more fiscal stability.

For 16 years Julie pursued a postsecondary credential. She was raised by her grandmother and was encouraged to pursue a postsecondary education, but was the first in her family to attend

and had little guidance with the postsecondary processes. She enrolled in a community college at age 18 but due to lack of money she dropped out at age 19 and started working. At age 20 she enrolled again and failed all of her classes. Her postsecondary journey was interrupted again when she was 23 years old and became pregnant. At age 30, Julie enrolled, became pregnant, and withdrew from college again. She is currently enrolled at the community college at 34 years of age with no credential yet completed.

Amy pursued her postsecondary education for over 11 years. She dropped out of high school and failed the LPN program at a technical center because her father had issues with drugs and died during her senior year of high school. She moved in with her boyfriend, Jack, and they used drugs. Although at the time she considered it recreational use, she now realizes that it was a problem and a poor choice. She became pregnant the same month that her father passed away and subsequently stopped using drugs, drinking alcohol, and smoking cigarettes. She earned her GED and re-enroll a year later in the LPN program, but failed again. At this time Jack was injured on his construction job and became addicted to pain killers. She left him shortly after the birth of their son due to his increasing erratic behavior. Jack's addiction led to illegal drug use and drug sales. He was eventually arrested and imprisoned. She began working as a waitress and started taking nursing pre-requisites at another community college. She applied for a dental hygiene program but was not accepted. Then she applied to the nursing program at the community college but was not accepted. She applied again to the LPN program at the technical center and was pleasantly surprised when they accepted her for the third time. Amy now works part-time as an LPN in a nursing home, passed the NCLEX (National Council Licensure Examination), reapplied to the community college's nursing program and was accepted in the fall 2020. Now her niece and new boyfriend, Alex, watch the kids when she studies or is at work.

Eight of the 23 student-parents in the current study were motivated to start or re-start their postsecondary education during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Trevor, Shannon, and Donna did not go to college after graduating from high school but entered the workforce. They all shared that they wished they had started their postsecondary journey earlier. Trevor shared after losing his job during the Pandemic that he is "... 33 years old and back in school again. I've always been successful. But I've always started at the entry level and worked my way up. I just don't want to do that again." He also performed well academically in his high school advanced courses and wanted to put his talents to better use.

Maggie, Julie, Chris, Tonya, and Sharon began their postsecondary pursuits after high school, did not earn a credential, and re-enrolled during the Pandemic. Before the Pandemic, Julie said she was in survival mode with her schedule, just barely making it to the next day. She was already homeschooling the kids and participating in a cooperative homeschool program in the community. However, social distancing measures due to the Pandemic gave Julie time to reflect on the amount of extracurricular activities in which her family participated. She realized that they were doing too much. She is thankful that the Pandemic helped her to slow down and better prioritize their additional activities. After 16 years of interruptions in her postsecondary journey, Julie was motivated to re-start her postsecondary studies because her husband was pursuing his master's degree and she was also encouraged by friends. She is also motivated to "live above what society says" about her abilities as a woman of color.

Another contributing factor to delays in their postsecondary credential completion is part-time enrollment. Working full-time and lack of childcare are some of the reasons that 21 of the 23 student-parents in this study are enrolled part-time. The Pandemic exacerbated these issues with the transition to online education for the student-parents as well as their children when

secondary and postsecondary educational institutions transitioned to online learning due social distancing requirements. Student-parents' long list of responsibilities now included having their children home from school most days, guiding them through their online studies, and additional meal preparation leaving them little time to devote to their own academic pursuits.

Amy is enrolled in only 10 credit hours because of lack of childcare. She said before the Pandemic her mother helped watch her kids while she worked. However, her mom was not able to continue this during the Pandemic because her mom and her mom's husband were immunocompromised. Amy did not want to risk giving them COVID-19 since she was often exposed to the COVID-19 virus during her job as an LPN. Melanie has been attending the community college for nine years and graduated with an Associate of Science degree in May 2021. She shared, "I only went to school part-time because I worked seven days a week." She also took developmental classes because she did not gain this knowledge during high school. This also delayed her credential completion.

Several student-parents had more familial responsibilities during the Pandemic making their postsecondary journey even more challenging. Tahir shared that after working a ten hour day, he would come home as his wife left for her job. During the Pandemic, his nine year old daughter's school schedule transitioned to a hybrid model with two days at home and two days at school. His six year old daughter was still attending kindergarten five days a week. His wife would homeschool their oldest daughter as much as she could during the day while also caring for their two-year-old son, doing household chores, and meal preparation. Tahir would then take over in the evenings with dinner, baths, homework, and bedtime. But his family responsibilities overlapped with his work schedule. He shared, "I called on video sometimes two times a day [while I was working] to make sure [my daughter did her] homework."

During the Pandemic, Marsha and the boys were in lock down in their house. Her one-year old son usually stays by Marsha's side; he is very attached to her. Her seven year old son's second grade class transitioned to 100% online instruction. His sporting events were cancelled due to the U.S. social distancing requirements. Marsha helped her oldest child each weekday to connect to his online Zoom classroom and with his assignments. This limited the amount of time that she was able to spend on her own academic studies.

Martha shared, "I just logged in [to complete my community college assignments] mostly at night for school, so my days were longer just because that's when I felt that I could do more studying for myself when everything was quiet." Samantha said, "I maximize my time to do all the homework when my husband is not working ... I can catch up. Most of time I make sure that I do it when my husband is available in the early morning when the children are asleep and my husband is here because when I do them late the night.... like around 1am- 2am ... I don't get as good of scores as I should because I'm tired."

Several student-parents work hours increased during the Pandemic. Sharon shared:

I work and my job is full time and at that time we were running really short on staff so I was being called in a lot to work, which means I was spending a lot less time with my kids. I wasn't seeing them as much. I wasn't getting to play with them as much. I was just waking up and maybe, making them some breakfast, going to work, and then not seeing them until it was time to put them to bed at night. That was really hard for me having to deal with feeling guilty that I wasn't spending enough time with them.

Several student-parents stopped working during the Pandemic due to lack of childcare and fear of the COVID-19 virus. Kelly had a new baby at the beginning of the Pandemic and shared, "Well, right now, like my fiancé's on night shift, so ... I do not get a break whatsoever."

She spends her time breastfeeding, doing household chores, meal preparation, and trying to get her assignments done. Samantha also had a newborn during the Pandemic. She said, "I was on maternity leave ... [and] ... I was thinking that I was going to go back to work but due to the COVID situation and the fear of sending kids out I decided that it was not going to be possible to go back to work. So I stayed home with my kids."

Some student-parents with older children found their schedules became less hectic during the Pandemic because they could leave their children at home while they worked. Ashley shared that her children's school transitioned completely online initially, then transitioned to a hybrid model. "It actually worked out better, for me, because when I get off work [in the morning] I would be rushing home to get them to school and now I only have to do that two days a week."

Children of all ages notice that their parents are in school. Julie's children study with her and ask her about what she is studying. Lucy's three year old daughter is starting to model Lucy studying by typing on her tablet and playing school. Susan says her son does not really understand what she is doing since he's only five. He does not like when she is busy studying because he is not the center of her attention. Chris' 18 year old daughter is excited that he is returning to college with her.

Although often a very long postsecondary journey due to life's challenges and younger children like Susan's son not understanding what his mom is doing to make a better life for him, student-parents motivation continues despite the years of interruptions. Credential attainment leading to better jobs, higher incomes, as well as medical and retirement benefits is on the horizon for these student-parents.

Student-Parents Need Mental Health Support

Overall student-parents in this study report being in good physical shape, exercising regularly and eating healthy foods. But their mental health is a completely different story. If your body is in good physical shape but you are unhealthy mentally, simple daily tasks can seem impossible to complete. Juggling work, school, and family are enough to put a strain on anyone's mental health. But adding the Pandemic and traumatic life events can surely make one mentally compromised and not able to perform to the best of one's abilities. Student-parents' deep personal stories, characteristics, and rich quotes shared below reveal the second theme of *Student-Parents Need Mental Health Support.*

Eighteen student-parent participants in this study reported that they suffer from mental health issues. They shared situations throughout their lives such as the Pandemic, school closures, social distancing requirements, as well as emotional and physical abuse have led to stress, anxiety, depression, and panic attacks. Some have sought professional help while others have not sought treatment due to the cost involved.

Marsha, Melanie, Julie, and Donna are student-parents who have benefited from mental health support. Before the Pandemic, Marsha experienced severe panic attacks and anxiety. She contributes this to her low self-esteem starting during childhood due to an absent father. As an adult, there were additional family challenges with the death of her grandmother and cancer diagnosis of her grandfather, and an emotionally charged court case involving a child she cared for at the preschool where she was employed. She sought mental health treatment through an outpatient treatment center where she had five days of intensive, eight-hour counseling sessions. As a result, she is now able to better manage her panic attacks.

Melanie has suffered from depression and anxiety her entire life. She and her siblings were emotionally abused by her mother who was later diagnosed with schizophrenia. She now

has custody of her younger siblings. Mental health treatment, guidance from a mentor, and medication have helped her with depression and anxiety. She said, "My support system has been everything and it has only been 100% mental and emotional support, but that has played such a big factor into just even keeping my drive going." However, during COVID, her stress and anxiety increased.

Julie's anxiety was amplified during the Pandemic as well. Since she was not as busy, she began eating more to cope. She did seek medical treatment and was prescribed anti-anxiety medication. She also converted part of her house to a gym so she can exercise regularly in an effort to improve her physical and mental health. Denise shared that exercise and mental health counseling helped her with severe depression during the Pandemic. She was prescribed anti-depression medication, but did not like the way it made her feel and stopped taking it. She said "I just couldn't function [on the medication]."

Before the Pandemic Donna lived in another state with her youngest child's father. He was emotionally abusive to her. Her own suicidal thoughts and her son's adverse behaviors prompted her to end the relationship and move away with the kids. She had a verbal agreement with him that she would have primary custody of their child, and he would pay monthly child support. He did not follow through with child support and during a routine weekend visit, he refused to bring their daughter back to her. She has not seen her daughter in months other than over video chat. She is now working with child protective services to get her daughter back. She is also in mental health counseling to cope with her anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts.

Not all student-parents have been recipients of mental health support. Tahir said his stress level worsened during the Pandemic due to the transition in responsibilities with a new job, his wife working, and homeschooling his three children. He shared, "...the job itself is more than ...

50 hours a week. Also I need to make sure everything works smoothly in my family." His wife takes care of the kids while he is at work, then she leaves for work when he gets home. The homeschooling and night-time routine for their three kids are his. He has few hours left to sleep, much less to seek mental health support.

Trevor shared: "[My mental health is] probably the roughest it's ever been ...it's been tough moving, losing my job, and starting school." He shared that he is not typically depressed but this has been the most challenging time in his life. He is concerned that his children are not going to know a world without masks. He wants them to be able to smile and see others smile and to spend time with their friends. He also shared that the U.S Presidential election and the racial tensions in the nation also made things challenging for him emotionally.

Maggie agrees with Trevor that she wants life to go back to the way it was before the Pandemic without social distancing. She and her husband ran a lacrosse program for high school students, including their sons. The program closed due to social distancing protocols and she shares "it was really hard on our boys. We [Maggie and her husband] started [the program] for them and they look forward to it all year long...then they couldn't go to school. It was hard...such a huge shock to everybody."

Susan has suffered with anxiety and depression all her life and since the Pandemic also suffers from panic attacks. She is an alcoholic and started her sobriety a year prior to the Pandemic. The Pandemic was hard and included homeschooling her son and getting a second job to make ends meet. She maintained her sobriety even though she says she is still not in best mental health: "I'm spiraling into this like obsessive compulsive thing. [I have] a lot of intrusive thoughts which are ... motivating me to ... start looking for help." But she is hesitant because this will be an out-of-pocket expense and she does not want another expense to worry about. Lucy

experienced similar issues. She felt isolated during the Pandemic especially after having a second child. Only close family visited her and she no longer had many friendships because she was trying to stay at home with her children to keep them safe from COVID-19.

Abuse

"[My child's father] beat my ass like I was a grown man," Denise said. She is not alone. Nine out of the 23 student-parents in this study reported being victims of domestic assault and/or emotional abuse. Denise added that her boyfriend at the time also cheated on her with someone she considered to be a friend and gave her a sexually transmitted infection all while she was pregnant with their baby. She concludes with, "So at this point [in my younger life] I'm still afraid of him ... I'm still dumb, dumb as hell!"

Amy shared that she was physically beaten by her son's father, Jack, until she could barely move. He used and sold illegal drugs and had been in and out of prison. She had a no contact order against him, but the judge lifted it after he completed therapy. When Jack was released from prison, he still had visitation rights to his son. Amy saved her money to hire a lawyer and she was finally awarded full custody of her son when he was seven years old. Her son has had mental health counseling, but she has not. She admits that she puts her son's needs above her own.

Like Denise and Amy, Amelia's husband physically and emotionally abused her. He also mentally abused their daughter. He was selling and using drugs. Amelia shared, "He was actually killed [shot outside of a bar] about a year and a half ago... he didn't live the best life ... he was in jail for a year before that." While Amelia has not had mental health counseling herself, she took her daughter to see a counselor after he died. Amelia still suffers from anxiety and panic attacks.

Mental health issues make it harder to concentrate on school. Student-parents in this study who received mental health support reported improvement in their symptoms through coping strategies, medication, and exercise. Those who did not receive support due to the out-of-pocket expense reported continuation of their symptoms. These financial challenges extend beyond mental health support as revealed in the next theme, *Student-Parents Need More Financial Support and Education.*

Student-Parents Need More Financial Support and Education

The cycle of poverty for many student-parents in this study has lasted for generations and is challenging to overcome. The lived educational and financial experiences of student-parents in this study revealed that Social Services' funding such as Medicaid and food stamps is challenging to obtain and maintain. Children's medical needs are often met, but many student-parents do not seek medical care due to the out-of-pocket expense. In terms of their education, for those who qualify, Pell Grants are not enough to cover the cost of attendance. The reasons that some do not qualify for Pell Grants is surprising. The system does not educate nor encourage fiscal responsibility which hinders socio-economic success. Through low-income or ALICE student-parents' characteristics, personal stories, and quotes I revealed the third theme *Student-Parents Need More Financial Support and Education* below.

Social Services Financial Assistance

Federal assistance for health care, food, childcare, and housing is available to those who qualify through Social Services. Medicaid and other federal assistance programs such as SNAP, WIC, and TANF are hard to obtain and maintain due to moving to a different state, changes in marital status, slight increases in income, or having too much money in savings. Donna shared that when she moved back to Virginia after leaving her abusive boyfriend, she applied for

Medicaid and food stamps but was denied. Through submission of additional paperwork, she was eventually found eligible, but she struggled financially for several weeks to provide for her two young children. Amelia did not qualify for Social Services Financial Assistance because of her marital status. She could not get her husband to sign the divorce papers. He was not helping her at all financially but she still had to include his income in their total annual household income. She shared, "I had to ask [myself], okay so am I buying this book or eating ramen all week?"

Only three of student-parents in this study have medical insurance through their employers. Samantha shared:

My two kids have Medicaid but ... my husband [and I] made too much money to qualify. We are using health insurance from my husband's job at the distribution center ... [we do not have] dental ... [or] optical; just regular checkup with the health provider and emergencies. It is so expensive, you know [to pay] for that type of plan [with dental and optical] and to be able to meet the needs of the family.

Only nine of the children in this study qualified for Medicaid. The student-parents of these children have no medical coverage for themselves and have not had medical care in years. Julie's five children qualify for Medicaid; however, she and her husband do not have medical insurance because her husband's full-time employer does not provide health insurance options. Susan and her son lost Medicaid when she got married two years ago because their new household income was too high. They still do not have health insurance and have not been to the doctor in years. Like Julie, even though both Susan and her husband work full-time, their employers do not provide health insurance options. Susan shared, "... we don't get sick often; when we do we just take Dayquil." She pays for her son's annual check-ups at the optometrist,

dentist, and pediatrician out-of-pocket. She has not yet sought medical care or mental health treatment for herself due to the out-of-pocket expense.

Increase in Income

Melanie, Rosa, Denise, and several others shared that they do not think they can ever get out of poverty. They are trying to make good fiscal choices by working or saving money; however, as a result they lose their food stamps or are denied aid through social services completely. Denise shared that she lost her food stamps because she "made $1.50 too much." She was embarrassed and humbled when she had to go to a food bank. Melanie shared:

We actually got less food stamps once I [became] unemployed because I made more [money with unemployment benefits]... When one thing works out well, it kind of flips the other thing and so it did put me in a predicament, where I was making too much ... now I can't go back to work because the 18 year old is working and that counts toward our household income. When I get one [financial] thing [settled] then ... [other financial support] goes away that we really need.

Sharon shared that she received a raise at work but had her SNAP balance reduced as a result. She said "I've gotten a little bit of a raise ... [but I'm] penalized for doing better [financially] ... [the system] keeps you stuck. It's not allowing you to grow and to better yourself is actually making it harder for you." She is not trying to take advantage of the system and understands that there are certain rules in place because some people do. She shared, "but I feel like there's people out there like me who would really benefit from the system and they just don't get a chance." If she gets married, her benefits will be reduced or lost completely. She suggested, "there should be a time period after you have these life changes for you to get yourself in order. Allow people to use the system ... [for] six months to a year to benefit off of these."

Savings

Melanie would like the opportunity to build her savings all while keeping Medicaid and SNAP. She said even if she had $5000 in savings, she thinks it would help her get out of poverty. She is constantly trying to balance making just enough money to not lose her Social Services benefits and avoiding getting penalized if she does make too much money. She said:

> You have to have some kind of money to make money! ... [The system is] exacerbating! There's no ... happy medium. There's just you make too much and we're going to cut it off... but those of us who have lived in poverty our whole life and want to get out of it, it is very crippling to get out ... I feel like the individual parent is trying to show that they are willing to put forth the effort to get out of the system so that they're not having to live on this the rest of their lives I feel that they should be ... it's kind of like this pattern of people recycling just generation after generation.

Sheila and Rosa built their savings. However, their fiscal responsibility and planning for a rainy day caused them to be denied for Social Services funding. Sheila shared:

> I feel like I should be able to have a good amount in savings because ... if I get in an accident and have to pay $1,000 like I need emergency funds. But Virginia's cap here is like $1200 in savings. At the time, I think I had maybe $5000 [in savings] ...that was just my safety line. I tried to tell them like I don't make enough to really cover this, please [help me].

Rosa's emergency situation actually occurred when she was diagnosed with breast cancer and had a double mastectomy during the Pandemic. She was on short-term disability from her job at the warehouse and was denied financial assistance from Social Services because of her

savings. The application process only inquired about her income and how much she had in savings. It did not inquire about other expenses, such as a car payment. She said:

> I was so mad when I went to [the hospital] and I didn't want to spend the money that I had saved. I applied for financial assistance but every little thing they found they asked me questions. Where did you get this money from? People started giving me money to help me and I put it in my bank account. I needed it for my bills and things like that, but [the hospital] said they needed a letter for this and a letter for that. They also told me I was making too much money for a two person family. I also applied for SNAP but they denied it saying that I'm making too much money for [a family of] two.

Paying for Their Education

Eighteen of the 23 student-parents in this study received financial assistance through Pell Grants ($n=17$) or FastForward ($n=1$). This financial assistance covered the cost of tuition, fees, and some textbooks. But it did not cover the cost of attendance such as childcare, transportation, and additional required educational materials. Julie shared that financial stress has caused her to drop out time after time, "... we're broke and at one point we were almost homeless. [So in] those circumstances ... I don't really care for school ... I've got to take care of my house." Melanie's was $300 shy of paying for textbooks one semester. She was emotionally distraught and cried in the community college's financial aid office while pleading her case. A compassionate staff member was able to find her funding to cover her books through another source. Susan receives Pell but still pays for all of her books out-of-pocket.

Pell Grant Denial

Seven of student-parents in this study do not qualify for Pell Grants because they have reached the Federal Pell Grant Lifetime Eligibility Used (LEU), are above the annual household

income limit, or have unique financial situations not considered in the FAFSA process. Julie, Denise, Tahir, and Samantha have reached the maximum amount of Federal Pell Grant funding that they can receive over their lifetime. The LEU limits Pell Grant disbursement to no more than 12 terms or the equivalent (roughly six years) (U.S. Department of Education Federal Student Aid, 2021d). The Pell Grant denial prompted Denise to take non-credit courses where she qualified for FastForward funding and only paid $100 toward the cost of the class. But she still struggled to pay for some required supplies for the class. Tahir and Samantha both reached the LEU limits because they have a Bachelor's degree from other countries. Samantha said, "[I] can only get loans and that's a big challenge. Since I'm not from this country, I haven't used [U.S. Federal] financial aid and Pell Grants before. I understand if you are from the U.S. and already taken advantage of financial aid before." Samantha believes she should be able to qualify for financial aid since her degree is from another country and she has never used U.S. Federal Financial Aid before.

Marsha and Tonya were both denied Pell because their household incomes were too high. However, they both have extensive medical bills or ongoing medical expenses that the FAFSA process did not account for. Marsha struggles with over $25,000 of medical debt due to the challenging delivery of her first child when she spent over one week in the hospital. Creditors were calling her constantly and were not satisfied with her monthly payments. They wanted thousands of dollars initially, which was not fiscally possible for Marsha. As a result, her credit was adversely effected and she was unable to get a loan to pay off the medical bills. She continues to make payments and has poor credit. She is able to pay for her tuition, fees, and most of her books through scholarships. Tonya has Cystic Fibrosis and had a double lung transplant in 2013. As a result, she pays at least $10,000 out-of-pocket for anti-rejection medications and

medical care each year. Her medication costs often exceed her monthly mortgage payment. Tonya shared, "...we just paid [my tuition and books]... out of pocket, which is not ideal for us. So I'm hoping to apply for student loans."

Scholarships

Only four of student-parents in this study receive scholarships. As mentioned previously, Tonya's annual household income despite her large medical bills makes her ineligible for financial aid. She was not aware of scholarships. Julie pays for her education through scholarships because she has reached the LEU limits. Marsha shared, "If it weren't for scholarships, I would not be able to be enrolled in college whatsoever." However, she struggles with scholarship restrictions. The community college scholarships are not transferrable to other colleges within the state which makes it challenging for her to pay for tuition and books when she needs to take classes outside of the community college. This barrier has caused her to take fewer classes each semester which delayed her progress toward credential completion. At times, she has also enrolled in courses outside of her main degree program so that she does not lose the scholarship funding. She feels this is a waste of the scholarship funding and time spent on a class that does not go toward her credential. She suggests that the state make scholarships transferable to all of its 23 community colleges.

Additional Funding During COVID-19

During the Pandemic, nine of student-parents in this study lost their jobs, were laid off, or had a reduction in their work hours. Trevor shared that he lost his job, health insurance, and his rent-free home. However, the U.S. Government implement several financial COVID-19 relief packages. Nine student-parents reported receiving $1005 from the community college in addition to any other financial awards received before the Pandemic. To be eligible, students had to have a FAFSA on file, have Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP), be U.S. citizens or permanent residents, registered for selective service if male, registered for six credits of courses that were not all online before the Pandemic, and an Expected Family Contribution (EFC) below $15,000. Julie was thankful to receive Re-employing Virginians (REV) funds to help pay for the cost of tuition. Three student-parents received Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) and shared that this funding was more than they earned while employed.

Lack of Financial Education

Most student-parents in this study were never taught about their credit score from their family or anyone in the secondary or postsecondary educational system. Living in poverty generation after generation, their families simply did not know how to obtain good credit themselves in order to pass along the knowledge. They see the community college as one of the few ways to break the generational cycle of poverty. Student-parents in this study want to know how to improve their credit score, invest money, balance a checkbook, and purchase a home. Some also have misconceptions about financial aid in higher education.

Julie exclaimed, "... teach us the [financial] things that actually matter to adults!" She believes this would help pull herself and other families out of poverty, especially in minority communities where resources are limited. Maggie shared, "I grew up in poverty ... nobody really

gave me much information about money or how to handle it." Maggie's husband also did not have financial education and they made poor financial choices when they were young and first married. She said, "We probably could have avoided [our financial challenges] had we known better."

Amy delayed returning to school because she did not think she was eligible for financial aid if she attended part-time. Eleven years later she returned to the community college and wishes she had known that she was eligible for financial aid sooner because she would have pursued her postsecondary education years earlier. Denise suggests having posters around campus and announcements on social media about financial aid. For example, if you are between the ages of 25 and 35 and you make under $20,000, 99% of your education will be paid.

Sharon wishes she had known more about what it meant to take out student loans. She was young and needed money. The student loans were easy to get and she took out a lot of them when she was attending a private four year postsecondary institution before enrolling at the community college. She now has over $70,000 in student loan debt and said, "I took out all this money for these classes and for this degree and I didn't even get [a credential]. I feel like there should be people in the financial aid office that offer more guidance especially to someone who isn't knowledgeable about [money]." She wishes someone had shared with her that she would need to pay back the loans and it would be expensive, she believes she would have made smarter financial decisions. Chris agrees with Sharon and wishes someone had taught him more about student loans when he was younger. He also struggles to pay back a large amount of student loans.

Instructor Interaction, Support Services, and Course Delivery Methods are Essential to Student-Parents' Persistence

Those who persist toward a postsecondary credential put the needs of their children above their own educational journey. Their class selection process was dependent upon their family's schedules, even if they typically preferred face-to-face courses, they were most likely to choose asynchronous online classes. Student-parents in this study expressed that positive interaction with the instructors, robust support services, and flexible course schedules are imperative for them to persist. Student-parents' characteristics, stories, and quotes below reveal the fourth and final theme *Instructor Interaction, Support Services, and Course Delivery Methods are Essential to Student-Parents' Persistence.*

Instructor Interaction

The student-parents in this study want to improve the lives of their families and share that interactions with their instructors had an impact on their persistence. They want instructors to be understanding when challenges arise because of their families such as when their children are sick or their car breaks down. Since Marsha's husband works so much, the responsibilities of caring for the children are mainly hers. Although she is close to her extended family, they are not able to help her with childcare due to their own responsibilities. She wants instructors to understand how hard she is working to manage her family and to persist toward a postsecondary credential. She shares: "the college experience ... is not just going to school and doing homework.... for me this is providing a better life for my kids as well."

Positive interactions with faculty, staff, and administration encourage student-parents' persistence. A little kindness and grace has a big impact on establishing a family friendly campus where student-parents feel that the college understands them and their families. They want the

college employees to know how hard they are working to obtain a postsecondary credential and feel comfortable asking for help should family obligations or unexpected challenges occur. Their requests for additional support or extensions on assignments is a genuine cry for help to make it over the very real and unexpected barrier in front of them through no fault of their own. One day they wake up to a call that their childcare provider is unavailable on that day, or daycare is calling them to pick up their child because they are sick, or their vehicle breaks down. They may not have family and friends that can help them at the last minute to watch their child or to drive them to campus. A little kindness and grace can make all the difference in their persistence.

Julie shared, "My professors were awesome ... they were always orderly, efficient, and communicating something back right away... I haven't had a negative experience at [this community college]." Melanie shared that professors went out of their way to make videos and give her additional examples to best understand the material. She said, "I knew every single one of my professors and they are my friends." In fact, before the Pandemic, they let her bring her sisters of whom she has custody to class because she could not afford childcare. Donna shared that when her child's father abducted their daughter after a scheduled visit, she was devastated and her instructors were so understanding. One instructor told her to turn in her assignments when she could and she would not receive grade penalties for late work. Donna said, "[the community college is] just one big happy family ... never be afraid to reach out and ask for help." She appreciates the extra time to complete her assignments and that her instructor continues to follow up with her to see how she is doing.

Lucy shared that she had one professor who took the time to ask her about her kids and allowed her to have her cell phone in class just in case there was an issue with the kids while she was in class. The professor was understanding if she was not able to arrange childcare and

missed class. Lucy said "She was just happy to catch me up and keep me included with everything." Even though most professors were understanding of her childcare issues, she said "...no one else went out of their way to make sure everything was good [with me and the kids like this one instructor did]." She appreciates the interaction in classes and dislikes it when her professors just require her to read the textbook and take quizzes. She struggled to learn the material on her own and earned a D in a class like this previously. Denise said:

> I can think of one instructor which I thought was pretty awesome. I really appreciated her approach I just thought she was a really good instructor. I definitely think she has a niche for teaching. She knows what she's talking about. She wasn't reading from slides. It was a lot of information that she was responsible for teaching us, but she was able to provide a lot of personal and professional experiences to enhance the material and just kind of make it all fit together.

Denise also had a negative experience with an instructor. She said the instructor seemed disconnected and did not understand the economic struggles that come from living in poverty and returning to school. The instructor was not empathetic and did not realize that she could barely pay for her car and gas to get to campus, much less purchase the additional material required for the class. She said, "I didn't want sympathy, I just wanted empathy." She said the program was disorganized and if she had known ahead of time that she needed these additional materials, she could have planned better.

Like Denise, Susan has had both positive and negative experiences with instructors. She shared that one instructor made a video to welcome students to the class. She said, "He seemed very eager to help, more than I've ever experienced in a teacher. He said, if you ever have any issues, any disabilities, any mental thing come to him talk to him he'll work with you on

deadlines and stuff like that. I know some teachers say it, but he said it with a lot of compassion." She said if more teachers were like him, it would make student-parents feel more comfortable if an issue arose. Just knowing that was an option helped her to feel more at ease and she really appreciated knowing that her instructor "genuinely cares." Susan also shared her negative experiences with instructor interactions:

> I've noticed ... probably about half of my classes are almost ... completely self-taught. You don't see the instructor, you don't talk to the instructor. Half of them, I don't even know their name. I don't even know if they're male or female ... there's not a lot of communication and I really don't like it.

She would like for someone to reach out from the college via text, email, or a phone call every once in a while just to see how she is doing personally and educationally. She would love to hear "...feel free to come to me [if you have issues]... sometimes that's all people want is to know that someone's thinking about them ... that email may just be the one thing that makes their day..."

Shannon was pregnant and began attending the community college after high school but stopped attending class during the second semester. She said no one at the College reached out to her when she stopped attending to try to get her back on track. She was making good grades before she dropped out, but ended up failing all her classes during the second semester. Donna initially began pursuing a postsecondary credential after high school. She enrolled but never started classes because she discovered she was pregnant with her first child. No one followed up with her either to see why she didn't attend class. Now she is back in school and was working ahead in a class and accidentally missed one assignment. When she realized it, she asked her instructor if she could make it up but he said no. She said, "I had missed it and he wasn't willing

to let me make it up even though I had never missed any assignments. I would have gotten an A in the class actually if he would have shown me a little grace."

Sharon agrees with Shannon about instructors extending grace. She does not want extra time on all assignments, but the opportunity to have a little more time if an issue arises. She said, "Sometimes things are out of control. There are times I have to work extra shifts, sometimes my kids are sick and I can't get that paper done by the time that you needed me to." This happened to her once and the instructor not only gave her an extension but shared encouraging words with her. She continued, "I feel like if I would have heard 'no, you've got to turn this in,' I probably would not quit but I definitely would have felt hurt."

Madison wants instructors to know that if she needs an extension on an assignment, it is not because she is lazy or forgot. She said, "There have been times I got called into work on a day off or just something was thrown in the way that prevented me from being able to do what I needed to do." She said that her children are typically the reason she has delays in completing assignments. After working, meal preparation, household chores, helping her own children with their school work, and all of the other responsibilities of being a parent, she finally has time to complete her assignments after the kids go to bed. She shared "I was actually up until one o'clock last night doing my homework and I had to get up to go to work so those are typical nights for me." She rarely gets eight hours of sleep each night and is exhausted.

Course Delivery Options

Student-parents also put the needs of their families first when it comes to choosing the type and quantity of courses in their post-secondary journey. Although there is not one course delivery method that works for them all, 16 of them preferred asynchronous online. Tonya shared, "Both of [my classes] are totally [asynchronous] online ... I need that flexibility because

my schedule normally comes last. I have to work around everybody else's schedule." Marsha also prefers asynchronous online classes because of her family's busy schedule. Lack of asynchronous online classes caused her to lose her scholarship funding because there was a minimum requirement to enroll in at least six credits per semester. Amy shared:

> As a parent who also is trying to work and go to college, online courses have been very beneficial and easier for myself and my family ... I can listen to these lectures when I feel that I am mentally ready to learn and take in what needs to be taken it versus having to go to an in person class where you know something could have just happened at home or I had a hard day at work ... and I'm just not mentally prepared to listen to that lecture.

Lucy's attends the community college part-time. Before the Pandemic, she said that she did not perform well in her face-to-face classes because she was caring for her then six-month old daughter. It was challenging to coordinate childcare in order to drive to campus to take classes twice a week for three hours. She prefers asynchronous online courses and was thankful that her classes transitioned to this delivery method during the Pandemic. She now attends part-time and takes two courses. She has dropped courses before due to low performance and taken only one class per semester. Since taking all asynchronous online classes she has earned A's in most of them. Lucy would like to have more time to study and take more classes. She also completes most of her studies after the kids go to bed at night and she cleans the apartment from the day. There are some days when her oldest child cannot get to sleep and her plans to study are foiled.

Julie is open to synchronous online courses that occur after 5PM when her husband is home from work and can take care of the kids. During the Pandemic, she often held her daughter on her lap during Zoom classes. She enjoyed the interaction with the professor and other students

while still giving her the flexibility to be with her children. Once her children are older and can take of themselves for short periods of time, she shared that synchronous online would be more of her preference. The program in which Marsha and Julie were both enrolled transitioned from a combination of asynchronous and synchronous online instruction to face-to-face instruction in the fall 2020. As a result, in the spring 2021, both Marsha and Julie changed their degree plans to one that had online class options.

Sheila also prefers online asynchronous classes as well. She shared that during the Pandemic her classes transitioned online. "It's just been easier for me with everything going on. I'm glad I transferred to this community college, because ... I have friends at [a local four year college] and most of their classes are still in person." Without online classes, she has no idea how she would manage her son, his school transitioning to online learning, her household responsibilities, and her own postsecondary education.

Trevor enrolled during the Pandemic and is struggling with asynchronous online classes. He is anxious to begin face-to-face classes in the future and thinks he will learn better being in class with the instructor and other students. While he says he is slowly getting used to the virtual learning environment, it has been challenging because he had no idea how to use it at first.

Julie also shared:

Representation also matters ... I would like to see more professors that look like me or more professors that are in the same life season that are adults have gone through adult learning themselves and have children. I think more women so that I can see myself in that professor so I see if she was able to do it I can keep going and doing it myself.

Course Length

Tonya said, "My schedule is not my schedule. My schedule is my son's schedule, my daughter's schedule, and my husband's schedule, so I kind of work my education in and around their schedules." The student-parents in this study agreed with Tonya. As a result, just as there is not one course delivery that works for them all, there is also not one course length that meets all of their needs. Julie prefers 16 week courses instead of shorter sessions. This allows her to learn at a steady pace and not feel like she is rushing to learn the materials or to not be able to learn it all because she cannot commit the time each day to study due to familial responsibilities. Seven of student-parents in this study also prefer 16 week courses.

Lucy, Madison, and Sheila prefer a combination of 16 week courses and accelerated courses. This would allow them to pick and choose depending on other obligations they have with their families which vary from semester to semester. Maggie and Sharon prefer only accelerated courses so that they can take fewer courses at one time and get them done faster. Maggie said it is harder for her to focus on four courses over 16 weeks, and does better with two courses over eight weeks.

Course Design

Marsha likes it when professors open all the assignments for the entire semester. This allowed Marsha opportunities to work ahead. One time she was able to finish a 16 week class in only one week because her husband was on vacation and took care of the kids so she could concentrate on her studies. Like Marsha, Sheila appreciates classes that allow her to work at her own pace. She has a science class that meets online synchronously but the instructor also records all her lectures so if she can't meet at those times. She shared that it has taken a lot of pressure off her and it is less stressful to be able to complete things on her own time. Like previous

student-parents, Sheila also works on her academic studies after the kids go to bed at night. Samantha and Amy appreciate recorded lectures and audio books that they can listen to throughout the day as they care for their kids.

Trevor encourages instructors to have assignments due on a weekly basis instead of a daily basis. It is easier to plan when he is going to complete the assignments when there is at least a week in between due dates due to his family's ever changing schedule. Maggie agrees with Trevor about spreading out due dates, but does not like it when an assignment is visible, but locked and she cannot access it. She has to wait hours or days to complete it and would rather just have access to it right away.

Marsha had a bad group experience where she did all of the work and her partner did not communicate with her. Now she prefers to work alone. Julie shared that it is harder for her to take exams and write long papers. She would appreciate more group work and project based learning.

Support Services

Many student-parents in this study were not aware of the variety of support services provided by the community college, such as free peer tutoring, technical support, computer repair, Beyond the Blue (an on-campus resource and referral center), and 24 hours a day/7 days a week library services. Marsha admits, "[I am in the] habit of going to this specific place [Canvas] to do this specific thing... [I] don't take time to explore everything. I feel like part of it is my fault but I also think I really wasn't aware of a lot of the resources that the community colleges offer."

Many shared frustration that support services were not offered on the evenings and weekends when they are able to dedicate time to her studies. Lucy shared, "If we had someone

on a Wednesday night and Saturday night or something like that to where if you have a problem you have immediate help. Like say I have an assignment due Sunday or something like that and you're trying to complete it on a Saturday and you're having issues with Canvas or anything like that there's not necessarily anyone that you're able to talk to until the next day when you get an email response... maybe like two times a week or something like that we could ever get 24/7 or somebody just to reach out to with general technical questions ...”

Childcare

The number one concern of the student-parents interviewed in this study was childcare. Mary said having onsite childcare "would be a parent's dream come true." Lucy, Marsha, and Tahir said they would be able to persist without dropping classes if there was onsite childcare. They both would prefer to be able to drop off her children, take a class and pick them up as soon as class was over. Rosa said an onsite childcare center would allow her to go to class, the library, and study. She is perplexed as to why the community college has a gym but no childcare. Julie and Melanie shared ideas for how an onsite childcare center could serve as practicum experiences for student pursing an Early Childhood Education credential. Donna said onsite childcare would not only be good for the student-parents but also for the children to be educated and socialize with each other.

Amelia, Denise, and Mary believe more student-parents would pursue their postsecondary credential if onsite childcare was provided. Amelia said, "A lot of the people that I know that are mothers won't go back to school because they can't afford [childcare]. I definitely [believe] 100% that [childcare] would be extraordinarily beneficial." Denise shared that there are so many children being raised by single moms in poverty. She said, "the key to social mobility is education...the acquisition of additional skills...we can't ignore the childcare situation." She

suggested having student-parents volunteer to work at the onsite childcare center themselves in exchange for the same number of hours of free onsite childcare for their own children. Mary believes that parents with younger children would return to college sooner if they had onsite childcare because many wait until their children are older and can take care of themselves because they cannot find affordable and dependable childcare.

Trevor said he does not understand why childcare is not more readily available. He is fortunate to have family that can help him with childcare. But, like Denise, he worries about single parents and those who do not have the childcare resources that he does. He was raised by a single mom with a low-income and saw how she struggled to make ends meet. She was not able to provide a better financial life for him and his siblings because she did not have the support to return to college.

Student-parents were also accepting of off-site childcare options. Julie suggests that the community college have a partnership with local childcare centers so that student-parents could get a discount or receive a stipend or voucher to help cover the cost. She also suggests having a list of childcare centers in the area that meet certain quality standards for student-parents to consider. Shannon, Ashley, and Rosa said having childcare stipend or voucher system would encourage them to persist toward her postsecondary credential because she would not feel so overwhelmed. Shannon and Samantha would like to see childcare offered in the evenings and on the weekends. Ashley agrees that the childcare needs to expand into the evenings. Amy needs childcare early in the morning so that she can get to her clinical site.

Admissions and Enrollment Process

Student-parents shared stories of their struggles with the admissions and enrollment processes. Marsh suggests streamlining process across the state including the admissions

application, financial aid, and transferring course between the colleges. There are times when the community college does not offer the classes she needs asynchronously online and she takes classes through other colleges in the state. She does not like completing an admissions application and re-applying for financial aid at each separate college within the state. She recommends that students only need to submit one admissions and complete one financial aid application and be able to attend any Virginia community college since they are all in the same Virginia community college System. Marsha shares, "that extra hassle ... causes some students not to enroll in courses and to finish their degrees."

Julie proposed that she would benefit from someone at the College who walks her through the admissions process step-by-step and checks in periodically to see how things are going and to provide assistance as needed. Trevor agrees and shared that it was really challenging for him to acclimate to the postsecondary world after being in the workforce for so many years. He felt lost every step of the way and said trying to find answers on his own was really difficult. Lucy shared, "I'm still having issues with getting an advisor's help figuring out what I'm supposed to do to meet my goal of clearing out my five remaining classes that are Gen Ed over the summer. I don't even know who my advisor is I've been trying to figure it out."

Student-Parent Support

Most student-parents said they would benefit from a student-parent support group, a mentor, and a student-parent cohort model. Having a safe place to celebrate their successes, express their concerns, and get support from other parents who are pursuing or have completed a postsecondary credential would provide encouragement to persist. Marsha said, "I feel like it would ...give parents a light at the end of the tunnel to hear that it's difficult and you're not that typical student but you can still do it." Lucy shared she does not get a lot of support from people

in her personal life in her academic pursuits and having a group of students in the same situation to talk to would be helpful.

Student-parents want a variety of options to connect to each other. Trevor suggested social media, study groups, and group texting to support each other. Rosa, Shannon, Susan, Ashley, and Amy also liked the idea of a social media group due to their busy schedules. Maggie shared that during a Zoom class she was randomly paired with another student of about the same age and life circumstances. She wishes she would have known her sooner to be able to share experiences and support each other.

Student-parents in this study are also eager to encourage other student-parents. Lucy said she would tell others to work at their own pace and not to compare themselves to others. She said, "...slow and steady wins the race..." and even though it might take you a little longer, you are still going to reach your goals. Julie said she would encourage other student-parents to take their time to explore different career paths to make sure they are pursuing one they will love. It is not all about the money, it is about your happiness too. Shannon, Maggie, and Amy agree with Lucy and Julie. Shannon said, "go at your own pace and don't take breaks [in between semesters]...just keep going....you are going to want to give up. That happens to me too... but once you get through it you'll look back and realize it wasn't that bad." Susan agrees with Shannon and also wants to tell other student-parents, "It's okay to take time for yourself, even though you know you feel guilty sometimes because you know you need to do other things like it's okay it'll work out just relax, breathe, it'll be okay." Sharon would tell other student-parents to create a vision board not only for themselves but for their children. Seeing their goals is a daily reminder to persist. Mary would share study tips such as using a pneumonic.

Repeatedly, over and over again, student-parents would encourage others to obtain their credential sooner than later to make a better life for their families. Trevor said, "I would recommend them to jump in headfirst and commit to being a full-time student if you can." Maggie agrees with Trevor about going back to school full-time. She shared that she wishes she had earned a credential earlier in life. She does not regret staying at home with her children, but says life would have been much easier if they made more money instead of working low-wage jobs. She also encourages other student-parents who have older children to get back to school, it is never too late. She is excited that she will finish her credential in three years by attending full-time instead of eight years if she attended part-time.

Like Maggie, Chris wishes he had returned to college sooner. He's now returning with his 18 year old daughter after working multiple low-wage jobs to make ends meet. Chris had such a great experience with a financial aid staff member that he wants to talk to her all of the time. He wants other student-parents to realize how many financial resources are available to pay for college expenses.

Chapter Summary

With regard to the first research question which addressed the family, financial and education experiences of the community college student-parents during the Pandemic, the first three themes were identified: (a) *Student-Parents Postsecondary Credential Completion Often Interrupted,* (b) *Student-Parents Need Mental Health Support,* and (c) *Student-Parents Need More Financial Support and Education.* With regard to the first research question which included student-parents' educational experiences as well as the second research question which addressed the online delivery method of courses during the Pandemic, the fourth theme (d)

Instructor Interaction, Support Services, and Course Delivery Methods are Essential to Student-Parents' Postsecondary Persistence was identified.

For the first theme *Student-Parents Postsecondary Credential Completion Often Interrupted*, I discovered that student-parents' life experiences included multiple interruptions in their postsecondary journey due to life's challenges. The Pandemic allowed some participants to slow down their hectic schedules and return to their postsecondary pursuits. Some of their homes were busy with toddlers while others were almost empty-nesters, but they were all motivated to make a better life for their families through a better job, better pay, and better benefits. Most were encouraged by at least one person in their life to pursue a postsecondary credential and further supported by the community college employees. Their families were their top priority and influenced the number of courses they took as well as their choices for course delivery methods and course length.

The second theme *Student-Parents Need Mental Health Support*, revealed that most participants suffer from depression, anxiety, and panic attacks. Student-parents shared challenging life experiences about child custody battles, raising their children alone, cancer, organ transplants, alcohol and drug abuse, as well as physical and emotional abuse. These experience have taken a toll on the mental health of the student-parents. Some have been fortunate to receive counseling and are now better able to cope, while most have not and continue to suffer from depression, anxiety, and panic attacks.

During my third walk with the theme *Student-Parents Need More Financial Support and Education*, I discovered that the cycle of poverty lasts for generations and is challenging to overcome. The lived educational and personal financial experiences of student-parents revealed that for those who qualify, Pell Grants are not enough to cover the cost of attendance. I was

surprised by the reasons in which some did not qualify for Pell especially expenses for which the

FASFA application does not account. Federal social services funding is challenging to obtain and

maintain. The children's medical needs are often met, but many student-parents do not seek

medical care due to the out-of-pocket expense. The system does not educate nor encourage them

to be fiscally responsible which delays their socio-economic success.

Through my walk with the final theme *Instructor Interaction, Support Services, and*

Course Delivery Methods are Essential to Student-Parents' Postsecondary Persistence, I

discovered that student-parent persistence toward a postsecondary credential is influenced by

their experiences with the community college employees, support services, and course delivery

options. The College provides many support services, but some students were not aware of them.

Student-parents also want to know that someone from the College cares about them and to have

access to live support services beyond 5:00 p.m. on weekdays and throughout the weekend. They

need flexible class schedules and instructors who are understanding when life's challenges occur.

In Chapter 5, I discuss what my study means and join the ongoing conversation of

scholars who research and study student-parents. I analyze my findings, synthesize my work

with previous research, and evaluate my place in the conversation. Also provided are "takeaway

points" for community college instructors, leaders, and legislators to best support student-parents

persistence toward a postsecondary credential.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Twenty-two percent of all United States undergraduate students are parents (Cruse et al., 2020). These postsecondary students who have at least one dependent child, also called student-parents, are most likely to attend community colleges (Cruse et al., 2019). Even though most student-parents have low-incomes and are twice as likely to drop out when compared to their non-parent peers, they have higher grade point averages (GPA) than their non-parent peers (The Aspen Institute, 2021; Manze, et al., 2021; Zalaznick, 2021).

Postsecondary enrollment is declining across the United States (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021; NCES, 2021). In addition, student-parent credential attainment is decreasing (Gault et al., 2014). Staying true to their mission to "serve all segments ... of society" (Vaughan, 2003, p. B24) with a focus on open access to meet the needs of the community (Vaughan, 2003), community colleges in particular need to be aware of the factors influencing student-parent persistence in order to retain this significant student population. Increased enrollment and more revenue for postsecondary institutions is not the only benefit. Most postsecondary staff, faculty, and administration genuinely want students to succeed and improve their lives. Student-parents who desire to pull their families out of poverty not only provide a better life for themselves but for generations to come (Gault et al., 2018). Their ability to support themselves financially also has a positive economic impact in their community.

The COVID-19 Pandemic provides a unique opportunity for researchers of student-parents. Student-parents across the nation struggled more than their non-parent peers to meet the basic needs of their families, such as food, housing, transportation, and childcare during the Pandemic. "Among parenting students, 70% experienced basic needs insecurity; the rate among

non-parenting students was 55%. Disparities in housing insecurity were especially prominent, with parenting students 15 percentage points more likely than non-parenting students to experience housing insecurity" (The Hope Center, 2021, p. 34). Parental responsibilities increased with the majority of educational institutions transitioning to online learning. Student-parents spent the majority of their time caring for and homeschooling their children while also trying to go to school themselves (Education Week, 2020; Heggeness & Fields, 2020).

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the phenomenon of low-income student-parents as they persist toward a postsecondary credential at a community college during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic. For the purposes of this study, the definition of persistence is continuing to enroll in courses consecutively or from one semester to the next. Focus is on successive fall and spring semesters since many students do not enroll during the summer.

The problem to be addressed was how community college instructors, leaders, and legislators can support low-income student-parents persistence toward a postsecondary degree. There is a gap in the research about how the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic is impacting low-income student-parents. Before the Pandemic, low-income student-parents already had financial insecurities with food, housing, and childcare (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). Now there are many more obstacles with school closures, lay-offs, and lack of childcare (Cruse et al., 2020).

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the family, financial, and educational experiences of low-income student-parents as they persist toward a postsecondary credential at a community college during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the family, financial, and educational experiences of low-income student-parents as they persist toward a postsecondary credential at a community college during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic?

2. What are the family, financial, and educational experiences of low-income student-parents as they persist toward a postsecondary credential at a community college in synchronous versus asynchronous courses during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic?

Due to social distancing protocols, secondary and postsecondary educational institutions transitioned online, childcare centers and restaurants closed. The United States was in lockdown to flatten the curve of COVID-19 cases. Many student-parents were confined to their homes with increased responsibilities including childcare, guiding their children through online learning during the Pandemic, increased food costs and preparation, and employment loss or changes. These challenges as well as previously unaddressed or underlying health issues also impacted the mental and physical health of student-parents.

Summary of Methodology

Through a qualitative, phenomenological study, I conducted interviews of 23 low-income student-parents as they persist toward a postsecondary credential at a medium sized, rural community college located in the Southeastern United States with approximately 5000 students. The College's service region includes three counties and three small cities with a total estimated population of 263,000. The study occurred during Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic over several consecutive months in 2021. The problem to be addressed was how community college instructors, leaders, and legislators can support low-income student-parents persistence toward a postsecondary degree during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic.

There were 465 student-parents identified as living in or near poverty through the community college's financial aid records. These students qualified for Pell Grants, Workforce Financial Aid, or applied for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) with an income within 200% of the poverty level and considered part of the ALICE population. ALICE is an acronym for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed and defines the struggles of households that earn above the Federal Poverty Level, but do not make enough to afford a bare-bones household budget (United Way, 2021). The Director of the community college's Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness (OIRE) emailed the 465 students briefly explaining the study (see Appendix A) and asked them to voluntarily fill out a form with their name and email address if they had potential interest to participate in the study. Sixty-three student-parents completed the form. The Director of OIRE emailed me the 63 names and email addresses. I sent a follow up email to these 63 students explaining more about the study (see Appendix E). Twenty-six responded confirming their willingness to participate in the study, and 23 of the 26 student-parents participated in all three interviews.

Data Collection

I submitted applications and received approval from Old Dominion University College of Education and Professional Studies Human Subjects Review Committee and the community college Internal Review Boards (Appendix B and C). After receipt of the participant contact information from the community college's Director of OIRE, I emailed the participants and scheduled a Zoom meeting to inform the participants of the nature of the study, the plans to use the results, as well as review and digitally sign ODU's Informed Consent Document (Appendix D). During the first Zoom meeting I explained the statement of confidentiality and anonymity, voluntary participation, as well as potential risks and benefits. Participants were encouraged to

participate in a consistent, quiet, comfortable environment that was free from interruptions. Three of the student parents in this study were not able to interview in a quiet environment due to lack of childcare. The semi-structured interview allowed me to ask follow-up questions (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). At the end of the first and second interviews, I scheduled the next interview with the participants. Twenty-three participants completed all three interviews. Three participants did not complete all three interviews and exited the study without consequence. The data from these three participants were removed from the study. Interview questions were developed by the researcher and guided by the literature review. Content validity was measured by assessing major themes in the literature review that comprehensively and adequately reflect the student-parent perspective of their family, financial, and educational experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

I took reasonable steps to keep private information, such as the participant's academic and financial student records from the community college. I removed identifiers from all identifiable private information collected. I stored the data in a locked, private office. In addition, electronic data was stored on a password-protected computer to which only I have access. I destroyed the digital audio files. Only researchers approved as PIs or co-PIs on this study have access to the data. Identifiers were removed, and the de-identified information used for future research without additional informed consent from the participant. The results of this study was used in reports, presentations, and publications; but I did not identify the participants. The records may be subpoenaed by court order or inspected by government bodies with oversight authority.

I conducted the first interview of the three-interview series (Seidman, 2013) with 23 participants. Interviews occurred over several months during the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2021.

The first interviews began at the end of February, the second interviews began in mid-March, and the third interviews began at the end of March. All of the interviews concluded at the end of April 2021. After concluding an interview with a participant, I scheduled the next interview to occur one to two weeks after the previous interview. Some interviews occurred more than two weeks after the previous due to schedule conflicts of the participants or the researcher. During the first interview, I put the participants' experiences in the context of their life history by asking them to tell as much as possible about their educational, financial, and family related experiences before the COVID-19 Pandemic. The purpose of the second interview was to focus on the concrete details of the participant's lived educational, financial, and family related experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic. During the second interview, I asked follow-up questions from the first interview as needed. During the third interview, I asked participants to reflect on the meaning of the experiences discussed in the first two interviews and how instructors, community college leaders, and legislators can best support student-parents as they persist toward completion of a postsecondary credential. I also asked and remaining follow-up questions from the first and second interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 20-45 minutes.

The interview transcripts were downloaded from the Zoom software. I copied the text into a word processing document and edited it to reflect the interview verbatim. As needed I referred to the Zoom audio recordings of the interviews for clarification during transcription. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, student names are changed to the student number, for example SP1 for student-parent 1, in the transcripts. I used a spreadsheet to track participants' interview progress, member checking, number of children, ages of children, race, and gender using a spreadsheet. These data were collected from the first interview transcripts. Also included in the spreadsheet were participants' names, their pseudonyms, and a number to track the number

of participants in the study. I only included the transcripts of the 23 participants who completed

all three interviews.

Data Analysis

Through reflective lifeworld research, I remained as open as possible to the phenomenon

of being a postsecondary student who is also a parent during the COVID-19 Pandemic. I read

and re-read the three transcripts of each of the 23 participants and focused on both description

and interpretation of the student-parent' lived experiences (Vagle, 2018). Guided by Vagle's

(2018) "phenomenological walks" (p. 93) using van Manen's (2016) hermeneutic

phenomenology, I began my walks by printing the 69 interview transcripts which totaled 348

pages. I initially read each participant's set of three interview transcripts and made entries into

my journal of potential themes. I asked myself where, what, how, and why the postsecondary

journey of student-parents during the COVID-19 Pandemic exists in multiple spaces and places.

I took constant notes and stayed as long as I was still collecting information. I asked myself

questions such as: What is happening here? What is the purpose of this place? What practices

and conversations take place here? I began to color code my journal entries with different

colored highlighting and matched the same color using sticky note arrows on the transcripts

where themes seemed to be emerging. I drew upon my own comprehension of the

phenomenological research as well as organically explored the place to identify cultures,

everyday practices, dialogues, and systems. My goal was not to discuss everything, but to find

meaningful things and examine them deeply. The colored sticky note arrows helped me to

visually quantify the abundance of each color from which I eventually identified the themes. I

returned to my journal to summarize what I learned, what I thought about, and how I could use

the transcripts to identify the themes. Not all of the colors became themes but instead became sub-themes. During this part of my phenomenological walk, four themes emerged:

- Student-Parents Postsecondary Credential Completion Often Interrupted

- Student-Parents Need Mental Health Support

- Student-Parents Need More Financial Support and Education

- Instructor Interaction, Support Services, and Course Delivery Methods are Essential to Student-Parents' Postsecondary Persistence

While my color coded journal and colored sticky arrows were instrumental initially, I discovered that I needed another way to keep track of my discoveries as I continued my phenomenological walks to dive deeper into each theme. I began using a spreadsheet with each theme typed in its own spot in the first row. Each theme expanded over several columns and was separated from the other themes by a blank column. Each subtheme had its own column below the appropriate theme. For example, the subthemes of Student-Parents Need More Financial Support and Education included FAFSA, Scholarships, Pell Grants, COVID Funding, Employment Status, Existing Debt, Reasons for Financial Aid Denial, and Additional Government Assistance. The pseudonyms for each participant were each typed in their own row. I marked an "x" in the corresponding cell if the subtheme applied to the participant. If there was no connection between the participant and the subtheme, I marked the cell with a hyphen " – " to indicate that I had reviewed it. If I had follow-up questions for the participant, I marked the cell with a question mark "?". I also typed notes to clarify how some subthemes applied to the participant.

I shaded the columns in the spreadsheet with the same color schemes used in the journal and sticky arrows to help guide me through the expansion of the spreadsheet due to additions of

subthemes. I went back through each transcript guided by my previous color coding and updated the subthemes for each participant in the spreadsheet. For example, I tracked the part-time enrollment for each participant as one of the subthemes for Student-Parents Postsecondary Credential Completion Often Interrupted. The spreadsheet allowed me to track the total number and percentages of participants impacted by each sub-theme. This also led to richer descriptions of the phenomenon reflected in this chapter.

This walk required patience and led to surprising discoveries as well as rich descriptions with many characteristics and distinctions of the postsecondary journey of student-parents. I was surprised that 23 participants took time from their busy lives to spend several hours with me to conduct three interviews with each of them over several months during the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2021. This allowed me to have prolonged engagement with the student-parent participants during the phenomenon to increase validity, trustworthiness, and rapport with each participant. One student-parent told me she would miss our meetings together when we concluded the third interview. Perhaps the desire for addition interpersonal communication during an isolating Pandemic was also a contributing factor to the quantity and quality of interviews completed. I am grateful for the participants' willingness to help me with this study.

I was also surprised how openly participants shared deep, personal life experiences with me. Being an empathetic person, I fought back tears during some interviews due to the tragic events many endured. I had to continually remind myself about bridling my emotions and thoughts. Through bridling I restrained my viewpoint as a child of a low-income student-parent as well as a student-parent myself pursing a doctoral degree. I did not make assumptions or interpretations too quickly or carelessly, but instead took a reflective stance and loosened my ties to the lifeworld. I remained patient while observing and exploring the experiences of student-

parents during the COVID-19 Pandemic as well as my relationship as the researcher and with the participants.

Summary of Major Findings

For the first theme *Student-Parents Postsecondary Credential Completion Often Interrupted*, I discovered that student-parents' life experiences included multiple interruptions in their postsecondary journey due to life's challenges. The Pandemic allowed some participants to slow down their hectic schedules and return to their postsecondary pursuits. Some of their homes were busy with toddlers while others were almost empty-nesters, but they were all motivated to make a better life for their families through a better job, better pay, and better benefits. Most were encouraged by at least one person in their life to pursue a postsecondary credential and further supported by the community college employees. Their families were their top priority and influenced the number of courses they took as well as their choices for course delivery methods and course length.

My walk with the second theme *Student-Parents Need Mental Health Support*, revealed that most participants suffer from depression, anxiety, and panic attacks. Student-parents shared challenging life experiences about child custody battles, raising their children alone, cancer, organ transplants, alcohol and drug abuse, as well as physical and emotional abuse. These experiences have taken a toll on the mental health of the student-parents. Some have been fortunate to receive counseling and are now able to better cope, while most have not and continue to suffer from depression, anxiety, and panic attacks.

During my third walk with the theme *Student-Parents Need More Financial Support and Education*, I discovered that it is challenging to obtain and maintain financial assistance. The lived educational and personal financial experiences of student-parents revealed that for those

who qualify, Pell Grants are not enough to cover the cost of attendance. I was surprised by the reasons some did not qualify for Pell, particularly expenses for which the FASFA application does not account. Federal social services funding is challenging to obtain and maintain. The children's medical needs are often met, but many student-parents do not seek medical care due to the out-of-pocket expense. The system does not educate nor encourage them to be fiscally responsible which delays their socio-economic success.

Through my walk with the final theme *Instructor Interaction, Support Services, and Course Delivery Methods are Essential to Student-Parents' Postsecondary Persistence*, I discovered that student-parent persistence toward a postsecondary credential is influenced by their experiences with the community college employees, support services, and course delivery options. The College provides many support services, but some students were not aware of them. Student-parents also want to know that someone from the College cares about them and to have access to live support services beyond 5PM on weekdays and throughout the weekend. In addition, they need flexible class schedules and instructors who are understanding when life's challenges occur.

Findings Related to the Literature

Most of the recent literature about student-parents is quantitative research based on survey data including but not limited to: Active Minds (2020), Alon et al., (2020), Aucejo et al. (2020), Blankstein et al. (2020), College Pulse (2020), The Healthy Minds Network (2020), and The Hope Center (2021). Although some literature such as the Aspen Institute (2020) and Goldrick-Rab et al. (2020b) includes some qualitative quotes from participants, the quotes do not include rich detail of their lived experiences and the research is still predominately statistical. The present study supports most of these quantitative studies but also enhances current literature

through qualitative research. Over 25 hours of interviews and 348 pages of transcripts with 23 participants were coded and analyzed. This addition to existing literature includes rich descriptions and details of the lived family, financial, and educational experiences of student-parents enrolled in a community college during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Details of how the findings of the current study relates to the literature as well as the addition of the present study's rich detail begins with the first theme *Student-Parents Postsecondary Credential Completion Often Interrupted.*

Student-Parents Postsecondary Credential Completion Often Interrupted

Tinto (2017) emphasized that postsecondary students must be motivated to persist and their experiences with the institution can impact persistence (Tinto, 2017). Motivation is the sum of student goals, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perceived worth or relevance of the curriculum (Tinto, 2017). Since student goals vary, they may have little commitment to the postsecondary institution because they simply do not plan to stay there very long (Tinto, 2017). However, if the institution is their first choice, they are more likely to persist to degree completion (Tinto, 2017). The current study expands on Tinto's (2017) theory to include the student-parent population and community colleges. There is alignment with the research from the current study and the Cruse et al. (2019) study that showed community colleges are the first choice for most student-parents. Because community colleges stay true to their mission to "serve all segments ... of society" (Vaughan, 2003, p. B24) with a focus on open access to meet the needs of the community (Vaughan, 2003), those who apply are accepted to these institutions with few exceptions. This would lead one to believe that this ease of acceptance would lead to more credential completion as Tinto (2017) shared; however, this was not the case in the current study.

Work-life balance challenges and long interruptions in their postsecondary pursuits have many student-parents in the current study without a credential.

The current study supports the Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2010) and Gault et al. (2020) studies that student-parents are more likely to reduce their course loads as the semester progresses due to work-life balance challenges. The findings in the current study contradict Tinto's (1993) claim that internal influences, or experiences within the postsecondary institution, are usually more significant to student persistence than external factors. Even though the internal factors or those within the postsecondary institution's control influenced student-parents' persistence, external influences, or those described by Tinto (1993) as outside of the institutions control, were more prominent reasons in the current study causing interruptions in student-parents' postsecondary education. However, the current study is congruent with Tinto's (2017) later research that claimed it is possible for students to persist despite a lack of a sense of belonging or perceived relevance of the curriculum if they are motivated by the external factors in their life.

Student-parents' are trying to balance work, childcare, and their own education. These work-life balance challenges are the reason that 21 of 23 student-parents in this study are enrolled part-time. Melanie, a participant of the current study, has been consistently attending the community college part-time for nine years while working full-time and finally graduated with an Associate of Science degree in May 2021. She also took developmental classes because she did not gain this knowledge during high school which also delayed her credential completion.

The current study supports the Heggeness and Fields (2020) study that revealed mothers ages 25-44 were three times more likely to be unemployed during the Pandemic due to childcare demands compared to fathers. Seven out of 23 student-parents in the current study became

unemployed due to the Pandemic. Of these unemployed participants, six of them were women ages 25-45. The unemployment was due to a variety of reasons including permanent or temporary closing of businesses while others had no choice due to lack of affordable and dependable childcare. Twenty of the 23 participants in the current study spent at least 40 hours a week caring for their children which is also congruent with the Hope Center Study (2021).

The current study adds to the Heggeness and Fields (2020) and Alon et al. (2020) studies with 15 of the student-parents in the current study remained employed during the Pandemic. In fact, some participants in the current study reported working more hours which reduced the time spent on their studies and with their children. The current study also adds to the existing research as some student-parents with older children found their schedules became less hectic during the Pandemic because they could leave their children at home alone while they worked.

The current study also supports the Alon et al. (2020) study that showed mothers spent more time on childcare during the Pandemic because secondary schools and childcare centers closed. This present study is also congruent with The Hope Center (2021) study that student-parents reported missing work or class due to lack of childcare. In fact, 19 of the participants in the current study reported providing schooling for their children at home while they attended their own postsecondary classes. Madison, a student-parent participant in the current study, said that her children are typically the reason she has delays in completing assignments. After working, meal preparation, household chores, helping her own children with their school work, and all of the other responsibilities of being a parent, she finally has time to complete her assignments after the kids go to bed. She rarely gets eight hours of sleep each night and is exhausted.

The current study supports the Garcia and Weiss (2020) study that showed parental responsibilities increased during the Pandemic as student-parents took on teaching their children when secondary schools transitioned to online learning. Tahir, a participant in the current study shared that after working a ten hour day, he would come home as his wife left for her job. During the Pandemic, his nine year old daughter's school schedule transitioned to a hybrid model with two days at home and two days at school. His six year old daughter was still attending kindergarten five days a week. His wife would homeschool their oldest daughter as much as she could during the day while also caring for their two-year-old son, doing household chores, and meal preparation. Tahir would then take over in the evenings with dinner, baths, homework, and bedtime. His family responsibilities not only increased but overlapped with his work schedule when he would need to call his daughter to make sure she completed her homework.

The current study aligns and expands upon Tinto's (2006) theory of retention that even though access to a postsecondary education has increased for low-income students, their degree completion rates are lower. The current study revealed that student-parents often have multiple interruptions in the postsecondary credential journey over long periods of time due to life's challenges. The postsecondary educational journey for 15 of the 23 student-parents in the current study was interrupted at least once for at least one semester, when they either withdrew or dropped out and did not enroll in the subsequent semester. For many student-parents in the present study, the interruptions occurred multiple times and over many years, some for decades with no credential attainment. Three participants in the current study, Maggie, Chris, and Tonya have an average of 28 years of interruptions in their postsecondary journeys without credential attainment. Julie, another participant in the current study, shared that her postsecondary

credential pursuits have lasted 16 years due to multiple interruptions because of life's challenges including almost being homeless.

Work-life balance challenges lead to multiple interruptions in student-parents' postsecondary journey. These challenges include providing the basic necessities for their families including food, housing, transportation, and childcare. These challenges cause stress and increase the likelihood of mental health challenges. What follows are the mental health findings of the participants in the current study related to the literature which aligns with the theme *Student-Parents Need Mental Health Support*.

Student-Parents Need Mental Health Support

Student-parents need mental health support to perform to the best of their abilities and persist toward postsecondary credential completion. The findings in the current study align with the majority of the literature regarding mental health challenges of student-parents. The current study did not align with the literature regarding suicidal ideations and reluctance to seek mental health counseling due to cultural stigmas; however, there was reluctance due to an inability to pay for treatment.

The current study is congruent with the mental health issues identified in The Healthy Minds Network (2020) survey that revealed student-parents feel stressed all or most of the time, feel overwhelmed, have a hard time regulating their emotions, feel depressed, and feel socially isolated. The current study showed 18 of the 23 student-parents suffer from potential mental health issues. Their emotional and mental health stories included stress, anxiety, isolation, depression, as well as panic attacks. The symptoms of most student-parents in this study were exacerbated by the Pandemic due to fear of getting COVID-19.

The Aspen Institute (2020) research showed that student-parents are more likely than their non-parent peers to have a history of trauma as a result of lack of extended family support, sexual assault, and domestic violence as well as basic needs insecurities. The current study revealed that this is especially true in the area of domestic violence. Nine of student-parents in the present study report being victims of domestic assault and/or emotional abuse. Denise, a participant in the current study shared several traumatic domestic events: **"**[My child's father] beat my ass like I was a grown man." She added that he also cheated on her with someone she considered to be a friend and gave her a sexually transmitted infection all while she was pregnant with their baby. Amy, another participant in the current study, shared that she was physically beaten by her son's father until she could barely move. He hid her car key to keep her from leaving the house. She eventually remembered where she kept a spare key and was able to grab her infant son when her abuser was not looking and drove to the police station to report the abuse.

Student-parents in the current study shared resistance to mental health counseling due to the inability to pay for mental health care which aligns with the IWPR (2020) study. Susan, a participant in the current study, suffered with anxiety and depression her entire life and since the Pandemic now suffers from panic attacks. She is also an alcoholic but maintained her sobriety through the Pandemic. Even though she says she is still not in best mental health, she is hesitant to seek counseling because of the out-of-pocket expense.

The current study expands on the literature review to include stories of student-parents who obtained mental health counseling for their children, but not themselves due to the out-of-pocket expense. Neither Amy nor Amelia, both participants in the present study and victims of domestic violence study, have had mental health counseling for themselves, but advocated and

obtained mental health counseling for their children. Amy and Amelia admit they put their children's mental health needs above their own and did not have the financial resources to pay for mental health counseling for themselves and their children.

The student-parents' in the current study who received mental health support sought the support in the community which is consistent with the Aspen Institute (2021) study that showed student-parents likelihood to seek mental health services off-campus. The findings in the current study also compliment current literature showing the benefits of mental health counseling. Melanie, a participant in the present study said her support system kept her motivated to persist toward credential completion. Marsha, another current study participant, sought mental health treatment through an outpatient treatment center where she had five days of intensive, eight-hour counseling sessions. As a result, she is now able to better manage her panic attacks.

This study is not congruent with The Aspen Institute (2021) and Wiley (2013) study that showed older student-parents ages 25 years and older are more likely to advocate for themselves, demonstrate more resilience, and are less likely to have substance abuse problems compared to younger student-parents. Student-parents, ages 19-52 years, in the current study shared that their children were their number one priority and they had no issues of advocating for their own needs at the College. If they had previous issues with drugs or alcohol, that stopped when they became pregnant. They are continually advocating for themselves and their children.

The current study also expands current research with additional reasons that student-parents are motivated to pursue a postsecondary credential. Through their own mental health challenges, there is a desire to help others, help themselves, and advance social justice. Marsha is motivated to earn a postsecondary credential because she wants to help people facing challenging situations. She believes her own life experiences will help her empathize with others.

She wants to help children with their own insecurities so that they do not have to carry that burden into adulthood like she has. Susan's postsecondary goals are to make a better life for her son, but also to stay sober. Denise is motivated to earn a credential to get a better job and increase her income in order to regain parental rights of her son. Julie is motivated to surpass societal expectations of her as a woman of color.

The current study reveals that student-parents need mental health support. Their stress levels due to traumatic life situations and work-life balance issues led to depression, anxiety, and panic attacks. The Pandemic exacerbated these issues and their need for support. Unfortunately, despite their desire to seek support, they often do not have the financial resources to pay for it and the other basic family needs. These fiscal barriers make it challenging to get out of poverty which leads to how the findings of the current study relate to the literature and the next theme, *Student-Parents Need More Financial Support and Education*.

Student-Parents Need More Financial Support and Education

Just as student-parents in the current study had challenges paying for mental health support, there are several other financial obstacles that make it hard to pull themselves out of poverty. These financial barriers reached all areas of their lives including, but not limited to, their healthcare, basic food needs, childcare, and education, While many reported being appreciative of receiving COVID relief funding from the community college through HEERF funds, they also felt like they will never get out of poverty because they are penalized for trying to better their lives. They shared loss of Medicaid and SNAP benefits when they got a raise, when they get married, or when they saved or were gifted money. Their large medical debts are not considered when completing the FAFSA causing them to be ineligible for Pell Grants. They did not receive good counsel when taking out student loans and were not educated how to budget their money

and achieve a good credit score. They are swirling in a financial sea of poverty and need more financial support and guidance to keep from drowning.

The current study aligns with the Gault et al. (2018) study that states student-parents desire to pull their families out of poverty not only provide a better life for themselves but for generations to come. All of the 23 student-parents in this study are motivated to earn a postsecondary credential to have a better life for their family through attainment of a better job, higher income, as well as have medical and retirement benefits. They do not want to worry about how they are going to provide food and shelter for their families or have dependable transportation to travel back and forth to work and school. They are tired of working multiple low-wage jobs with little or no advancement opportunities. So, they pursued a postsecondary credential with aspirations to make a better life for their families through a better job, better pay, and better benefits.

The current study partially supports and adds to the Aucejo et al. (2020) research that COVID-19 exacerbated socioeconomic disparities in higher education by delaying graduation for 13% of undergraduate students. Participants in the current study did not report delays in their educational journey during the Pandemic. However, it is important to note that student-parents had to be currently enrolled to participate in this study. Eight of the student-parents in this study either enrolled for the first time or re-enrolled at the community college during the Pandemic. They shared that since they were already home with their children and helping them with their schoolwork, they thought it would be a good time to return to school themselves.

The present study supports the Aucejo et al. (2020) research that COVID-19 exacerbated socioeconomic disparities when undergraduate students lost a job, internship, or a job offer. Seven of the student-parents in the current study became unemployed due to the Pandemic while

15 remained employed. The current study aligns with the NCES (1999) study that claims students who live in or near poverty are more likely to attend two-year colleges part-time and work full-time compared to students from higher income families. Nine of student-parents in the current study work full-time (more than 30 hours per week) and 21 enrolled part-time at the community college. Adding to the existing literature is the fact that some participants in the current study reported working more hours during the Pandemic, especially in health care fields.

The current study adds to the Johnson et al. (2020) study that showed digital inequalities intensified during the Pandemic for students who lacked access to the required electronic devices and internet in order to participate in online courses. The student-parents in the current study reported that the community college provided funding for them to purchase electronic devices such as laptops and hotspots to participate in online courses. However, because their children were also at home completing their schoolwork online, they often found that they could not all connect to the internet at the same time due to their internet service bandwidth. This delayed assignment completion and caused more stress to determine an internet schedule that worked for everyone.

The current study is congruent with the Gosliner et al. (2020) and Wilson (2008) studies that SNAP and TANF recipients report that they still cannot meet the basic food needs of their families due to eligibility requirements. Denise, a participant in the current study, shared that she lost SNAP because she "made $1.50 too much." Melanie shared that she lost SNAP because she became unemployed and the unemployment benefits were slightly higher than her income when she had a job. Sharon shared that she received a raise at work but her SNAP balance reduced as a result.

The current study also expands the existing research with additional reasons that student-parents find themselves ineligible for social services benefits, such as a change in marital status or having too much money in their savings accounts. Sharon, a participant in the current study, has not married because she knows her benefits will be reduced or lost completely. Another current study participant, Susan, lost Medicaid and SNAP benefits for her son and herself when she married. She now pays for their medical care out-of-pocket. Melanie would like the opportunity to build her savings all while keeping Medicaid and SNAP. She is constantly trying to balance making just enough money to not lose her Social Services benefits. She shared: "[The system is] exacerbating! ... [For] those of us who have lived in poverty our whole life and want to get out of it... it is very crippling... like this pattern ... generation after generation."

Sheila and Rosa, two student-parent participants in the current study, built their savings. However, their fiscal responsibility and planning for a rainy day caused them to be denied social services funding. Sheila shared that the state in which this study was conducted has a maximum amount that can be in a savings at one time to quality for and to maintain the benefits. She said, "I tried to tell them like I don't make enough to really cover this, please [help me]." Rosa's emergency situation actually occurred when she was diagnosed with breast cancer and had a double mastectomy during the Pandemic. She was denied Medicaid because she had too much money in savings because her friends raised money to help her with medical expenses.

The present study was not congruent with part of the Wilson (2008) study that included challenges with their caseworkers. Participants in the current study shared that they were able to update their income easily when requested by social services and did not report any issues with their caseworkers. In fact, Denise, a participant in the current study, shared that her caseworker helped her with foodbank resources when she lost her SNAP benefits.

The current study is congruent with the Goldrick-Rab (2016) study that asserted that FAFSA is good at determining financial need for those who are in the upper-class, but it can miss students who live near poverty and need more financial assistance. Marsha and Tonya, both participants in the current study, were denied Pell because their household incomes were too high; however, they both have extensive medical bills or ongoing medical expenses that the FAFSA application did not account for. If the FAFSA application asked about existing large debt, such as medical bills, student-parents like Marsha and Tonya may not be overlooked.

The current study also adds to the literature in reference to the FAFSA requirements and reasons for Pell Grant denial. Four of student-parents in this study did not qualify for Pell Grants because they have reached the Federal Pell Grant Lifetime Eligibility Used (LEU). Julie, Denise, Tahir, and Samantha have reached the maximum amount of Federal Pell Grant funding that they can receive over their lifetime. The LEU limits Pell Grant disbursement to no more than 12 terms or the equivalent (roughly six years) (U.S. Department of Education Federal Student Aid, 2021d). Both Julie and Denise had been enrolled in two or more postsecondary institutions over the years and accumulated enough credits to reach the LEU limits. Tahir and Samantha obtained their previous credentials in another country and had never taken a postsecondary course in the U.S. previous to relocating. However, they were both denied Pell because they have a Bachelor's degree from other countries. The number of credits taken in a completely different country were counted and caused them both to reach the LEU limits, even though they have never used U.S. Federal Financial Aid before.

The Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2010) study claimed it is unlikely for student-parents to take out student loans. The current study is not congruent with this research. Sharon, a student-parent participant in this study, shared that she consistently took out student loans during her

many years of postsecondary pursuits and has accrued $70,000 in student loan debt. Chris is

another student-parent in the current study who has thousands of dollars in student loan debt.

Samantha relies on student loans to pay for her postsecondary education because she does not

qualify for Pell Grants due to a previously earned Bachelor's degree in her home country of

Africa. Tonya paid for her current semester out-of-pocket but says this is not sustainable and

plans to apply for student loans for next semester. Amelia borrowed money to pay for her tuition,

fees, books, and childcare.

The current study continues to show that work-life balance challenges, such as financial

struggles, as likely reasons for lack of persistence. However, student-parents' persistence is also

influenced by experiences within the postsecondary institution. This leads to the last section

comparing the findings of the current study with the literature guided by the fourth theme,

Instructor Interaction, Support Services, and Course Delivery Methods are Essential to Student-

Parents' Postsecondary Persistence.

Instructor Interaction, Support Services, and Course Delivery Methods are Essential to

Student-Parents' Postsecondary Persistence

The findings of the current study are congruent with Tinto's (1993; 2017) theory of

student retention which discusses internal influences, or experiences directly within the

postsecondary institution, impact student persistence. He observed four categories that led to

students' lack of persistence toward degree completion: (1) adjustment, (2) difficulty, (3)

incongruence, and (4) isolation (Tinto, 1993). Category explanations and stories of congruency

from the present study follow.

The first of Tinto's (1993) internal categories reveals that *adjustment* to the

postsecondary institution can be challenging, even for the most socially mature students. Making

new friends, navigating the campus, and learning how to be open to other points of view are some of the adjustments students often make. In the current study, Trevor's adjustment was even more challenging because he enrolled in college for the very first time during the Pandemic after losing his job. With the majority of this Community College's classes offered online during the Pandemic and having never been an online learner, Trevor struggled with asynchronous online classes. He also was not familiar with the resources the College offered and how to navigate the ones he found such as financial aid and library resources. The last time he had to do research in a library was in person with the card catalog. He shared that he looks forward to begin face-to-face classes and thinks he will learn better being in person with the instructor and other students. While he says he is slowly getting used to the virtual learning environment, it has been challenging because he had no idea how to use it at first.

The second internal category is *difficulty* that student may encounter on campus either inside or outside of the classroom. Difficulty may include locating resources, finding time to complete assignments and study for exams, or interpersonal interactions with college employees or other students. In the current study, Lucy struggled when her professors just required her to read the textbook and take quizzes. It is difficult for her to learn the material on her own and she earned a D in that class like this previously.

Incongruence, the third internal category, occurs when a student does not feel agreement, balance, and harmony at the postsecondary institution. This is especially true for student-parents who do not feel like the campus is family friendly. Family friendly campuses have intentional plans in place to learn about students who are also parents. Postsecondary institutions should learn about their experiences, collect data, implement best practices, make evidence-based plans to improve the experiences of student-parents, and locate helpful resources in the community

(Oshe & Karp, 2020). Fifty-seven percent of student-parents reported having a negative experience with an instructor who was not sympathetic to their children's needs and were unwilling to make accommodations for them (The Aspen Institute, 2021). This caused them to have to retake the class due to a missed exam or not be able to make up an assignment. They feel singled out for being a parent and perceive the college culture as a whole as not being supportive of student-parents (The Aspen Institute, 2021). There were signs of incongruence with some for the participants in the current study like Madison. She wants instructors to know that if she needs an extension on an assignment, it is not because she is lazy or forgot. Her job can call her into work at the last minute or family obligations with her children take priority and are usually the reason for delays in her assignment completion. After working, meal preparation, household chores, helping her own children with their school work, and all of the other responsibilities of being a parent, she finally has time to complete her assignments after the kids go to bed. She rarely gets eight hours of sleep each night and is exhausted.

Denise had incongruent thoughts of being a low-income student-parent when she had a negative experience with an instructor. She said the instructor seemed disconnected and did not understand the economic struggles that come from living in poverty and returning to school. The instructor was not empathetic and did not understand how she could barely pay for her car and gas to get to campus, much less purchase the additional materials required for class. She wanted empathy from her instructor and for the program to be better organized. If she had known about the additional required program materials, she could have better budgeted this additional expense.

Tinto's (1998) final internal category is *isolation.* A student who experiences isolation inside of the postsecondary institution is less likely to persist. Isolation can occur inside or

outside of the classroom when a person feels lonely and not included by their peers or college employees in the college experience. Even though the student-parents in the current study are currently persisting, they shared feelings of isolation and could be at risk to withdraw or drop out. These stories also align with Jobe et al. (2018) study that stated that since they cannot connect to a peer or faculty member immediately, they may feel detached. Although some shared feeling of isolation in asynchronous online classes, 16 of the 23 student-parents in the current study preferred asynchronous online course delivery. This aligns with the Jobe et al. (2018) study that showed flexible online programs are appealing to busy adult learners. The current study also supports the Strada Education Network (2020) study that showed low-income adult learners value the convenience of course offerings.

Student-parents in the study clearly wanted support from instructors and the rest of the College. They wanted someone to reach out to them to simply see how they were doing. When they stopped attending class they said they may have started attending again if someone from the College had just contacted them. Susan, a current study participant, would like to have regular communication from the college via text, email, or a phone call to see how she is doing personally and educationally. Shannon, another participant in the current study, began attending this Community College after high school but stopped attending class during the second semester when she became pregnant. She said no one at the College reached out to her when she stopped attending to try to get her back on track. She was making good grades before she dropped out but ended up failing all her classes during the second semester. Donna, another student-parent participant, began pursuing a postsecondary credential after high school. She enrolled but never started classes because she discovered she was pregnant with her first child. Like Shannon, no one followed up with Donna to see why she was not attending class.

The current study further supports Tinto's (1993) theory of student retention through positive on-campus interactions that lessened the occurrence of one or more of Tinto's (1993) internal categories. Julie shared, "My professors were awesome ... they were always orderly, efficient, and communicating something back right away... I haven't had a negative experience at this community college." Melanie said professors went above and beyond to make videos and give her additional examples to best understand the material. She said, "I knew every single one of my professors and they are my friends." In fact, before the Pandemic, they let her bring her sisters of whom she has custody to class because she could not afford childcare. Lucy shared that she had one professor that took the time to ask her about her kids and allowed her to have her cell phone in class just in case there was an issue with the kids while she was in class. The professor was understanding if she was not able to arrange childcare and missed class.

The current study is also congruent with Frick et al. (2009) who showed that students want to feel that their time and effort is well spent. There is also alignment with the current study and Tinto's (2017) theory of retention that claims students must believe they are getting a quality education through relevant curriculum to persist. Denise, a participant in the current study, appreciated one of her instructor's approach during lecture and content expertise. The instructor did not simply read from slides but sat with the students in a circle and provided a lot of personal as well as professional experiences to enhance the material. As a result, Denise said she learned a lot from this class and looked forward to taking more.

The current study is also consistent with Tinto's (2006) claims that if faculty focus on their own actions to enhance student education, that retention will increase. Susan, a participant in the current study, shared that one instructor made a video to welcome students to the class. He was compassionate and willing to offer deadline extensions due to life's challenges. He was

genuine and really cared with helped put her at ease and willing to approach him if an issue arose.

The current study expands the scope of Tinto's (2006) enhancing student education to include the manner in which instructors' respond to students outside of the classroom. Donna, a current study participant, shared that she was working ahead in a class and accidentally missed one assignment. When she realized it, she asked her instructor if she could make it up but he said no even though she had never missed any assignments previously. Sharon, another current study participant, did not want extra time on all assignments, but the opportunity to have a little more time if an issue arose like working additional shifts at work or if her children are sick.

Grice and Grice (2007) supported Tinto's retention theories on first-generation, working-class adults who are also postsecondary students and were intimidated by the idea of seeking support from faculty. However, the current study is not congruent with their claims. Student-parents in this study who are also working-class adults, were not intimidated by the idea of seeking support. One participant in the current study, Melanie, advocated for herself in classes when she did not understand the complex material. As a result, her professors went out of their way to make videos and give her additional examples to help her. Donna, another participant, shared that she reached out to her instructors for assignment extensions. They were also very understanding. One instructor told her to turn in her assignments when she could and she would not receive grade penalties for late work. As a result, Donna encourages future student-parents to "... never be afraid to reach out and ask for help."

Student-parents in this present study admitted that they were not always familiar with the multitude of services that this community college provides; however, once they discovered them, they were not hesitant to ask for the support. Melanie needed $300 to pay for the rest of her

textbooks one semester. She had already been awarded Pell Grants but did not hesitate to return to this Community College's Financial Aid Office to plead her case even though she was emotionally distraught and cried during the visit. Fortunately, a financial aid employee was able to find additional funding to cover her books.

<div align="center">**Conclusion of Findings**</div>

Student-parents are trying to balance work, childcare, and their own education. The current study aligns with the literature and showed that these work-life balance challenges are the reasons that 21 of the 23 student-parents in the current study are enrolled part-time and the reason that 15 of them had multiple interruptions in their postsecondary journey, some for decades, with no credential attainment. The lack of affordable and dependable childcare was their number one challenge which also aligns with the current literature. The current study also aligns with the literature that mental health issues are prevalent throughout the student-parent population. The current study showed 18 of student-parent participants in the present study reported having mental health issues and 9 reported being victims of domestic abuse. The stories about their emotional and mental health before and during the Pandemic led to stress, anxiety, isolation, depression, and panic attacks. They need mental health support, but do not have the financial resources to obtain it much less meet their families' basic needs. They feel like they will never get out of poverty and are penalized for trying to improve their lives by saving money, getting a raise, or getting married by loss or reduction of the very benefits that are helping them to provide basic housing, transportation, healthcare, and food for their families.

An exceptional finding in the current study is despite the work-life balance challenges, mental health issues, and financial barriers, student-parents are still trying to earn their postsecondary credential. Even though some of their postsecondary journeys have been decades

long with no credential attainment due to emotional and mental health issues, not getting

accepted into competitive programs, and other work-life balance challenges causing a number of

interruptions in their educational journey, they have not given up their credential attainment.

Discussion

Even though the student-parents in the current study are presently persisting, their

feelings of isolation as well as their history of repeated interruptions in their postsecondary

journeys could put them at risk for withdraw and dropping out again. As mentioned previously,

participants in this study were identified through this Southeastern U.S. community college's

financial aid records because it is the only resource at the College that identifies student-parents.

This yielded 465 student-parent but this begs the question, if only 45% of this Community

College's student population complete the FAFSA, how many more student-parents are

enrolled? Community college leaders cannot effectively support student-parents if they do not

know who they are and how many to serve.

The lack of affordable and dependable childcare was the number one challenge for

student-parents in the current study and aligns with the current literature. With decreasing

enrollment across the nation, community colleges cannot always do what they have always done

to get enrollment. Addressing the childcare needs of student-parents is likely to increase the

number of courses student-parents can take. The student-parents in the current study also

reported they have many friends who are parents that would like to go to college but do not have

the resources to pay for childcare. If the childcare issues were addressed at the community

colleges, enrollment could increase by adding these parents as new students. Credential

attainment leading to better jobs also improves the lives of student-parents and their families

sooner.

The Pandemic added challenges especially to women in the workforce, causing many to lose employment in order to care for and educate their children due to secondary educational institutions transitioning the majority of their learning online. The increase in parental responsibilities as well as other work-life balance challenges are likely to cause more interruptions in student-parents' postsecondary pursuits. This further delays their ability to provide a better life for their families through increased income, health benefits, and to provide for their basic needs. In addition, the current study shows there is a need for mental health support for student-parents. While mental health issues are rising among student-parents in this study, community colleges across the nation are defunding their on-campus mental health counseling centers (Anderson, 2019). I understand that community colleges cannot be everything to everyone; however, student-parents are more likely to attend community colleges and it is unfortunate that the current study supports the IWPR (2020) study findings that community colleges are less likely to offer any student mental health services. Even though community colleges may partner with and refer students to their local Community Services Board (CSB) for mental health services, like the community college in the current study, student-parents most likely do not have the time nor the money to add more travel and childcare expenses to their lists of responsibilities. If the mental health support services were provided at the community college, it would be more probable that student-parents could make this a priority and fit mental health counseling appointments into their tight schedules.

Student-parents in this study have an added burden of being low-income or in the ALICE population. ALICE is an acronym for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed and defines the struggles of households that earn above the Federal Poverty Level, but do not make enough to afford a bare-bones household budget (United Way, 2021). Postsecondary credential

attainment helps end the cycle of poverty which benefits student-parents, their families, and the communities in which they live due to increased economic contributions. There are also positive mental health impacts on student-parents, not to mention the pride of their family, friends, peers, as well as the community college staff, faculty, and administration. However, Pell Grants and social services funding such as SNAP are not enough to cover the cost of tuition, fees, books, basic food needs, housing, transportation, and childcare. Significant improvements in the FASFA process resulted from the Consolidated Appropriations Act (2021) which included important steps to provide emergency aid to students and adjustments to financial aid rules during the Pandemic (Goldrick-Rab & Welton, 2021). However, the issues this Act resolved are not going away just because the Pandemic may one day. Continuation of this Act is needed to help the student-parent population.

Financial barriers reached all areas of their lives including healthcare, basic food needs, childcare, housing, and education. Student-parents in the current study feel like they will never get out of poverty because they are penalized for trying to better their lives or have large medical bills. They lost Medicaid and SNAP when they got a raise, when they married, or when they saved or were gifted too much money. Their large medical debts are not considered in the FAFSA qualifications causing them to be ineligible for Pell Grants. They did not receive good financial counsel when taking out student loans and were not educated how to budget their money and achieve a good credit score. They are swirling in a financial sea of debt in a world of poverty. They need more financial support and guidance to keep from drowning.

The interpersonal interactions with faculty and staff at the postsecondary institution and the course delivery method impact student-parent persistence. The majority of the participants in the current study prefer asynchronous online classes that fit easily into their busy schedules, they

experience feelings of isolation, incongruence, and difficulty as they adjust to postsecondary education which can put them at risk of additional interruptions in their postsecondary journey. They often have multiple jobs and struggle to meet the basic needs of their family such as housing, transportation, food, and childcare. They struggle to balance work, family, and their own education and if one thing goes wrong, like the car breaking down, a sick child, or loss of childcare, they cannot get to campus. They do not have time to find a parking space on campus or meet during in-person office hours. They want consistent interaction with their professors, quick responses to emails, grace every once in a while if it is needed to submit assignment late, empathy and resource options if they do not have enough money to pay for books, childcare, and other basic needs. They want to know that their families are welcome in a family friendly campus environment that supports their postsecondary journey and helps with life's challenges. They want to know that someone cares about them and for college faculty and staff to know how hard they are working to achieve their dreams.

Implications for Practice

The current study provides information about the work-life balance challenges of low-income student-parents and opportunities for community college and other postsecondary leaders to best support and retain this significant student population. Even though these data were collected during the COVID-19 Pandemic which exacerbated some work-life balance issues, these data are applicable beyond the Pandemic and emphasized challenges of student-parents that existed well before the Pandemic that still need to be addressed. Implications for practice for community college leaders and legislators follow.

If the Pandemic taught postsecondary leaders and legislators anything, it was to be ready to pivot. Community college leaders cannot always do what they have always done to help

students to increase their enrollment and revenue. They need to get creative and establish deeper connections and support for students, as the student-parents in the current study crave. Establishing a family friendly campus for students-parents can help accomplish this objective. This comprises identifying student-parents, providing support services including childcare options, implementing flexible class schedules, and providing sensitivity training for faculty and staff regarding the unique challenges of student-parents in order to best support them.

Identify Student-Parents

Community college leaders cannot effectively support student-parents if they do not know who they are and the number of parent leaners on campus. Postsecondary leaders need to identify and track student-parents who are currently enrolled. They also need to gather data on student-parents such as the number of and ages of the children because the resources needed differ for different aged children. Even though the current study of 23 student-parents did not show a difference in needs of support for younger versus older student-parents, community college leaders should gather the age of the student-parents as well since some of the research indicated that younger student-parents were less likely to advocate for themselves and benefited from having older student-parents as mentors.

Financial Support Services

One way to better track students is for community college leaders to require all students to complete the FAFSA. This completion mandate would not only help to better track students, including student-parents, but can help many students understand that even though they may not be eligible for Pell Grants, there are other resources such as G3, FastForward, and scholarships which could pay for most of their tuition, fees, and books expenses. This requirement could be included in the student onboarding guided by an admissions advisor. Another option is to include

a question on the admissions application to determine if the student is a parent. This one question would be less of a barrier to admission. In addition, community college leaders and legislators should also advocate for the continuation of the Consolidated Appropriations Act (2021) which included important steps to provide emergency aid to students during the Pandemic and adjustments to financial aid rules. This Act's significant improvements in the FASFA process should not be taken away when the Pandemic does. Continuation of this Act reduces the amount of time to complete the FAFSA among other barriers.

Low-income adults, like the student-parents in the current study, have grown up in poverty generation after generation and need strategies to pull themselves out of poverty. They need help navigating a complicated financial system to establish good credit because they did not learn about this from their friends, families, or educational system. Community college leaders should consider fiscal education programs to teach adults about credit scores, how to obtain a good score, and how to repair a negative one. Legislators should consider creation and implementation of these programs for everyone who receives financial assistance.

Community college leaders should require their financial aid offices to provide education and guidance to any student before they take out student-loans, like the financial aid office at the community college in the current study does. Students need to know how large future payments may be and how non-payment can negatively impact their credit score. Community college leaders should also teach postsecondary students about Federal Pell Grant Lifetime Eligibility Used (LEU) limits and encourage them to only take the classes they need for program completion. Financial aid policies now require that a student be enrolled in a program that leads to a credential and to only take the courses required in that program. But for the Pell Grant

students who are changing programs and changing postsecondary institutions, they could exceed the LEU limits before they realize it, especially if they do not even know they exist.

Another consideration for legislators is to promote and implement fiscal policies to help student-parents wean off of government assistance. For example, policy consideration to include a grace period when a significant life-event occurs, such as receiving a raise at work or getting married, before a person's social services benefits are reduced or completely taken away. This would give recipients time to save money and adjust to the reduction or loss of benefits. In terms of qualifying for government assistance such as SNAP or Medicaid, consideration should be given to raising the ceiling for savings accounts to promote fiscal best practices and to afford opportunities to save for an emergency situation, such as a car breaking down. Policies like this help student-parents continue to go to school and provide transportation for their families. It alleviates future emergencies from causing another interruption in their postsecondary journey.

Legislators should give consideration to inquiring about one's debts in addition to one's income and assets on applications such as Medicaid and FAFSA. Student-parents in this study have housing, transportation, and childcare expenses that often exceeded their income. They are barely able to provide the essential basic needs of their families, much less paying for large medical bills, which Medicaid could alleviate. In addition, for those who have had a health situation beyond their control, such as Marsha in the current study who was hospitalized for a week due to a challenging child birth or Tonya's double lung transplant due to cystic fibrosis, they should not be denied Pell Grants if they meet all of the other criteria. The application process needs to consider large debts, like these medical bills. In addition, legislators and community college leaders need to continue to allow financial aid offices to increase opportunities for additional funding for students based on their own professional judgement by

advocating for the continuation of the Consolidated Appropriations Act (2021) implemented during the Pandemic.

Legislators should consider making Pell Grants available to individuals who have earned degrees in other countries. If they are paying taxes in the United States and meeting the other eligibility criteria, such as income level, they should have access to Pell Grants since they have never used them in the past. Legislators and postsecondary institutional leaders should also consider smoother pathways in which international degrees can transfer to the United States, so that participants in the current study, Samantha and Tahir, can maintain their credentials as a Medical Doctor and an Engineer respectively as well as transition into a career in the U.S. faster and easier.

It is not enough for community college leaders to simply promote fulltime enrollment to reach earlier degree attainment. The student-parents in the study know that they need to earn a credential and the sooner the better to have a better life for their families. However, the majority still enroll part-time because they have to work to pay for their basic needs. They simply do not have the option of enrolling fulltime. Postsecondary leaders should advocate for and participate in community wide efforts to provide additional financial support for student-parents to help alleviate the cost of childcare, housing, and transportation, and lead to earlier credential attainment faster.

Childcare

Childcare was the number one challenge of student-parents in the current study. Specifically high cost and lack of dependable childcare options, especially since many childcare centers closed during the Pandemic. They often spend their entire paychecks on childcare or they simply cannot afford to pay for it at all leaving them with little time to focus on their college

courses. On-site childcare was their most common suggestion to resolve this issue and to help them persist in their postsecondary journey. Some shared that they just wanted to drop their children off during class and then pick them up. The convenience of this would also enable them to take more on-campus classes which align better with their learning styles and the on-campus course requirements of some programs, especially hands-on labs.

If postsecondary institutions are unable to provide childcare onsite, student-parents in the current study suggested that community college leaders establish partnerships with childcare centers in the community to reserve spots for the children of the student-parents, raise funds to help pay for childcare, and offer childcare scholarships or childcare vouchers to help pay for the expense. It is important to note that these fiscal childcare endeavors cannot count toward the annual income of student-parents because it can lead to a decrease or loss of their social services benefits, such as SNAP and Medicaid.

Mental Health Support Services

Community college leaders need to consider further supporting student-parents' mental health needs. The current study showed that 18 of the student-parents reported having mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, feelings of isolation, and panic attacks. They need coping strategies to process and deal with their challenging life circumstances. They need mental health resources to persist and excel in their postsecondary journey and perform to the best of their abilities. Free on-campus mental health counseling that includes free childcare services during appointment times would contribute to the goal of achieving a family friendly campus. The student-parents in this study who want mental health counseling said they cannot afford the out-of-pocket expense. Providing the mental health and childcare services during appointments for free not only alleviates the expense but provides the convenience to access these services on-

campus. Student-parents could also align their appointments with their busy family schedules. In addition, for postsecondary institutions that can provide on-campus mental health services, the community college leaders need to ensure that the counselors are aware of the unique challenges faced by student-parents in order to best serve them.

Further consideration for postsecondary institutions that are not able to provide mental health services on-campus, is to establish partnerships with community partners, such as the Community Services Board like the community college in the current study does. Community college leaders need to have a process in place for handling different student mental health issues. Then share the plan and educate faculty and staff so that they can best serve students when mental health situations arise.

Additional Support Services

Student-parents in the current study said they were not always aware of all of the services that the community college provided and did not know where to begin looking for them. Consideration for Enrollment Specialists and Deans of Student Services is to provide an introductory video for all new students about the variety of services provided by the college and monthly or weekly campaigns that highlight one service at a time throughout the semester. Student-parents in the current study also reported needing services in the evenings and on weekends when they complete their assignments and take exams after the children go to sleep. Specific requests of services included technology, advising, financial aid, and tutoring. Community college leaders should consider providing services 24 hours a day and 7 days a week services in these areas. The state-wide community college system, of which the community college in the current study resides, already has a service like this for the library. It includes a partnership with libraries across the world where students can get online assistance from a

librarian in real time on any day and at any time. Since the software systems, such as PeopleSoft, and Canvas, in these 23 community colleges are typically the same, the state-wide community college system could share these evening and weekend hours to not overextend existing resources all while providing support for each other. Not knowing the volume of the requests for support, this community college system should consider a pilot program where each of the 23 colleges takes about two weeks a year to provide the coverage for itself and the other remaining 22 sister community colleges. This would help assess the volume of requests as well as peak times when students may need more assistance. Then make adjustments along the way to make this pilot program sustainable. The library's 24/7 services also allow for remote access to a student's computer to help them navigate. This should also be a consideration for these newly suggested 24/7 additional state-wide support services.

Community college leaders should also consider establishing a student-parent support group, a student-parent social media group, and a webpage of available resources, such as childcare. The student-parents in the current study said that these student-parent specific support services would decrease their feelings of isolation and lead to increased persistence toward their postsecondary credential. Many of them do not currently have friends or family members that are also student-parents. They would like the opportunity to provide and seek support, encouragement, and advice to and from other student-parents.

Flexible Class Schedules

Community college leaders need to know that the student-parents in the current study put their families' schedules above their own. Even if the asynchronous courses do not align with their preferred course delivery method, 16 of the student-parents in the current study prefer them due to the flexibility it provides. The current study allowed unique insight into online course

delivery methods and accessibility of support services when the majority of higher education courses and support services moved online due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Enrollment officials should continue to schedule plenty of asynchronous online course offerings like they did during the Pandemic. However, community college instructors should be aware of the feelings of isolation students can feel in asynchronous courses and make sure they have an active presence in the course and continually interact with the students. Instructors should also consider self-recorded videos that show compassion by encouraging students to contact them if they need anything, as well as following up with students who did not attend or stopped attending classes were all important to the student-parents in the current study. Student-parents in the current study especially appreciated videos to welcome them to the class as well as weekly videos, even if the instructor just says hello and introduce them to the assignments of the week.

Sensitivity Training and Advocacy

Although most postsecondary staff, faculty, and administration genuinely want students to succeed and improve their lives, they may not be aware of the unique work-life balance challenges student-parents face. Community college leaders can further their family friendly campus by providing sensitivity training to faculty and staff. For example, teaching faculty the reasons student-parents need their cell phones during class in case a family emergency arises, such as a sick child. They need to know that student-parents are hardworking, have higher GPAs compared to their non-parent peers, sometimes need more time on assignments and should not be penalized if they have to miss class. They are not lazy, they are managing many priorities including their commitment to their postsecondary education. Community college leaders should also have an advocate for low-income student-parents on committees college-wide to establish intentional goals to create and maintain a family friendly campus.

Theoretical Considerations

The findings of the current study could supplement additional future research of internal and external factors which impact student retention. Possible consideration for additional two external factors, *Life's Challenges* and *Postsecondary Interruptions*, and an internal factor, *Support Services*, which influence persistence for student-parents. Despite the motivation to persist, life's challenges lead to interruptions in student-parents academic journey. At some point during the postsecondary interruption, they regain focus of their educational goals and are motivated to persist again. This cycle of external factors can occur many times and is why the current study shows that external factors, by Tinto's (2017) definition are outside of the institutions' control, can reduce persistence just as much, if not more, than internal factors that institutions can control. Additionally, even though external factors occur outside of the postsecondary institution of which they have no control, the institution can implement support services to help students through these challenging issues to avoid the postsecondary interruptions and maintain their persistence.

Recommendations for Further Research

Recommendations for future research include surveying the citizens of the community colleges' service region to see how many parents would like to continue their education but are unable to do so due to work-life balance challenges. This will help the community college identify potential students and implement enrollment strategies and support services for these students all while increasing their enrollment and revenue. Another recommendation for future research is to duplicate this study with student-parents at this community college who are currently enrolled but did not complete the FAFSA. This will require surveying the entire student-body since the only way to identify student-parents is through the FAFSA application.

A third recommendation for future research is after establishing student-parent support groups, survey the student-parent participants to see if it supports the research that older parents often serve as mentors to younger parents and help teach them to advocate for themselves and their families. In addition, through a quantitative study determine if there is correlation between student-parent support group participation and retention. Another consideration for future research is to explore *Life's Challenges* and *Postsecondary Interruptions* as a possible external factor, and *Support Services* as a potential internal factor of Tinto's (2017) model of student retention. Perhaps a study that focuses on the internal support services that a postsecondary institution provides and how it impacts retention of adult students.

Conclusion

Student-parents are trying to balance work, childcare, and their own education. These work-life balance challenges are the reasons that the majority of the student-parents are enrolled part-time and have multiple interruptions in their postsecondary journeys, some for decades, with no credential attainment. The lack of affordable and dependable childcare was their number one challenge while trying to earn a credential. Mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, and panic attacks are prevalent throughout the student-parent population. Their emotional and mental health issues were exacerbated by the Pandemic and they need mental health support. However, they do not have the financial resources to obtain this support much less meet their families' basic needs. They feel like they will never get out of poverty and are penalized for trying to improve their lives by saving money, getting a raise, or getting married which causes loss or reduction of the very benefits that are helping them to provide basic housing, transportation, healthcare, and food for their families.

Legislators and community college leaders can do more to support student-parents. Legislators should consider grace periods before benefits are reduced or lost due to an increase in the household income. They should also use these data to promote continue the Consolidation Appropriations Act (2021) beyond the Pandemic as it resolved issues with the FAFSA and SNAP exacerbated by the Pandemic, but that existed previously and were not addressed. Community college leaders should offer a variety of asynchronous courses since the majority of student-parents in the current study said they need them in order to persist and accommodate their busy schedules. Community college leaders also need to establish a family friendly campus through sensitivity training, and provide more support services, such as childcare and mental health support. Together we can help end the cycle of poverty and improve the lives of student-parents, their families, and our communities.

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Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Letter

Hi [First Name of student],

There's very little in life that's harder than attending college while also being a parent. Growing up with a single mom that worked two jobs to provide for me and my siblings, I saw this struggle firsthand. Now, I'm back in college as a parent myself, being reminded firsthand of the challenges that students who are parents face. In short, you are amazing and I admire you!

My personal journey has made me passionate about helping students who are also parents have the best experience possible at the community college. Will you help me? All you need to do is share your story with me. Our conversations will be on Zoom and will remain anonymous. We would meet three times over the next few months for about 45 minutes each. I'm happy to meet you on Zoom any day or time that works best for you.

If you think you might be interested, please enter your name and email address below and I'll contact you with more information. I look forward to meeting you on Zoom and learning how the community college can best help you get where you want to be! Thanks for considering!

Appendix B

Old Dominion University Education Human Subjects Review Committee Exempt

OFFICE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT FOR RESEARCH

Physical Address
4111 Monarch Way, Suite 203
Norfolk, Virginia 23508
Mailing Address
Office of Research
1 Old Dominion University
Norfolk, Virginia 23529
Phone(757) 683-3460
Fax(757) 683-5902

DATE: August 25, 2021

TO: Mitchell Williams
FROM: Old Dominion University Education Human Subjects Review Committee

PROJECT TITLE: [1792068-1] The Family, Financial, and Educational Experiences of Low-Income Student-Parents at a Community College During the Coronavirus (Covid-19) Pandemic
REFERENCE #:
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE:

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category #2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Old Dominion University Education Human Subjects Review Committee has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

If you have any questions, please contact John Baaki at (757) 683-5491 or jbaaki@odu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Old Dominion University Education Human Subjects Review Committee's records.

Appendix C

Approval from a Community College's Internal Review Board

RRC Summary Form

Date submitted to OIRE: _____ 1/25/21 _____

Date reviewed by RRC: _____ 2/8/21 _____

Low-Income Student-Parents' Experiences while Pursuing a Post-Secondary Degree, Certificate, or Workforce Credential at Blue Ridge Community College before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic

After review, the RRC finds that the submitted project _x_ does __ does not meet federal guidelines. (If the submitted project does not meet the federal guidelines please outline reasons below)

Additional concerns/comments: _____ Had some concern about the title when read by potential participants in the study; while Student-Parent is the term used in research, it was confusing to us and think it will be to students. Perhaps Low-income Parents as Students. Parameters for working with OIRE and some questions/thoughts from the committee are attached.
Director of Financial Aid will work with the researcher to develop the criteria for identifying students for Director of OIRE to send an invitation to participate in the research.

The RRC _x_ recommends __ does not recommend the approval of this project.

Susan E Crosby _____ 2/8/21 _____
RRC Chairperson   Date

The Vice President _✓_ recommends __ does not recommend the approval of this project.

_____ _____ 2/8/21 _____
Vice President of Instruction and Student Services   Date

Date investigator informed of final action: _____ 2/8/21 _____

Protocol Number: _____ 21-6Jarboe _____

Appendix D

Old Dominion University's Informed Consent Document

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY

PROJECT TITLE: Low-Income Student-Parents' Experiences while Pursuing a Post-Secondary Degree, Certificate, or Workforce Credential at a community college before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic

INTRODUCTION

The purposes of this form are to give you information that may affect your decision whether to say YES or NO to participation in this research, and to record the consent of those who say YES. The title of this research project is Low-Income Student-Parents' Experiences while Pursuing a Post-Secondary Degree, Certificate, or Workforce Credential at a community college before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Data for the study will be collected via your student academic and financial records at a community college and a three interview process. During the first interview, the researcher will ask about your educational, financial, and family related experiences in the context of your life before the COVID-19 Pandemic. The purpose of the second interview is to focus on the concrete details of your present-lived educational, financial, and family related experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic. During the third interview, the researcher will ask you to reflect on the meaning of the experiences discussed in the second interview.

RESEARCHERS

Responsible Principal Investigator: Dr. Mitchell Williams, Associate Professor, Darden
College of Education and Professional Studies, Community College Leadership

Investigator/Researcher: Marlena Jarboe, PhD Candidate, Darden College of Education
and Professional Studies, Community College Leadership

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH STUDY

If you decide to participate, then you will join a study involving research about how the
Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic is impacting low-income student-parents'
experiences as they pursue a postsecondary degree, certificate, or workforce credential
at the community college. If you say YES, then your participation will last for no more
than three hours through video-conferencing (Zoom). Approximately 30 low-income
student-parents enrolled at a community college (the community college) in Weyers
Cave, Virginia, will be participating in this study.

EXCLUSIONARY CRITERIA

You should be seeking a degree, certificate, or workforce credential at a community
college (the community college) in Weyers Cave, Virginia. You should have at least one
dependent child aged birth to 18 years. You must be eligible for Federal Student Aid
(FAFSA) or the community college Workforce Aid. You should not be less than 18 years
of age, as that would keep you from participating in this study.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

RISKS: If you decide to participate in this study, then you may face a risk of encountering unpleasant memories of your familial, financial, or educational experiences before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The researchers will try to reduce these risks by providing a safe space during interviews and by listening with unconditional positive regard. And, as with any research, there is some possibility that you may be subject to risks that have not yet been identified.

BENEFITS: The main benefit to you for participating in this study is the opportunity to process the impact that the COVID-19 Pandemic has had on your familial, financial, or educational experiences. The data collected from this research will help community college leaders and legislators to better understand your experiences so that they can best support you, and student-parents like you, in the future.

COSTS AND PAYMENTS

The researchers are unable to give you any payment for participating in this study.

NEW INFORMATION

If the researchers find new information during this study that would reasonably change your decision about participating, then they will give it to you.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The researchers will take reasonable steps to keep private information, such as your academic and financial student records from the community college. The researcher will remove identifiers from all identifiable private information collected. Data will be stored for up to five years in a locked, private office, or alternative protected space, of the researchers. In addition, electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer to which only the researchers have access. After five years, digital audio files will be destroyed. Only researchers approved as PIs or co-PIs on this study will have access to the data. Identifiers will be removed, and the de-identified information used for future research without additional informed consent from the participant. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications; but the researcher will not identify you. Your records may be subpoenaed by court order or inspected by government bodies with oversight authority.

WITHDRAWAL PRIVILEGE

It is OK for you to say NO. Even if you say YES now, you are free to say NO later, and walk away or withdraw from the study -- at any time. Your decision will not affect your relationship with Old Dominion University, or otherwise cause a loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled.

COMPENSATION FOR ILLNESS AND INJURY

If you say YES, then your consent in this document does not waive any of your legal rights. However, in the event of harm arising from this study, neither Old Dominion University nor the researchers are able to give you any money, insurance coverage, free

medical care, or any other compensation for such injury. In the event that you suffer injury as a result of participation in any research project, you may contact Dr. Mitchell Williams, the principal investigator for this study, at (757) 683-4344 or mrwillia@odu.edu, Laura Chezan, the current chair of the Darden College of Education and Professional Studies Human Subjects Review Committee at 757-683-7055 or lchezan@odu.edu, and current IRB chair at Old Dominion University, or the Old Dominion University Office of Research at 757-683-3460 who will be glad to review the matter with you.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT

By signing this form, you are saying several things. You are saying that you have read this form or have had it read to you, that you are satisfied that you understand this form, the research study, and its risks and benefits. The researchers should have answered any questions you may have had about the research. If you have any questions later on, then the researchers should be able to answer them:

Dr. Mitchell Williams, (757) 683-4344

Marlena Jarboe, (540) 578-5369

If at any time you feel pressured to participate, or if you have any questions about your rights or this form, then you should call Dr. Laura Chezan, the current IRB chair, at 757-683-7055, or the Old Dominion University Office of Research, at 757-683-3460.

And importantly, by signing below, you are telling the researcher YES, that you agree to participate in this study. The researcher should give you a copy of this form for your records.

Subject's Printed Name & Signature	**Date**

INVESTIGATOR'S STATEMENT

I certify that I have explained to this subject the nature and purpose of this research, including benefits, risks, costs, and any experimental procedures. I have described the rights and protections afforded to human subjects and have done nothing to pressure, coerce, or falsely entice this subject into participating. I am aware of my obligations under state and federal laws and promise compliance. I have answered the subject's questions and have encouraged him/her to ask additional questions at any time during the course of this study. I have witnessed the above signature(s) on this consent form.

Investigator's Printed Name & Signature	**Date**

Appendix E

Follow-up Email to Potential Participants

Hi [Student's First Name],

You are a super star! Going to school all while being a parent! I admire you and want to learn more about your journey. I can talk to you over the phone or on your digital device. All we need to do is set up a time that works for your schedule. I'll explain more about our meetings together and if you are willing, we will do the first interview. This will take 20- 45 minutes. Can you send me any/all dates and times that work best for you over the next two weeks (any day of the week, any time of day – truly whenever it works for you)? It would be great if you can be in a quiet comfortable environment free of distractions, but, if you can't, that's ok too. I look forward to meeting with you!

-Marlena Jarboe

Appendix F

First Interview Protocol

EXPERIENCES OF LOW-INCOME STUDENT-PARENTS AT A COMMUNITY

COLLEGE DURING THE CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) PANDEMIC

Thank the participant for taking the time to participate in the interview. Explain that the

interview will be video recorded with their permission, but in transcription and analysis of their

responses will be anonymized. Explain that the purpose of this study is explore the family,

financial, and educational experiences of low-income student-parents as they persist toward a

postsecondary credential at a community college during the Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Pandemic.

Interview One: Focused life history before the COVID-19 Pandemic

1. Tell me about you. Probing questions as needed: Age? Culture/ethnic background? Preferred pronouns? Preferred name?
2. Tell me about your family experiences before the COVID-19 Pandemic. Probing questions as needed: Daily routine? Marital status? Children? Childcare? Household chores? Meal preparation? Support?
3. Tell me about your family's financial situation before the COVID-19 Pandemic. Probing questions as needed: Did you have a full-time or part-time job(s)? Salary/wage? Did your partner have a full-time or part-time job(s)? Salary/wage? Housing? Food security? Challenges? How did you pay for your tuition and course materials? Financial Aid? Pell? Government assistance? Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)? Medicaid? Unemployment Insurance? Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)?
4. Tell me about your physical and mental health before the COVID-19 Pandemic. Probing questions as needed: Exercise? Weight? Stress? Depression? Suicidal thoughts? Suicidal attempts? Mental health counseling? Medication? Supplements?
5. Tell me about your educational history and why you chose to attend a community college.
6. Tell me about your academic experiences at the community college before the COVID-19 Pandemic. Probing questions as needed: What program(s) were you enrolled in? How many courses completed? How many semesters enrolled? What were the delivery methods of each class (face-to-face, hybrid, synchronous online, asynchronous online)? Interactions with your peers and the community college employees (faculty, staff, administration)? Grades – any withdraws or incompletes? Strengths? Challenges?

7. Tell me about your experiences with the community college's support services during your pursuit of a postsecondary credential before the COVID-19 Pandemic. Probing questions as needed: Financial aid? Tutoring?
8. Tell me about what motivates you to pursue a college degree, certificate, or workforce credential before the COVID-19 Pandemic. Probing questions as needed: Financial stability? Career switcher? Encouragement from family and friends? How do your kids feel about you going back to school?
9. Is there anything about your family, financial, or educational experiences before the COVID-19 Pandemic that I have not asked you about that you would like to share?

Conclude the interview by thanking the participants for their time and insightful responses.

Mention that I will send a transcript of each interview to them for member checking, and

encourage them to provide any additional insights via email.

Appendix G

Second Interview Protocol

EXPERIENCES OF LOW-INCOME STUDENT-PARENTS AT A COMMUNITY

COLLEGE DURING THE CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) PANDEMIC

Thank the participant for taking the time to participate in the interview. Explain that the

interview will be video recorded with their permission, but in transcription and analysis of their

responses will be anonymized. Explain that the purpose of this study is explore the family,

financial, and educational experiences of low-income student-parents as they persist toward a

postsecondary credential at a community college during the Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Pandemic.

Interview Two: The Details of Lived Experience during the COVID-19 Pandemic

1. Tell me about your family experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Probing questions as needed: Daily routine? Marital status? Children? Childcare? Household chores? Meal preparation? Support?
2. Tell me about your family's financial situation during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Probing questions as needed: Do you have a full-time or part-time job(s)? Salary/wage? Did your partner have a full-time or part-time job(s)? Salary/wage? Housing? Food security? Challenges? How did you pay for your tuition and course materials? REV? Covid-19 funding? Financial Aid? Pell? Government assistance? Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)? Medicaid? Unemployment Insurance? Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)?
3. Tell me about your physical and mental health during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Probing questions as needed: Exercise? Weight? Stress? Depression? Suicidal thoughts? Suicidal attempts? Mental health counseling? Other challenges? Any improvements?
4. Tell me about your academic experiences at the community college during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Probing questions as needed: Are you enrolled in the same program(s) you were enrolled in before COVID-19? Are you taking the same amount of courses? Have you been enrolled consistently or did you take time off? What were the delivery methods of each class (face-to-face, hybrid, synchronous online, asynchronous online)? Interactions with your peers and the community college employees (faculty, staff, administration)? Grades – any withdraws or incompletes? Strengths? Challenges?

5. Tell me about your experiences with the community college's support services during your pursuit of a postsecondary credential during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Probing questions as needed: Financial aid? Tutoring?
6. Tell me about what motivates you to continue to pursue a postsecondary credential during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Probing questions as needed: Financial stability? Career switcher? Encouragement from family and friends?
7. Is there anything about your family, financial, or educational experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic that I have not asked you about that you would like to share?

Conclude the interview by thanking the participants for their time and insightful responses. Mention that I will send a transcript of the interview to them for member checking, and encourage them to provide any additional i

Appendix H

Third Interview Protocol

EXPERIENCES OF LOW-INCOME STUDENT-PARENTS AT A COMMUNITY

COLLEGE DURING THE CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) PANDEMIC

Thank the participant for taking the time to participate in the interview. Explain that the

interview will be video recorded with their permission, but in transcription and analysis of their

responses will be anonymized. Explain that the purpose of this study is explore the family,

financial, and educational experiences of low-income student-parents as they persist toward a

postsecondary credential at a community college during the Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Pandemic.

Interview Three: Reflections of experiences from the first and second interviews and share

ideas for ways to improve the student-parent experience with community college

instructors and leaders as well as legislators.

1. Reflecting on your family, financial, and educational experiences before and during the COVID Pandemic, what is your main challenge? If you could go back in time and do anything differently, what would that be?

2. What advice would you give other parents who are pursuing a community college credential in terms of their family, financial, and educational obligations? Probing questions: About their physical and mental health? Motivation for pursuing a postsecondary credential? To persist taking courses next semester? Obtaining financial assistance (FAFSA, Pell Grant, Scholarships, WIC, TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, financial aid, unemployment)? What type of courses to take? Childcare? Seeking educational assistance (tutors, relationship with peers and faculty, support groups, study groups)?

3. What advice would you give to instructors who have student-parents in their class?

4. What suggestions do you have for community college leaders and legislators related to your family, financial, and educational experiences before and during the COVID Pandemic? Probing questions: About support for your physical and mental health? What they could do to further motivate you to pursue and persist toward completion of a

postsecondary credential? Obtaining financial assistance (FAFSA, Pell Grant, Scholarships, WIC, TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, financial aid, unemployment)? What type of courses to offer? Childcare? Seeking educational assistance/support (tutors, relationship with peers and faculty, support groups, study groups)?

5. Is there anything else that you would like to share with other student-parents, community college leaders, or legislators about being a low-income student-parent pursuing a postsecondary credential before and during the COVID Pandemic?

Conclude the interview by thanking the participants for their time and insightful responses.

Mention that I will send a transcript of the interview to them for member checking, and

encourage them to provide any additional insights via email.

VITA

MARLENA YVONNE JARBOE

Old Dominion University
Darden College of Education, 120 Education Building
Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership
Norfolk, VA 23529

EDUCATION

Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia
Ph.D. in Community College Leadership 12/2021

Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida
Master of Science in Computing Technology in Education 07/2007
    Upsilon Pi Epsilon Honor Society Member in Computing and Information Disciplines

James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia
Bachelor of Business Administration in Computer Information Systems 12/1998
    Golden Key National Honor Society Member

HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE

Blue Ridge Community College, Weyers Cave, Virginia

Dean of Academic Affairs	5/2016-present
Interim-Dean of Mathematics, Physical Sciences and Technology	1/2015-6/2016
Program Coordinator of Information Systems Technology (IST)	8/2013-1/2015
Associate Professor IST	4/2013-1/2015
Assistant Professor IST	5/2009-4/2013
Instructor IST	8/2007-5/2009
Adjunct Instructor IST	1/2002-7/2007
Continuing Education Instructor – Microsoft Office	6/2004 & 2/2007-7/2007

James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia

Adjunct Instructor – College of Business	07/2012-05/2016

AWARDS & SERVICES

Virginia Network Senior Leadership Seminar, American Council on Education	2019-Present
Chancellor's Leadership Academy, Virginia Community College System	2016
Council of Deans and Directors, Virginia Community College System	2015-present
BRCC Dream Big Award $3000	2014
VCCS New Horizons Excellence in Education – Improving Student Success	2012
Blue Ridge Community College SCHEV Faculty Rising Star Award	2011