

A Qualitative Study of Low-Income Single Student
Mothers' Experiences and Perceptions at Two Pennsylvania Community Colleges

By

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Higher Education Administration and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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Date Approved: 28 March 2018

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of low-income single-mothers attending two community colleges in Pennsylvania recognized by the Institute for Women's Policy Research as being supportive of student parents. Specifically, this study sought a deeper understanding of the experiences and perceptions of low-income single student mothers at two community colleges in Pennsylvania through the following research questions: What personal resources, such as motivation, contribute to their postsecondary pursuits? What institutional programs, policies, or practices do they perceive as being helpful in their pursuits, or serve as barriers? What broader societal factors, such as federal or state policies and programs, are helpful, or serve as barriers in their postsecondary pursuits?

Through a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews, I explored twenty low-income single student mother's experiences at two Pennsylvania community colleges recognized as being supportive of student parents. Several themes emerged from the data. First, low-income single student mothers pursued their postsecondary education in hopes of providing a better life for their children. Second, their children posed barriers to their education, but were also a source of inspiration and motivation for their postsecondary pursuits. Third, the participants in this study created support networks, often through the institution. Finally, for the women in this study, public assistance and financial aid were two necessary, but not coveted, tools in their quest to earn their degree. Additionally, most of the women in this study were part of a state-funded program to help student parents complete their associates degree. This program served as a comprehensive support program at the both institutions and contributed to the persistence of the low-income single student mothers. Several recommendations for future research, practice, and policy also emerged.

Acknowledgements

My journey to my doctorate degree has been a great and ambitious adventure, and it would not have been possible without my faculty, family, and friends. The journey has been intense and influential both academically and personally, and I would like to reflect and acknowledge those who have played pertinent roles.

I would first like to thank my faculty. Thank you for providing an engaging classroom where I could truly learn and apply the theories and concepts that are now so important in my career. Thank you for challenging me, supporting me, and guiding me through this journey.

I would like to give special thanks to my advisor and chair. Thank you for your guidance, honesty, expectations, and for being a role model. Through your example, I knew it was possible to carry multiple roles- worker, mother, student, etc. I appreciate the time, guidance, critique, and energy you have given me more than you know!

To my colleagues, both in my program and in my professional career, thank you for pushing me and helping me persist. I am so grateful for your support, empathetic ear, your review of my work, and our brainstorming sessions.

Finally, to my family, all my love and gratitude. To my husband who held down the fort, so I could work and go to school. To my mother who stepped in as another parental figure when I needed to go to class, study, research, and write, and to my father who always listened, pushed, and believed in me, I am so grateful and appreciative. Finally, to my babies, Ariel and A.J.- you two are my world, and my everything. Thank you for being my inspiration and motivation.

Contents

Chapter 1	8
Introduction and Background	8
Theoretical Framework	10
Research Site Selection	12
Research Site Institutional Profiles	14
Significance of Study	16
Organization of the Dissertation	18
Chapter Two.....	19
Literature Review.....	19
Introduction	19
Theoretical Framework	20
Low-Income Undergraduate Single Student Mothers.....	24
The Individual- Single Student Mothers	24
The Mesosystem and Microsystem: Various Environments for Single Student Mothers.....	29
The Exosystem: The Policy Context for Single-mothers	37
The Macrosystem: Single-motherhood in the United States.....	40
Chapter Three.....	44
Methodology.....	44
Research Questions	44
Research Design.....	45
Research Sites.....	47
Participants	51
Interview Protocol	54
Role of the Researcher	56
Pilot Study.....	57
Data Collection Procedures.....	57
Institutional Review Board.....	57
Participant Recruitment	58
Interview Setting.....	59

Semi-Structured Interviews	60
Research Site Visit.....	60
Data Analysis	61
Validity and Reliability	62
Limitations of Study.....	63
Chapter Four	65
Results.....	65
Introduction	65
Personal Resources.....	66
The Desire for a Better Life.....	66
Time Management and Organization	68
Self-Care.....	70
Support Systems, Supportive Others, and Campus Supports	72
The Admissions and Enrollment Process	72
Financial Aid	73
KEYS.....	74
Building Support Networks.....	76
ACT 101.....	77
Campus Resources.....	78
The Societal Factors	81
Public Assistance Programs.....	82
Federal and State Educational Programs	86
Summary	87
Chapter Five.....	88
Discussion and Conclusion.....	88
Significant Findings	88
A Different Picture of the Low-Income Single Student Mother	88
Power in the Mother-Child Relationship.....	90
Support Systems, Supportive Others, and Support Programs	90
The Policy Context.....	93

Public Assistance from the Emotional Perspective	93
Public Assistance from the Transactional Perspective	94
Financial Aid	94
Emergency Assistance Funds	95
The KEYS Program and the Environment.....	96
The Environment and Single Student Mothers	98
Macrosystem.....	100
Exosystem.....	101
Microsystem and Mesosystem.....	101
Implications for Practice	102
Implications for Policy	106
Recommendations for Research.....	110
Conclusion.....	112
References.....	114
Appendix A.....	122
Single Student Mother Demographic Survey	122
Appendix B	123
Interview Protocol.....	123
Appendix C	126
Recruitment Flyer	126

Chapter 1

Introduction and Background

Higher education is a catalyst for change and economic mobility, and it is viewed by many as a public good (Kezar, Chambers, & Burkhardt, 2005). Specifically, postsecondary education promotes family stability, higher aspirations for future generations, and is a pathway of escape from poverty (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Pandey, Zhan & Kim, 2006; Zhan & Pandey, 2004a; 2004b). The promise of economic mobility and other benefits of postsecondary education propel nontraditional students back to school (NCES, 2016). Nontraditional students are defined as postsecondary students who do not start higher education immediately after high school, have not earned a high school diploma, attend postsecondary education part-time, are financially independent, work more than part-time, and/or have dependents (NCES, 2002). Nontraditional students are increasing in number on American college campuses, but unfortunately, many colleges remain unprepared for them (Kezar et al., 2005; NCES, 2016).

The traditional model of American higher education was originally designed for elite, white men who could focus almost exclusively on their studies and spend most of their time and energy immersed in the college community, i.e., traditional students (Kezar et al., 2005; Lucas, 2006; Toma & Kezar, 1999). While the current system of postsecondary education was modeled for traditional students, nontraditional students now outnumber traditional students on contemporary college campuses. Despite their numbers, many nontraditional students struggle with navigating and succeeding in postsecondary institutions that were not designed with them in mind (Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Navigating the higher education environment can be particularly challenging for an important subpopulation of nontraditional students: single-mothers. In the United States, there

are approximately 3.4 million undergraduate student mothers, and almost 60% of them are single-mothers (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds, & Froehner, 2014). Single-mothers are attending college at higher rates than ever before, but many of them face barriers in college success and completion (Huelsman & Engle, 2013; Nelson, Froehner, & Gault, 2013). When it comes to completing a degree at a two-year college within six years, about a quarter of students who are parents completed their degrees (26.2%), while over a third of students who were dependent on their parents for financial support completed their degrees (38.9%) (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2015). Even more concerning, over half of students who have children (in other words, student parents) left their two-year college with no degree within six years of starting (Reichlin, 2015). Experiencing low-income conditions intensifies the challenges student parents face in college, thus student parents are 25% less likely to obtain their degrees than low-income students who are not parents (Nelson et al., 2013). Seventy-eight percent of undergraduate single-mothers are low-income, thus risk factors and barriers low-income single-mothers experience in postsecondary access and completion are significant for their subpopulation. While the numbers of single-mothers attending postsecondary education are increasing, especially on community college campuses, their persistence and completion rates are not (Nelson et al., 2013). It is important for college administrators, faculty, staff, and other students to gain a deeper understanding of low-income single-mothers' experiences and how the institutions that are considered to be most supportive of this population have either helped or inhibited their intentions to continue to degree completion.

Purpose of the Study

The community college is the point of access into higher education for many nontraditional students, especially single-mothers (NCES, 2016). Some community colleges are

implementing practices, collaborating with community resources, and revising policies to better serve student parents, especially single-mothers (Schumacher, 2013). The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of a group of low-income single-mothers attending two community colleges in Pennsylvania recognized by the Institute for Women's Policy Research as being supportive of student parents. This qualitative study focused on low-income single student mothers who had children under the age of 18, who were currently enrolled for at least six credit hours at these two institutions, were eligible for either the KEYS program or who had an estimated family contribution that allowed for the awarding of the full Pell grant, and who planned on enrolling or graduating the following semester. The following questions guided the study:

- How do these single-mothers experience and perceive their postsecondary education pursuits?
 - a. What personal resources, such as motivation, contribute to their continued postsecondary pursuits?
 - b. What institutional programs, policies, or practices do they perceive as being helpful in their pursuits, or serve as barriers?
 - c. What broader societal factors, such as federal or state policies and programs, are helpful, or serve as barriers in their postsecondary pursuits?

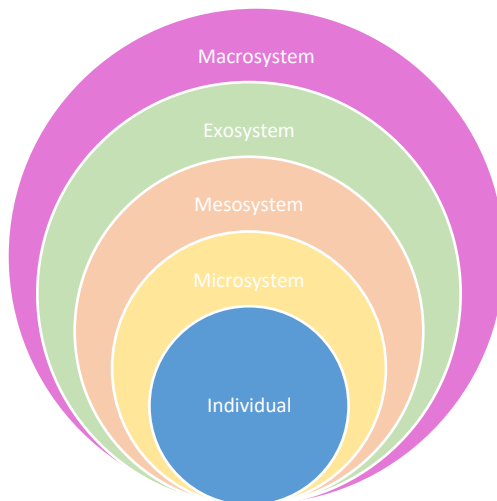
Theoretical Framework

This study used Bronfenbrenner's (1979) human ecology model as a lens through which to explore the experiences of low-income single student mothers in the context of these two community colleges. The human ecology model is referred to as the person-process-context-time (PPCT) theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). At the heart of the theory are two critical

assumptions that lend themselves to gaining a better understanding of low-income single student mothers' experiences in postsecondary education. The first is the assumption that people and their environments are inseparable. The second is that change, or development, occurs through interactions with one's environment. Further, Bronfenbrenner (2005) asserts that individuals influence their environments just as their environments influence them, and that the connections, or interactions, across an individual's environment will shape his or her behavior (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012). A systems approach, such as Bronfenbrenner's (1979) PPCT theory, permits the investigation of multiple interactions and their influences simultaneously, thereby allowing a deeper understanding of how single student mothers perceive their experiences, and subsequent choices, in postsecondary education (Arnold et al, 2012).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) human ecology model is comprised of several environmental contexts (Figure 1). Individuals experience these environmental contexts throughout their lives. Individuals grow and change through direct interactions with people, objects, or symbols; this growth is known as a proximal process. Throughout any given day, an individual may experience multiple people, roles, and settings, i.e., microsystems, and the connections among them are known as the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The exosystem encompasses the contexts in which the individual may not be present, but that influence them, whereas the macrosystem encompasses the broader culture and ideology (Arnold et al., 2012).

Figure 1

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Human Ecology Model

While Chapter Two provides a more complete description of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) human ecology model, it is important to note that Bronfenbrenner (1979) believed that context, or the environment, matters to the development of individuals. As such, the decision to have two different environments (i.e. two different research sites) allows for deeper investigation into how different environments, although both noted for their resources for student parents, influence the single student mother's experience (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Research Site Selection

The following institutions were selected as research sites because they were recognized by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) as being supportive environments for student parents. These particular institutions were listed on the IWPR Student Parent Success Initiative website as institutions with resources for student parents in Pennsylvania. Further, both

institutions had programs and practices that the literature supports as being helpful to single-mothers' postsecondary pursuits.

The IWPR was founded in 1987 to conduct and disseminate research addressing the needs of women. IWPR has five major initiatives: Employment, Education, and Economic Change; Democracy and Society; Poverty, Welfare and Income Security; Work and Family; and Health and Safety (IWPR, 2010). Under the Employment, Education, and Economic Change Initiative, IWPR has created the Student Parent Success Initiative (SPSI). In affiliation with George Washington University and through grant funding, contributions from organizations and individuals, SPSI's focus is to support student parents through their education. Through conducting and commissioning research on student parent success, developing toolkits, trainings, and other materials for practical use regarding student parents, and networking and educating practitioners, policymakers, and communities, SPSI hopes to increase the public's knowledge of the need for student parent resources, improve policies so that they encourage postsecondary access and completion, and increase the knowledge of successful student parent programs among postsecondary institutions for replication (SPSI, 2010). One of the ways that the SPSI assists with sharing knowledge and successful strategies at postsecondary institutions is through their Student Parent Resource Finder. The target demographic for this tool is student parents themselves, but is also useful to practitioners. Through the SPSI, the Student Parent Resource Finder allows postsecondary institutions to submit their programs and/or resources for review and subsequent posting by the IWPR. As a part of the SPSI, Schumacher (2015) examined the programs and strategies that student parents used for success in their postsecondary experiences. Schumacher (2015) reported specific institutions that had best practices in supporting student parents. Across the 144 total programs reviewed, several community colleges were highlighted

by the SPSI as having resources that are beneficial to student parents (SPSI, 2010), and the two research sites chosen for this dissertation were the only two community colleges located in Pennsylvania.

Research Site Institutional Profiles

Montgomery County Community College and Northampton Community College are public community colleges in Pennsylvania. Both institutions have diverse student bodies with enrollments of over 10,000 students, and they have been recognized IWPR for their various programs for student parents, including childcare, financial support, and advising and counseling. Additionally, both community colleges participate in state programs that assist academically or financially disadvantaged students. One program is the Pennsylvania Keystone Education Yields Success (KEYS) program, which assists parents receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (food stamps) benefits who are in certificate or degree programs at Pennsylvania's 14 community colleges, and self-initiate enrollment (Bone, 2010). The KEYS program and the community colleges recognize that a student's program of study typically will not be completed in timeframes applicable to full-time students due to TANF/SNAP recipients' obligation to work at least part-time (Bone, 2010). The KEYS programs offer a range of resources to student parents, and it is implemented in various ways across the state's community colleges. The KEYS program provides funding for each institution to set up a KEYS office comprised of at least once facilitator and administrative support person. Each community college chooses how to implement the KEYS office within their organizational structure. The two community colleges in this study implemented KEYS into their student services or student affairs departments. At these institutions, the KEYS program serves as comprehensive support program to student

parents, especially low-income single-mothers. Other programs for low-income students offered at the state level include ACT 101 and the PHEAA grant, a state grant for those who have financial need. ACT 101 targets academically and financially disadvantaged students and offers additional academic support (PHEAA Funding Opportunities, 2016).

Montgomery County Community College. Montgomery County Community College (MC3), located outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was founded in 1964, and offers over 100 degrees in 44 areas of study (MC3, 2016). MC3's mission is to provide a high quality, affordable, and accessible education that leads to relevant, rewarding, transfer and career opportunities. The college is funded through the state, county, local school districts, student tuition, donations, and grants (MC3, 2016).

MC3 has 190 full-time faculty who serve approximately 10,000 students annually (MC3, 2016). MC3's student body is diverse with 60% of its student body identifying as female, and 27% of its students coming from racial and ethnically underrepresented populations. MC3's fall-to-spring persistence rate is 71% (MC3, 2016). MC3 is known across the state as one of the most technologically advanced community colleges, which is evident by their multiple online student services, including a mobile application (MC3, 2016). In addition to the "high tech" approach, MC3 also offers various student success resources, including several outreach programs for students who may be at risk for stopping/dropping out and not completing. In addition to ACT 101 and KEYS, these outreach programs include TRIO, a federal program focused on low-income and first-generation college students, POWER, a program focused on students who are in mental health recovery, the Minority Student Mentoring Initiative, and First Year Experience Initiative (MC3, 2016). The outreach programs work in collaboration with student services and the faculty to help provide support to students both in curricular and co-

curricular activities (MC3, 2016). MC3 also has an on-campus childcare center as well as financial assistance for student parents, particularly single-mothers.

Northampton Community College. Northampton Community College (NCC) is located 90 miles west of New York City and 60 miles north of Philadelphia, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. NCC was founded in 1967 and seeks to provide excellent, accessible, and comprehensive learning experiences in partnership with the dynamic, diverse, communities it serves (NCC, 2016). NCC offers over 100 degree and certificate programs and boasts the most diverse student body in the region. In the Fall of 2015, NCC served over ten thousand students, and 37.7% were from underrepresented backgrounds (NCC, 2016).

NCC is funded through the state, county, school districts, student tuition, and donation and grants. Eight different school districts comprise 10% of the college's funding at five locations (About NCC, 2016). Due to NCC's unique location, on-campus housing is available for students.

NCC has 146 full-time faculty. NCC's student success services include ACT 101, Children's Centers, KEYS, and a program called New Choices, a career decision-making program targeted at single-mothers, displaced homemakers, single pregnant women, and dislocated workers (NCC, 2016). Together, the college community has a fall-to-spring persistence rate of 72% (NCC Fact Sheet, 2016).

Significance of Study

This study examined the experiences of a group of low-income single student mothers, a population that is increasing on college campuses nationwide, yet one that is struggling with persistence and degree completion. Because community colleges are an entry point for many students with increased levels of risk, it is important that postsecondary educators, policymakers,

and researchers gain a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to community colleges' successes, and struggles (Center for Community College Engagement, 2014).

Developing a deeper understanding of low-income single student mothers' higher education experiences and perceptions helps higher education practitioners develop support structures, policies, and practices that can help low-income single student mothers make their way through college. Understanding more about low-income single student mothers' perceptions of the benefits or barriers presented by various programs, policies, and practices and how student mothers manage multiple priorities as they navigate their way through college is key to helping institutions support them better.

Information gathered from this study expands the depth of research on low-income single student mothers at the institutions who are recognized as supporting them well, and it could inform the practice of other community colleges seeking to increase their persistence and completion rates among this population. Gaining a deeper understanding of how supportive institutions help or hinder low-income single student mothers aligns with one of the goals of the Student Parent Success Initiative with the Institute for Women's Policy Research to replicate and disseminate best practices. While not generalizable, perspectives from the mothers themselves about how the institutional interventions helped them or not is useful to practitioners seeking to increase persistence and completion on their campuses.

Additionally, the results of this research may benefit other single-mothers in college. Few studies focus closely on the experiences of low-income single student mothers, and this research may benefit this growing subpopulation of students.

Finally, as a higher education practitioner myself, this research influenced similar programs at my own institution. The lessons I have learned through the course of this research

have guided changes in my institution centered on the goal of increasing the persistence and subsequent graduation rates for the single student mothers enrolled at my institution.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 introduced the importance of more deeply understanding low-income single student mothers' experiences in higher education, and the importance of doing so for higher education practitioners, researchers, policy makers, and students. Chapter 2 reviews the current literature and best practices in undergraduate postsecondary persistence and completion for low-income single student mothers. Chapter 3 outlines the qualitative methodology used for this study. Specifically, the selection criteria for the institution and participants are described as well as the methods for data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 discusses the findings. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the findings and presents recommendations for practice and research.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

Nontraditional students, especially low-income single-mothers, are attending postsecondary institutions at higher rates than ever before (NCES, 2016). Postsecondary education is a factor that contributes to the economic well-being and overall health of households headed by single-mothers (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Pandey et al., 2006; Zhan & Pandey, 2004a; Zhan & Pandey, 2004b). Specifically, postsecondary access and completion can help single-mothers escape poverty and increase their family's well-being (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Lovell, 2014; Pandey et al., 2006; Radey & Cheatham, 2013; Ricco, Sabet, & Clough, 2009; Romo & Segura, 2010; Zhan & Pandey, 2004a; 2004b). Low-income single-mothers often enter postsecondary education through their local community college (NCES, 2016).

The community college has been and remains the primary postsecondary entry point for students of color, working-adults, and students from low socioeconomic status (Cohen, 1990; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Dowd, 2003; NCES, 2016). Dowd (2003) asserts that the community college represents the American commitment to democracy by increasing the capacity of higher education to provide access to many. While open access and lower tuition rates have opened the doors to the masses and provided opportunities to students who once could not attend postsecondary education, community colleges have come under scrutiny in recent years due to their low completion rates (Juszkiewicz, 2016). The American Association of Community Colleges reported that only 38.2% of community college students completed a program of study at their starting institution, or another institution, within six years (Juszkiewicz, 2016). For

single-mothers, the statistics are more daunting as only a quarter (26.2%) of students who were parents completed their degrees within six years and over half (56.7%) left college without a degree (Reichlin, 2015).

Community colleges across the nation are focused on improving retention and completion rates with the goal of meeting a national completion rate of 50% (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014). College completion can help single-mothers escape poverty and increase well-being for their families (Adair, 2001; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010); therefore, better understanding the experiences of low-income single-mothers as they persist through their community college degree program is an important aspect to gaining a further understanding of what will help them persist and complete.

Understanding college persistence and completion is challenging, and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, or person-process-context-time (PPCT), accounts for the various influences, i.e., children, family, peers, finances, etc., that single-mothers face on their path to degree completion (Renn & Arnold, 2003). Further, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model is especially relevant to the population of low-income single student mothers at two community colleges because it accounts for single-mother's individual differences, the multiple influences in their environment, and their susceptibility to their environment (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Person-Process-Context-Time theory has two central assumptions: first, that people and their environments are inseparable, and second, that a person

grows, or develops from the interactions with their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Bronfenbrenner (1994) asserts that for human development to occur, “processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interactions between active, evolving, biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment” must take place on a consistent basis over an extended period of time (p.39). These interactions are known as proximal processes.

Proximal processes are direct experiences that a person has with their environment, and they are reciprocal (Arnold et al., 2012). The person, at the center of their own development, can affect his or her development through their actions on their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). For example, a student’s reaction to a professor will affect the behavior of the professor towards the student. If a student receives critique well and makes necessary adjustments, the professor is more likely to receive that student positively. Conversely, if a student demonstrates negative behavior and sulks, the professor may not engage the student the same way. It is important to note that all development takes place through proximal processes with the immediate environment; therefore, as Arnold et al., (2012) note, “more distant levels of the environment must be filtered through the individual’s direct experience to constitute a proximal process” (p. 13).

There are several layers to an individual’s environment. Bronfenbrenner (1994), starting with the individual at the core, termed these levels as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, all of which are influenced by the function of time, or the chronosystem. The levels, ranging from the most immediate to the individual to the most distant from the individual, are nested within each other, and can have overlapping interactions (Arnold et al., 2012).

The microsystem is comprised of the developing individual's immediate physical and social environment (Arnold et al., 2012). Per Bronfenbrenner (1994),

The microsystem is a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in the immediate environment (p.39).

Examples of a single student mother's microsystem might be the college she attends, her family, her workplace, and/or her neighborhood. Arnold et al., (2012) also note that social networks can constitute one's microsystem.

The overlapping relationships of the microsystem comprise the mesosystem (Arnold et al., 2012). Defined by Bronfenbrenner (1994) as "the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person" (p.40), the mesosystem is especially important when considering low-income single student mothers and their persistence as their microsystems often collide and overlap. For example, the time that single-mothers must spend caring for their children or working may take time away from their studies, thereby creating a challenge to their academic success (Arnold et al., 2012).

The next layer, the exosystem, includes policy, laws, regulations, educational programs, organizational structures, social structures, and community structures (Arnold et al., 2012).

Bronfenbrenner (1994) defined the exosystem as being

Comprised of the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings in which at least one of which does not contain the developing person, but in which events

occur that indirectly influence processes within the immediate setting in which the developing person lives. (p.40).

The exosystem is especially important to low-income single student mothers as postsecondary institutions, state, and federal policymakers can assist or inhibit single student mothers' persistence through the structures created within the exosystem (Arnold et al., 2012). As previously mentioned, for development to occur, the influencing factors of the exosystem must be directly experienced by the individual, i.e., the single student mother must directly receive the benefits, or lack thereof, of a federal or state program (Arnold et al., 2012).

The most distant level of an individual's system is the macrosystem. Bronfenbrenner (1994) asserted that the macrosystem could be thought of as a type of blueprint for the culture and/or subculture of a particular environment. Defined differently, the macrosystem is the ideology, culture, social institutions, religion, and other large concepts that shape an individual's experience (Arnold et al., 2012). For example, the United States being a democracy is part of the macrosystem. All other levels of the system exist within the macrosystem, and the chronosystem affects all of them.

The chronosystem, defined by Bronfenbrenner (1994), encompasses change or consistency over time, not only in the characteristics of the person, but also of the environment in which the person lives, (p. 40). This is important to the PPCT theory because a person's life exists within the parameters of a broader context.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of human development is especially pertinent to the study of low-income single student mothers because of the recognition of the overlapping and connections of the various levels of an individual's environment. In the following section, I

use Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development as a lens through which to view the current literature regarding single student mothers.

Low-Income Undergraduate Single Student Mothers

This review of the literature will start with the at the center of the ecological system with the single student mother, herself, and move outward to the current state of single-mothers in the United States, i.e., the macrosystem. It is important to recognize that interactions can occur between the systems simultaneously, and that change, or growth, can only occur through direct experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Not all single-mothers who attend community colleges are necessarily classified as low-income – it is important to note that this study focuses on a particular subset of single-mothers.

The Individual: Low-Income Single Student Mothers. Development, or change towards more complex functioning within one's environment, is determined by the environment's influences on the individual and the individual's influences on the environment (Arnold et al., 2012). As such, it is pertinent to this study, to understand the background characteristics of low-income single student mothers, and how they are similar or different from other student populations. To this point, this section of the literature review will describe the demographic characteristics of single student mothers attending community colleges as well as some concepts that are important when investigating low-income undergraduate single-mothers and their collegiate persistence.

Demographic Characteristics. The National Center for Education Statistics (2002) includes single-mothers as a sub-group of nontraditional students. As such, single-mothers in postsecondary education possess many of the same characteristics as other nontraditional

students. They include, but are not limited to: part-time student status, financially independent, older than the age of 24, and/or lacking a high school diploma (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Huelsman and Engle (2013) report that undergraduate single student parents, who are disproportionately single-mothers (73.5%), face significant challenges in enrolling in postsecondary education full-time, i.e., 12 credit hours per semester. Further, undergraduate single parents have difficulties maintaining their enrollment for consecutive terms thus delaying their degree completion, if ever completing. Huelsman and Engle (2013) pointed out that undergraduate single-mothers, like non-traditional students, often work at least part-time. They were also more likely than their married, or dependent, counterparts to work full-time and care for dependent children full-time (Huelsman & Engle, 2013). These background characteristics, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2002) and Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2010), put single-mothers at a disadvantage in accessing and completing postsecondary education.

Students who do not have a high school diploma are included in the definition of nontraditional students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). In a review of pregnant and parenting teens conducted by Costello (2014), high school completion was the first challenge to postsecondary access. Costello conducted a literature review, program review, and an online survey to “examine the barriers and promising approaches to support educational success for pregnant and parenting teens” (2014, p. V.). The data show that only about half of teen mothers, as compared to nine out of ten women who did not have children, received their high school diploma by the age of 22. Further, data indicate that pregnant and parenting teens were often academically unprepared. Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2010) report similar findings regarding single student parents outside of the high school setting. Specifically, they assert that 18% of

single-mothers, as opposed to six percent of the overall population, begin college with a GED. Further, research shows that single-mothers are more likely to begin their education at a community college and require some developmental coursework (Costello, 2014; Gault et al., 2014; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Huelsman & Engle, 2014).

Studies report that undergraduate single-mothers are more likely to be first-generation and low-income than both their married counterparts with children and students who do not have children (Gault et al., 2014; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Huelsman & Engle, 2014). They share similar disadvantages as other students who are low-income and/or first-generation: lack of knowledge about the college enrollment process, lack of knowledge about financial aid, the need to work, and lack of academic preparation (Costello, 2014; Gault et al., 2014; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Huelsman & Engle, 2014). Further, like many low-income and first-generation college students, single-mothers are disproportionately women from underrepresented backgrounds (Gault et al., 2014; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Huelsman & Engle, 2014). Gault et al. (2013) assert, “Women of color in postsecondary education are more likely than other college students to have dependent children; 47% of African American women student, 39.4% of Native American students, and 31.6% of Latina students are mothers” (p.4).

Psychosocial Characteristics. Undergraduate single-mothers have unique background characteristics (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Costello, 2014; Gault et al., 2014; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010). Unlike other student populations, undergraduate single-mothers have competing priorities as caretaker, student, and possibly worker. Further, they face specific issues such as feelings of guilt for time spent away from children, increased financial stress due to dependent children, and the need for affordable and dependable childcare (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Costello, 2014; Gault et al., 2014). According to Miller, Gault, and Thorman (2011), only

17% of postsecondary institutions offer childcare to student-parents on-campus. The lack of childcare resources and assistance are specific challenges for single-mothers as they experience constraints on both their finances and time (Costello, 2014; Gault et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2011).

Low-income single-mothers have been noted as a vulnerable population regarding susceptibility to physical and mental health issues such as depression and/or diabetes (Broussard et al., 2012). Many of the mental and physical health concerns are related to prolonged stress. Stress, or the changes from physical and emotional strain, are highly correlated to the instances of chronic poverty, of which single-mothers are disproportionately likely to experience (Broussard et al., 2012). In a study of 2,839 single-mothers across 20 large cities in the United States, at least 63% of the participants self-reported some form of physical, emotional, or financial difficulties (Teitler, Reichman, & Nepomnyaschy, 2004). Twenty percent of the sample reported being in poor health while 12 % reported being at high risk for depression (Teitler et al., 2004). In a more recent qualitative study of 15 impoverished single-mothers, all of them reported symptoms of depression. Further, many of them did not seek treatment due to their economic status (Broussard et al, 2012). However, Broussard and colleagues (2012) reported that the participants in the study used a variety of coping methods to help them get through single-motherhood. These coping strategies included their faith, support from others, and pets (Broussard et al., 2012).

Despite their levels of stress, many low-income single student mothers have another unique characteristic that influences both their choice to access postsecondary education and their degree completion (Cerven, 2013; Costello, 2014; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Osborne, Marks, & Turner, 2004; Wilsey, 2013; Wilson, 2011). The unique characteristic is their desire to

be a role model and better provider for their children, i.e., their children act as motivators (Cerven, 2013; Costello, 2014; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Osborne et al., 2004; Wilsey, 2013; Wilson, 2011). Osborne et al. (2004) conducted a qualitative study of 110 mature students in the United Kingdom regarding the influences on their choice to enter, or re-enter, higher education. Due to the heterogeneity of mature students, the participants in the study population were classified into subgroups. Among the subgroups was a group specific to single parents. Data revealed that the primary motivator for single parents, primarily single-mothers, to enroll, or re-enroll in postsecondary education was the desire to be a good role-model and provide an economically stable future for their children (Osborne et al., 2004). The desire to be a good role-model and to provide for one's children are also consistent findings in studies focusing on American single-mothers (Adair, 2001; Cerven, 2013; Wilsey, 2013). For many single student mothers, their children are their primary motivator, and the hope for a better life for them keeps them persisting (Adair, 2001; Cerven, 2013; Goldrick- Rab & Sorensen, 2010).

Bronfenbrenner (1994) asserts that the person is inseparable from their environment thus the characteristics that low-income single-mothers possess, as individuals, directly influences their environments and vice versa. Their coping strategies, stress management, goal commitment, and overall well-being influence their experiences, and ultimately their choice to persist. As such, this study seeks a deeper understanding of how low-income single student mothers manage multiple demands, and how their environments, i.e., the two community colleges noted as being supportive of student parents, has influenced their coping and management strategies. The next section of the literature review focuses on the immediate environments that low-income single student mothers experience on a daily basis, i.e. the microsystem and mesosystem.

Mesosystem and Microsystem: The Various Environments for Single Student

Mothers. The microsystem encompasses an individual's daily life, or their family, college, school/childcare facility, neighborhood, etc. (Arnold et al., 2012). The influences of the microsystem can have a profound effect on the low-income single undergraduate mother. Further, the connections across the microsystems comprises the mesosystem (Arnold et al., 2012). For most individuals, single-mothers included, multiple microsystems will be experienced daily. For this reason, the microsystem and mesosystems will be discussed together. As the research will demonstrate, low-income single student mothers are navigating their collegiate environment, their child's school or daycare, their workplace, their home, their neighborhood, their support network, etc. It is the totality of these experiences, in combination with their individual traits that ultimately determines their choice to persist (Arnold et al., 2012). This study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences, their individual characteristics, and the personal characteristics that influence their microsystems or mesosystems.

Postsecondary Institutional Climate. The climate of the postsecondary institution, a microsystem within a single student mother's environment, can have either positive or negative influences on the access and success of low-income single-mothers. The climate refers to the "various structural aspects of the college and the behaviors of faculty, staff, and students" (Duquaine-Watson, 2007, p. 231). Researchers agree that welfare reform, because of PRWORA, closed the door to postsecondary education for many low-income single-mothers (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Johnson, 2010; Tiarniyu & Mitchell, 2001); further, the rippling effects of such policy reform have resulted in unwelcoming environments (Austin & McDermott, 2003;

Costello, 2014; Duquaine-Watson, 2007). Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, Duquaine-Watson (2007) examined the experiences of 13 single-mothers at a Midwestern community college. Duquaine-Watson (2007) found that the single-mothers had significant concerns about childcare even though there was an on-campus facility with a good reputation. The policies governing the childcare facility made it open to the larger community thereby causing lengthy waiting periods. Lengthy waiting periods resulted in the single-mothers having to secure off-campus childcare, which posed challenges due to constrained finances and time; subsequently, the women felt frustrated. Second, Duquaine-Watson (2007) found that specific pedagogical practices, such as requiring activities outside of class time, can cause single-mothers to be unable to successfully complete coursework. Finally, single-mothers reported experiences of feeling either ignored or singled out because of their student parent status. In both situations, they felt they had few friends and were unwelcomed at the institution (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). The current study explores the experiences and perceptions of single student mothers at institutions that have been noted as being supportive of student parents: how do low-income single undergraduate mothers at the two research sites perceive their environment?

Classroom and Pedagogical Practices. Pedagogical practices and classroom experiences can have a significant influence on a single-mother's decision to persist in college (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Lovell, 2014; Schumacher, 2015). The experiences that single-mothers have in the classroom, and their perceptions of how they are treated by their peers and faculty influence their sense of belonging and their desire to continue. Specifically, unwelcoming faculty or policies that act as barriers to successful course completion, for example, mandating outside of class meetings or event attendance, deter persistence for single-mothers (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Lovell, 2014; Romo & Segura, 2010; Schumacher, 2015). Schumacher (2015), in a

review of programs assisting student parents in postsecondary education, found that course delivery, or online or hybrid environments, and positive interactions with faculty encouraged persistence. Other studies, related to connections and interactions with faculty, have had similar findings (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Romo & Segura, 2010). Small class sizes and faculty who understand the challenges faced by single-mothers have demonstrated positive correlations with single-mothers' decisions to continue postsecondary education (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Romo & Segura, 2010). The classroom experience influences the overall perceptions of a student's experience in postsecondary education, and the current study hopes to gain a deeper understanding of the role that pedagogical practices and the classroom experience plays in the experiences of low-income single student mothers.

College Support Programs. Comprehensive college support programs play an imperative role for low-income single-mothers in gaining successful entry and persistence in postsecondary education (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Brown & Adansi, 2007; Cerven, 2013; Fenster, 2003; Matus-Grossman, Gooden, Wavelet, & Seupersad, 2002; Romo & Segura, 2010; Schumacher, 2015). Comprehensive college support programs include support through the application process, academic advising services, tutoring, peer support, mentoring, and counseling (Cerven, 2013; Fenster, 2003; Romo & Segura, 2010; Schumacher, 2015). As predominantly low-income and first-generation students, single-mothers often struggle with acquiring correct information and advice regarding entry and persistence in postsecondary education; therefore, access to advisors, counselors, and other college support personnel ease their challenges (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Brock & Richburg-Hays, 2006; Brown & Adansi, 2007; Fenster, 2003; Matus-Grossman et al., 2002; Richburg-Hays, 2008; Romo & Segura,

2010). Further, single-mothers often lack time and may find it difficult to seek out disconnected support services; for that reason, connecting student support services, i.e., counseling with academic support services, yields positive outcomes for single-mothers (Brock & Richburg-Hays, 2006; Matus-Grossman et al., 2003; Richburg-Hays, 2008; Romo & Segura, 2010; Schumacher, 2015). As an example of the positive outcomes, Matus-Grossman et al. (2003) conducted focus groups with 131 low-wage, mostly low-income mothers who were students, across six community college campuses in California. The findings demonstrated the importance of comprehensive support systems in helping to increase the student's feelings connectedness to the institutions and awareness of programs (Matus-Grossman et al., 2003).

As studies indicate, numerous community colleges across the nation have taken steps to assist single-mothers in their postsecondary pursuits (Brock & Richburg-Hays, 2006; Matus-Grossman et al., 2003; Richburg-Hays, 2008; Romo & Segura, 2010; Schumacher, 2015). A special project in Louisiana, the Opening Doors Project, was designed to help low-income parents attending community college (Brock & Richburg-Hays, 2006; Richburg-Hays, 2008). Single-mothers were the primary participants, and they shared in a program that provided comprehensive student supports as well as financial incentives (\$1000/semester based on academic success). Richburg-Hays (2008) reports higher rates of re-enrollment, course passage, and credits earned among participants as compared to nonparticipants. Richburg-Hays (2008) summarized the Opening Doors Project as positively influencing persistence and completion for a population who faces significant barriers to postsecondary education, i.e. single-mothers.

Comprehensive college support programs provide avenues for knowledge acquisition, communication, academic assistance, and a way in which single-mothers can connect with their postsecondary institutions (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Cerven, 2013; Fenster, 2003; Romo &

Segura, 2010). To further explore how comprehensive programs encourage persistence, Fenster (2003) investigated whether students receiving TANF benefits could achieve academic success if given the proper supports: tutoring, academic advising, pre-registration, group and individual counseling, smaller class sizes, childcare and transportation reimbursement. The study compared the achievement- GPA in a 100 level Psychology class, election to the Dean's list, and rates of dismissal- of the TANF recipients and the general population of the community college.

Quantitative statistical analysis revealed that TANF students outperformed the general population of students. They had a higher GPAs in the 100 level Psychology class, had higher rates of election to the Dean's List, and were no more likely to be dismissed for academic reasons than the general population. Fenster (2003) concluded that multiple college support structures are pertinent to the success of students receiving TANF benefits. Further, Fenster (2003) asserted that support programs not only provide needed services, but also help connect the students to faculty, staff, and peers thereby helping them gain a sense of belonging. The recognized importance of college support programs led to the current study's investigation of the connection to, utilization, experiences, and perceptions that low-income single student mothers had of their postsecondary institution's programs. Specifically, what specific practices or aspects of the comprehensive support programs at these institutions do low-income single student mothers at the two research sites perceive as being helpful, or not?

Support Groups and Supportive Others. The research regarding single-mother's access and persistence in postsecondary education has demonstrated the need for single-mothers to have a strong support system both in their collegiate environment and in their personal lives (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Brown & Adansi, 2007; Bruns, 2004; Cerven, 2013; Costello, 2014; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Romo & Segura, 2010; Schumacher, 2015; Van Stone, Nelson, &

Niemann 1994). Several studies highlight the importance of supportive others in a single-mother's decision to attend postsecondary education as well as the in the initial access to postsecondary education (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Cerven, 2013; Costello, 2014; Romo & Segura, 2010). Cerven (2013) conducted a qualitative study of 60 low-income single-mothers. Through semi-structured interviews, Cerven (2013) observed the significance of supportive others assisting in postsecondary access for single-mothers. For some of the participants in the study, the supportive other provided only encouragement. The supportive other, in other cases, assisted with the application process and/or acted as a referral source to provide further information. Cerven (2013) demonstrates the powerful role supportive others play by relaying the experiences of one of the participants,

Well, my sister helped me get enrolled and stuff, and then I had a friend who attended right after...she graduated (from high school) early and she started right after that. And so she helped me with any questions I had. Her mom helped me with applying... (p.10).

Not only did Cerven (2013) find that supportive others helped single-mothers access postsecondary education, but they also played a significant role in their persistence. Cerven (2013) asserts that many women needed assurance and encouragement. Other studies also emphasize the importance of emotional support and encouragement from supportive others in single-mother's decisions to persist (Costello, 2014; Schumacher, 2015; Van Stone et al., 1994). Costello (2014) claims that encouragement, especially from family members, can have positive influences on pregnant and parenting teens accessing and persisting in postsecondary education. Further, support groups within the postsecondary environment can positively influence persistence.

Several studies support the positive influences of support groups for single-mothers in higher education (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Brock & Richburg- Hays, 2006; Brown & Adansi, 2007; Bruns, 2004; Cerven, 2013; Costello, 2014; Fenster, 2003; Richburg-Hays, 2008; Schumacher, 2015; Van Stone et al., 1994). Bruns (2004) found particularly positive implications from support groups for single-mothers pursuing postsecondary education. A support group for single-mothers was created at a large university in the south-central United States. Seven women regularly attended the support group, and the researchers observed and subsequently interviewed the participants. The support group was a productive venue for single-mothers to express their fears, feelings of guilt for postsecondary attendance, the need to fulfill multiple roles, feelings of lack of emotional and financial support, daycare difficulties, and other concerns. Bruns (2004) found that the single-mother support group provided an outlet for single-mothers to discuss their challenges and barriers, receive peer assistance to overcome their barriers, and feel connected to other single-mothers also pursuing postsecondary education. Schumacher (2015) also cites support groups as a way of assisting single-mothers with balancing their multiple roles and helping them persist in higher education. The research supports the conclusion that a support network is critical to a single student mother's success in postsecondary education. The current study seeks to gain a deeper understanding the role that a support network plays for low-income single student mothers in their successful persistence at the two institutions noted for being supportive of student parents.

Childcare. Throughout the literature, access to affordable and dependable childcare was the most frequent need and concern cited by single-mothers pursuing postsecondary education (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Brock & Richburg- Hays, 2006; Brown & Adansi, 2007; Bruns, 2004; Cerven, 2013; Costello, 2014; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Duquaine-Watson, 2007;

Fenster, 2003; Matus-Grossman et al., 2003; Richburg-Hays, 2008; Romo & Segura, 2010; Schumacher, 2015; Wilson, 2011). Studies that provided reimbursement for childcare or on-campus childcare for single-mothers had positive results on persistence (Matus-Grossman et al., 2003; Richburg-Hays, 2008; Romo & Segura, 2010; Schumacher, 2015). Further, the lack of affordable and dependable childcare often inhibited participation and success in postsecondary education for single-mothers (Cerven, 2013; Costello, 2014; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Romo & Segura, 2010; Schumacher, 2015). Further still, lack of childcare centers or lack of access to on-campus childcare, results in single-mothers having negative perceptions of the postsecondary environment (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). Finally, Schumacher (2015) asserts that postsecondary childcare is a key strategy to helping single-mothers access and complete higher education; further, that childcare assistance can take numerous forms. Postsecondary institutions could provide on-campus childcare, childcare subsidies, assistance finding and paying for childcare in the community, and/or partner with private organizations (Schumacher, 2015). Regardless of the method, employing strategies to help low-income single-mothers access and afford dependable childcare is a promising strategy to assist low-income single-mothers in successfully accessing and completing postsecondary education.

The importance of on campus childcare led to selection criteria for the present study. Both postsecondary institutions in the current study have childcare centers that are open to students as well as the community at large. Further, both colleges have childcare centers that are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and have Pennsylvania's four-star Keystone Rating, a state rating indicating the level of quality of childcare (PA Promise for Children, 2017). Additionally, this study hopes to gain a deeper

understanding of the role that such as childcare centers, play in the overall perception of the single student mother's experience.

Moving outward in the human ecology model, the next section of the literature review discusses the exosystem, or the policy context, for single student mother. As this study focuses on low-income single student mothers, the policy environment to which they are subjected influences their postsecondary experiences.

The Exosystem: The Policy Context for Single-mothers. The exosystem, according to Arnold et al. (2012), "describes the level of environment in which individuals are not physically present, but where events occur that indirectly affect processes in their immediate surroundings" (p.15). Most pertinent to this study is the policy context for single-mothers. Single-mothers in the United States are disproportionately of lower socioeconomic status (Huelsman & Engle, 2013). Falling below the poverty level makes single-mothers financially vulnerable thus greatly influenced by changes in federal, state and institutional policies, specifically welfare and financial aid policies (Cerven, 2013; Costello, 2014; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Fenster, 2003; Gault et al., 2014; Huelsman & Engle, 2013; Johnson, 2010).

Revisions to social policies, specifically welfare reform, have resulted in several challenges for low-income single-mothers pursuing postsecondary education (Cerven, 2013; Costello, 2014; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Fenster, 2003; Johnson, 2010). Johnson (2010) explored the impacts of welfare reform on African American single-mothers. Through a review of policy and literature, Johnson (2010) emphasizes the detrimental influences of the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 on recipients' enrollment in postsecondary education. PRWORA is a program within TANF, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and is available to provide cash benefits to qualifying

low-income parents and their families (Gault et al., 2014). Prior to this act, welfare laws allowed the pursuit of postsecondary education to count as work (Johnson, 2010). PRWORA created a work-first philosophy, and subsequently required recipients to immediately seek employment. Johnson (2010) asserts that such welfare laws limit postsecondary education and continue to perpetuate biases that disadvantaged students have continuously and systematically experienced.

The limiting influences of PWORA's work-first policies on postsecondary enrollment led to many single-mothers discontinuing their participation (Cerven, 2013; Gault et al., 2014; Romo & Segura, 2010; Wilson, 2011). Gault et al. (2014) assert that in 2011-2012, only 7.4% of low-income students with children received TANF benefits. Further, while welfare reform decreased the number of welfare recipients enrolling in postsecondary education (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Johnson, 2010), the enrollment rates of single-mothers increased, especially at community colleges (Gault et al., 2014; Huelsman & Engle, 2013; Wilson, 2011). Such incongruences caused Wilson (2011) to investigate how low-income single-mothers used social and economic benefit programs while attending college. Wilson (2011) conducted case studies comprised of ten low-income single student mothers. The case studies consisted of three one-on-one interviews and document collection for triangulation. After transcribing and analyzing the data, Wilson (2011) found that the ten participants received benefits from 20 different education and non-education benefit programs. Other common themes emerged from Wilson's (2011) study: the motivation and need to work while enrolled in postsecondary education, the importance of social benefit programs, such as food stamps, to help provide, the lack of postsecondary access provided by the utilization of TANF, and the importance of Federal Financial Aid programs, such as the Pell Grant, in the individual college decision-making process. Finally, the lack of clear and correct information regarding the benefits, eligibility requirements, and application

procedures for both educational and non-educational programs benefit programs led Wilson (2011) to conclude that it is not a lack of programs inhibiting college access for single-mothers; rather, a lack of clarity, collaboration, communication, and knowledge among federal, state, and local agencies as well as postsecondary institutions.

Financial aid plays a pivotal role in both postsecondary access and completion for single-mothers (Cerven, 2011; Gault et al., 2014; Huelsman & Engle, 2013; Radey & Cheatham, 2013; Wilson, 2011). Further, due to single-mothers' background characteristics, they are at an increased risk for not completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and thereby excluding their access to needed assistance (Gault et al., 2014; Huelsman & Engle, 2013; Radey & Cheatham, 2013). Using data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study and a framework that accounted for the multiple intersecting vulnerabilities, i.e., low-income and student parent, Radey and Cheatham (2013) explored how student background characteristics: marital status, number of children, level of income, and/or employment, influenced FAFSA completion. Through a quantitative analysis of 27,269 students, Radey and Cheatham (2013) found that single-mothers, when all vulnerabilities were accounted for, had lower rates of FAFSA completion, especially those in the lowest low-income categories (Radey & Cheatham, 2013). Radey and Cheatham's (2013) study further supports Wilson's (2011) call for increased awareness and a less complex system. The current state of the policy environment is one that inhibits college access and completion for single-mothers due to its complexity and lack of knowledge and awareness (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Johnson, 2010; Huelsman & Engle, 2013; Radey & Cheatham, 2013). The present study seeks a better understanding of how a particular group of low-income undergraduate single student mothers perceive and experience federal, state, and institutional policy, specifically federal and state financial aid and any other programs

from which they may receive assistance. Additionally, this study aims for a deeper understanding of how they utilize programs or resources, provided by federal, state, or the institution, to assist them in their postsecondary pursuits. The final section of the literature review explores the outer environment of the human ecology theory, or the macrosystem. The macrosystem influences all other levels of environments thus it is important to note in the overall experience of low-income single student mothers.

The Macrosystem: Single-motherhood in the United States. The macrosystem encompasses all ideologies, cultures, and values of an environment. For example, in the United States, the macrosystem includes the government, the stratifications between upper, middle, and lower classes, religion, and other values, such as capitalism (Arnold et al., 2012). The values and ideologies are set forth by the dominant class, and those who do not belong, experience the macrosystem of the dominant culture as well as their own (Arnold et al., 2012). This is especially important when considering single-mothers in the United States, who are largely of lower socioeconomic status and are typically women of color (Huelsman & Engle, 2013).

Today's American family is far different than it was in the 1960's or 1980's, and has been the topic of many popular, media-based, conversations (Pew Research Center, 2015). Prior to the 1960's, 71% of children were born into two-parent, first marriage households (Pew Research Center, 2015). Further, the iconic nuclear family was held in high regard, and marriage was rewarded through policy implementation and public regard (Abramovitz, 2006). Shifts in the American family structure were recognized in the 1970's and 1980's as more and more children were born into single parent households. By 1980, the Pew Research Center (2015) notes that 19% of children were born to single parents versus only 9% in 1960. In 2014, 26% of children were born into single parent homes (Pew Research Center, 2015).

The changing demographics led to debate over single-motherhood; specifically, a cause of concern to society and vilification (Abramovitz, 2006; Lundberg, Pollak, & Stearns, 2016). Further, these concerns, or stigmas, occur within socioeconomic stratifications (Lundberg et al., 2016). The increase in non-marital births in the 1970's, divorce rates in the 1980's, and/or the changes to the welfare system in the mid 1990's could have caused many of the stigmas and stereotypes that low-income single-mothers still face today (Abramovitz, 2006; Lundberg et al., 2016). Some of the stigmas and stereotypes, such as the welfare queen or lazy personifications, were the result of the debate that ensued over welfare reform in the mid-1990's. As Abramovitz (2006) describes,

During the welfare reform debate, the reformers evoked gender and racial stereotypes to portray single-motherhood as the nation's number one social problem...they implied that crime, drug use, school drop outs, teenage pregnancies, and drive by shootings were transmitted from one generation to the next by husbandless women heading their own families. (p.340)

These stereotypes have followed low-income single-mothers since the changes in the welfare system. Popular online magazines, such as *The Stir* or *Brain & Child*, often publish articles about the stereotypes faced by single-mothers (Mayor, 2013; Zipp, 2015). Broussard, Joseph, and Thompson (2012) conducted a qualitative study of 15 low-income single-mothers. In the study, the researchers found that the women were influenced by the stigmas that society, specifically their social workers and others, assumed of them. One participant affirmed, "they view the poor (us) as low life's, they think they are criminals..." (Broussard et al., 2012, p. 195).

Conversely, around the same time, the Pew Research Center (2011) released a study in which the millennial generation valued parenthood at a much higher rate than they did marriage

which suggests the tides regarding single-motherhood might be changing. In fact, in 2008, 51% of births to millennials were to unwed mothers (Pew Research Center, 2011, p.1). Further, Millennials are less likely than their Generation X or Baby Boomer counterparts to contend that single parents are bad for society (Pew Research Center, 2011). Such differentiation in research opinions supports the assertion by some scholars that many of the stigmas and stereotypes of single-mothers cut sharply along socioeconomic status and racial divides (Abramovitz, 2006; Broussard et al., 2012; Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016). In a study involving the perceptions of 435 undergraduates, when viewing photographs of four different conditions involving black and white females, the Black females were more likely to be perceived as being more promiscuous, single-mothers, and in need of public assistance than their white counterparts (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016). Such stereotypes regarding race and socioeconomic status extend deeply into the stigmas that many single-mothers experience.

The stigmas and stereotypes of single-mothers that are pervasive along socioeconomic and racial lines in the United States, are important to recognize when investigating their experiences because the values, stigmas, and ideologies shape the world in which they live (Arnold et al., 2012). Further, all other levels of the ecological model exist within the macrosystem thus policy and the direct experience of single-mothers are influenced by the values that the larger society holds.

Conclusion

Undergraduate single-mothers are a subset of nontraditional students whose primary entry point to postsecondary education is through the community college (NCES, 2016). While the number of nontraditional students attending postsecondary education continues to increase, less than half complete their degree (Juszkiewicz, 2016; NCES, 2016). Further, despite the

current research and literature regarding single-mothers, only 28% of student parents, who are predominantly single-mothers will complete their degree. For single student mothers who are disproportionately low-income, the failure of persistence means less economic mobility (Zhan & Pandey, 2004). While the literature provides great insight into programs and practices that support success and characteristics that correlate with non-completion, a deeper understanding of low-income undergraduate single-mothers' perceptions of how and why they are successful at community colleges noted for being supportive of student parents can aide practitioners and researchers alike in comprehending how low-income single student mothers at these particular institutions persist.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) PPCT theory yields a useful lens through which to investigate the experiences and perceptions of low-income single student mothers at institutions who are noted as being supportive and having resources. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) two central assumptions are that people and their environments are inseparable, and that a person grows, or changes, from the interactions with their environment. This study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of how the experiences and perceptions of low-income single student mothers' environments, i.e., the two community college research sites, influence their intent to persist.

Chapter Three

Methodology

In this study, I sought to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions and experiences of low-income single-mothers attending two community colleges in Pennsylvania noted as being supportive of student parents. I used Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of human development as a framework to investigate low-income single student mothers' experiences at two Pennsylvania community colleges.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- How do these single-mothers experience and perceive their postsecondary education pursuits?
 - a. What personal resources, such as motivation, contribute to their continued postsecondary pursuits?
 - b. What institutional programs, policies, or practices do they perceive as being helpful in their pursuits, or serve as barriers?
 - c. What broader societal factors, such as federal or state policies and programs, are helpful, or serve as barriers in their postsecondary pursuits?

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) PPCT theory shaped the development of the research questions.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) asserted that the environment and person are inseparable, and that a person grows through interactions with the environment. As such, each of the sub-questions under the broad research question of how single student mothers persist in postsecondary education reflects Bronfenbrenner's layers of the human ecology system. Working from the person out, research sub-question (a) addresses the people themselves, i.e. the single student

mothers. Sub-question (b) investigates the environment of institution, or a microsystem for single student mothers. Sub-question (c) explores how the policy environment as well as societal factors i.e., the exosystem and macrosystem, influences the persistence of single student mothers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Research Design

Recognizing that low-income single student mothers live and study within specific environmental contexts, this study is a basic interpretive and descriptive qualitative study with a lens of an embedded multi-case study. In this way, the women are the unit of analysis, but their experiences are contextualized within the bounded context of two community colleges noted for their supportive environments. Creswell (2014) asserts that qualitative approaches are best suited for studies in which the questions desired to be answered are exploratory or seek to gain a deeper understanding of groups or individuals. Further, Patton (1985) points out that, “qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a context and the interactions there” (quoted in Merriam, 2009, p.5). Qualitative methods are appropriate for this study because I sought to gain a deeper understanding of a particular group of low-income undergraduate single-mother’s experiences in the context of two community colleges that have resources to offer student parents (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009).

Merriam (2009) defines a basic interpretive and descriptive qualitative study as, “a study in which the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon, this meaning is mediated through the researcher as an instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive” (p.6). Data from this type of research is typically collected through interviews and subsequently analyzed to identify reoccurring patterns

or themes (Merriam, 2009). The data collected should yield a rich description and in-depth knowledge regarding the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved (Merriam, 2009).

Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to have some control over the information gathered and allow for deeper understanding as the conversations can elicit participant's experiences and opinions (Creswell, 2014). The highly-structured portion of the interview is usually comprised of the specific information the researcher wishes to know; whereas, the interview may guide other questions itself (Merriam, 2009). This study used a semi-structured interview design to promote consistency in the research protocol, while allowing for the freedom to explore each participant's experience in depth.

The theoretical framework for this study supports providing context for the single student mother's experiences, which provides another level of meaning and is pertinent in a person's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner (1979) notes that environmental interactions are most likely to produce effects over time thus the environment, or the context, in which the low-income single-mothers spend their time matters. I utilized an embedded multi-case study lens to account for the contextualization of the low-income single student mother's experience. Yin (2009) defines an embedded design as one that focuses on specific elements within a case study. A multi-case study design is used when more than one case is investigated (Yin, 2009). Since this study examines two community colleges in Pennsylvania who were recognized by the IWPR, it is important to note that the participants' experiences exist within a particular, presumably supportive, context. This study ultimately analyzes the data by examining the experiences of the women themselves, while sharing the bounded context inherent in case study research.

Research Sites. I selected MC3 and NCC as research sites for three reasons. First, both institutions were included as one of the 144 supportive programs for student parents by the IWPR's Student Parent Success Initiative. Second, both institutions have programs and practices that have been supported in the literature as being important to the success of single-mothers, especially low-income single-mothers. Finally, both institutions were in the state of Pennsylvania and within a reasonable travel distance for me as the researcher.

The IWPR was founded in 1987 to conduct and disseminate research regarding the needs of women. To better assist student parents, the IWPR started the Student Parent Success Initiative (SSPI), which hopes to improve access and postsecondary graduation for low-income student parents, especially mothers. One of the resources the SSPI provides, in effort to provide resources to the larger community, is a student parent program finder. This resource includes 144 programs at four-year and two-year colleges across the nation (Education & Training, 2010). MC3 and NHC were included in this list. In a report for SSPI, Schumacher (2015) also recognized NCC for the resources it provides to student parents.

NCC is located relatively close to New York City and Philadelphia, but is outside both metropolitan areas. NCC has five different college sites serving over ten thousand students per year. Northampton holds a fall to spring persistence rate of 72% and has 146 full-time faculty. In addition to student services such as advising, learning support, and campus life, Northampton has the following resources for student-parents: Campus Childcare, New Choices- a program for single parents or single, pregnant women, and the KEYS program-a state funded program for single-mothers receiving TANF or SNAP assistance.

The IWPR SPSI's student parent resource finder also recognizes MC3 for the resources it provides student parents. MC3 is in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania, outside of Philadelphia. MCCC

serves over 13, 000 students per year at multiple campuses. MCCC has a 71% fall to spring persistence rate and 190 full-time faculty. Childcare and advising services are important for student parents, especially single-mothers, and MC3 offers these services via a childcare center, outreach programs that includes advising and counseling, KEYS, and scholarships for single-mothers. Table 1 summarizes key characteristics about NCC and MC3.

Table 1:

Summary of Institutional Characteristics for 2015: Northampton Community College (NCC) and Montgomery County Community College (MC3)

	<u>NCC</u>	<u>MC3</u>
Enrollment	10,269	13,122
Fall to Spring Retention	72%	71%
Number of Full-time Faculty	146	190
Average Student to Teacher Ratio	1:21	1:19
Number of Campuses or Locations	5	4
On Campus Childcare	Yes	Yes
Counseling and Advising Services	Yes	Yes
Scholarships	Yes	Yes
Programs specifically for single-mothers	KEYS New Choices	KEYS

The academic literature also guided the selection of the research sites. The literature affirms that on-campus childcare, collaboration among community organizations and postsecondary institutions, outreach to increase single-mother's knowledge of financial aid, specifically the FAFSA, and other financial assistance, opportunities for peer engagement, and

comprehensive support services, including academic advising, counseling, and learning support services are pertinent to the success of single-mothers (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Cerven, 2013; Costello, 2014; Fenster, 2003; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Lovell, 2014; Matus-Grossman et al., 2003; Pandey et al., 2006; Radey & Cheatham, 2013; Richburg-Hays, 2008; Romo & Segura, 2010; Schumacher, 2015). Both NCC and MC3 meet these criteria. Table 2 summarizes the programs or practices that each college participates in categorized by the criteria supported from the research.

Table 2:

Criteria for Selection

	<u>MC3</u>	<u>NCC</u>
On-Campus Childcare	Central Campus-Blue Bell, childcare serves ages 2-5 years, is open for MC3 students, and MC3 students can use financial aid to assist in childcare payment as well as PA subsidies.	Bethlehem and Monroe Campuses, childcare centers serve infants from six weeks to children ready to enter kindergarten. NCC students can choose full-time or part-time care on a semester or yearly basis, and use their PA subsidies.

Collaboration with community organizations and postsecondary institution.	The Counseling Center serves as the primary liaison for outside resources at the Central and West Campuses.	The Counseling Center serves as the primary liaison for outside resources at all campuses.
Outreach to increase knowledge of financial aid and financial assistance.	<p>- KEYS program- specific to single-mothers in the state of Pennsylvania. MC3 KEYS program provides childcare assistance, books & school supplies, transportation assistance, and a laptop loan program.</p> <p>- Other outreach programs include ACT 101, a state-funded program to assist students in receiving the bachelor's degrees, FYE program, POWER program for student with mental illness, and the Minority Student Mentoring Initiative.</p> <p>- FAFSA Workshops - Financial Literacy Workshops</p>	<p>KEYS program through the state of Pennsylvania. NCC program helps with childcare, books and supplies, and other assistance.</p> <p>Outreach programs include New Choices, a program designed for single parents, single pregnant women, dislocated home makers, and/or people interested in a career that is not traditional for their gender.</p> <p>FAFSA tutorials.</p> <p>FAFSA Workshops.</p>
Comprehensive Support Services, including academic advising, counseling, and learning support.	<p>MC3 utilizes Starfish Retention Software for early alerts on students.</p> <p>Student Support Services are all free, and the majority are in the Student Success Center</p>	<p>NCC also utilizes an early alert system, and the Dean of Students assists with coordination.</p> <p>Learning support services are offered free of charge.</p>
Opportunities for peer engagement.	<p>The outreach programs facilitate opportunities for peer engagement.</p> <p>The Counseling Center also assists with groups.</p>	<p>New Choices offers opportunities for peer engagement.</p> <p>The Association for Nontraditional Students is a student organization open to students who fit the definition of nontraditional and are enrolled for at least six credit hours.</p>

Participants. I purposefully selected 10 participants from each site for interviews (Creswell, 2014). The participants were low-income, as defined by Pell eligibility, single-student mothers who met the following criteria: 1) had dependent children under the age of 18, 2) were enrolled in at least six credit hours, 3) plan to re-enroll the following semester or graduate, 4) were eligible for either the KEYS program, or have an estimated family contribution that allows for the awarding of the full Pell grant, and 5) agreed to participate in the study. The women in the study ranged in age from 24 to 51 years, and they represented various backgrounds and academic disciplines. Details of the participants' demographic characteristics are in the tables below.

Table 3

Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants (n = 20)

<u>Age Range</u>	<u>Number of Participants</u>
18-24 years old	1
25-40 years old	16
40+ years old	3
<u>Number of Children</u>	
1 child	6
2 children	6
3 children	5
4 children	2
5 children	1
<u>Age of Children</u>	
Five years and under	12
6-11 years	21
12-18 years	12
Over 18 years	1
<u>Race and Ethnicity</u>	
African American	5
Native American/ American Indian	0
Asian	2
Hispanic/Latino(a)	1
White	9
Two or More Races *	3

*One participant identified as Native American and White, and the other two identified as Hispanic African Americans.

The study participants came from various fields:

Table 4

Study Participants' Degree Programs (n = 20)

<u>Field</u>	<u>Number of Participants</u>
Human services/Helping fields	4
Business/Office Management	3
Health Related Field	2
Nursing	8
Paralegal/Communications	1
Information Technology	1
Liberal Arts: Transfer	1

All the women in the study qualified for federal financial aid, and all but one of the women were dependent on public assistance (TANF, SNAP, etc.) for necessities, such as food:

Table 5

Study Participants' Use of Assistance Programs (n = 20)

<u>Programs</u>	<u>Number of Participants</u>
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)	6
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	19
Health Care Coverage (Children)	19
Housing Assistance/ Emergency Housing	7
Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)	4
KEYS	19
Other (Home Heating Assistance, Electric, Internet, etc.)	7

There was a greater range in the participants from NCC rather than those at MC3, who were mostly in their late twenties. Both research sites had some variation in race and ethnicity. At

NCC four of the ten women noted that English was their second language, and two of them had come to the United States through marriage. At MC3, two of the women had come to the United States because of marriage and both were still learning English.

Very few of the women reported working outside of the federal work study program. However, of the five women who reported working, four of them attended NCC. Many of the women who reported utilizing the federal work study program were students at MC3.

Interview Protocol. Creswell (2014) asserts that the data collection procedures for qualitative research includes four basic types of collection: observation, interviews, documents, and audio-visual materials. For this study, I completed semi-structured one-on-one interviews. Participants completed a seven-item demographic survey (Appendix A) either verbally or in written format depending on the modality of the interview. Then, the participants were asked a series of eight opened ended questions with two or three sub-questions in a 30 to 60-minute interview. The semi-structured interview protocol began with less structured questions to gain knowledge on the participant's background and to build a rapport. The questions gradually became more focused to gain the depth needed to learn about the participant themselves, their immediate surroundings, and their larger environment.

In qualitative research, the researcher herself is the primary instrument (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, it is essential that, as the interviewer, the research remain open, non-judgmental, and hold a positive regard for the participant (Merriam, 2009). As the interviewer, I listened actively and took notes while using the following instruments:

1. The seven-item demographic survey
2. The thirteen item semi-structured interview protocol.

The following table correlates the semi-structured interview questions to the overarching research questions.

Table 6

Correlation of semi-structured interview questions to the overarching research questions

Overarching Research Question: How do these single-mothers experience and perceive their postsecondary education pursuits?

<u>Research Sub-Questions</u>	<u>Interview Questions</u>	<u>Interview Sub-Questions</u>
(a) What personal resources, such as motivation, contribute to their continued postsecondary pursuits ?	Tell me a little bit more about yourself and your background.	What led you to pursue postsecondary education?
	Tell me about being a parent.	What strategies do you use to cope with multiple demands?
	How do you manage all of your responsibilities?	Are there people who help? If so, who? How?
	Why did you choose to go to college?	What is your goal in coming to college?
	How do you support yourself and family (financial)?	What internal resources, like willpower, have helped you?
(b) What institutional programs, policies, or practices do they perceive as being helpful in their pursuits, or serve as barriers?	Describe your experience at your community college?	Do faculty do things that are particularly helpful? Or not?
	What has really helped you to be successful as a student mother?	What outside of the classroom has helped? Programs? People?
	What has been difficult for you?	What inside of the classroom, or outside of the classroom has challenged you?

(c) What broader societal factors, such as federal or state policies and programs, are helpful, or serve as barriers in their postsecondary pursuits?	Are there particular programs that have helped you be successful?	How do you feel about the public assistance process? Describe the public assistance process?
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Role of the Researcher

I have been a practitioner in higher education for over twelve years. Throughout my professional positions, I have always worked with populations who were termed “at risk.” Often, I have had to interface with social service agencies and state programs to assist students in their endeavors for academic success. Recently, I had the opportunity to work with a population for whom single-motherhood was prevalent, and the tenacity of these women inspired me. For many students, the obstacles these young women faced daily would have deterred them from pursuing their education any further, yet these young women persisted. It sparked my curiosity in what could make them persist when others did not? What could postsecondary institutions do to assist student parents, especially these single women, on their educational pathways?

As a mother of two young children myself and pursuing my doctorate while working full-time, I empathized with having to manage multiple roles. Further, gaining a deeper understanding of how to assist young single-mothers from a policy or program perspective is especially important to me as I serve as a chief student affairs officer at a community college. The lessons learned from this research will be employed in my practice; however, my prior experience could also influence this study.

Pilot Study

I employed the assistance of a counselor who works with me at my current institution to assist me with a pilot study. She purposefully recruited three single student mothers who met the study's requirements. Two of the three student mothers agreed to be interviewed for a pilot study. The counselor set up two separate appointments in which the single student mothers met me in my office, a quiet space to have a conversation. The two single student mothers and I had never met before thus it was a good opportunity for me to practice building a rapport, explaining informed consent, and transitioning into the interview.

Through the pilot, I realized that demographic information was needed, though it was awkward to request or discuss. I subsequently developed the seven-question demographic survey. The pilot interviews also revealed that the original sequence of questions was not natural, so I changed the semi-structured interview protocol to go from broad open-ended questions to more specific, in-depth, questions. Finally, I added two questions: "Tell me about being a parent," and "How do you feel about the public assistance process?" The pilot interviews were only used to refine the semi-structured interview protocol, and they were not used in the final data.

Data Collection Procedures

Institutional Review Board. The current study was submitted for human subject approval through the University of Kansas's IRB. Once approved, the study was submitted to both research sites for IRB approval. Once cleared through all both IRBs, I was able to connect with the research site liaisons for participant recruitment.

Participant Recruitment. Colleagues from both research sites introduced me to key personnel at their respective institutions. These key personnel were program coordinators for either the KEYS program, or another program that worked closely with KEYS. These program coordinators became my institutional, or site, liaisons. Upon approval from the IRB, the flyer created through the IRB process, study information, and informed consent documents were sent via e-mail to the site liaison. The site liaison at both institutions sent the study information out to their student listserv. Additionally, both research sites had end of year program meetings in May. The study information was disseminated at these meetings, and a sign-up list for study volunteers was passed around the meeting.

Once the informed consent was signed at MC3, the liaison sent me an excel file with the volunteers' names, phone numbers, and college email addresses. Once informed consent was signed at NCC, the liaison proceeded to schedule one-hour time slots for each participant for the days that I would be on campus. Both sites provide informed consent forms, contact information, and verification that participant study criteria had been met.

To schedule interviews for MC3, I sent an email to all participants requesting the best time for them to meet. I heard back from the majority of them and scheduled them for one-hour time slots. For those who did not respond, I followed up with a text. Through text messaging, I was able to set a time and location for the majority of those who volunteered. Four participants at MC3's site did not show up for their scheduled time, and they were rescheduled for a different date and time for the interview. Approximately, three from the original list of 15 opted not to participate.

At NCC, if participants did not show up for their scheduled interview time, the liaison called, texted, and emailed. Three students initially did not show up for their interview time, and

two of the three were scheduled for the next day. The third decided not to participate thus another participant was recruited.

At both research sites, participants were given interview reminder e-mails and text messages in hopes of improving the participation rate on the day of the interview. After the interviews were complete, MC3's site liaison requested names of the participants so that they could reward them with a \$10.00 gift card. No known compensation was given at NCC.

Interview Setting. At NCC, the site liaison allowed me to use an office in the Student Services Suite for the duration of my time on campus. This was a comfortable space for both the student participants and the researcher. The students were familiar with the suite thus making it easy for them to find in a prompt manner. It was also quiet and private, allowing for open conversation.

At MC3, the student participants chose the locations of their interviews. It was the middle of summer when I was on campus thus common spaces, such as the cafeteria and student lounges, were not in high use. All locations were quiet and sparsely populated thus making conversation comfortable and private.

Several interviews took place over the phone. At NCC, two students were at an off-site location, thus the interviews were completed via phone in the office within the Student Services Suite. At MC3, two students did not show up for their scheduled interviews and several interviews had to be scheduled during the fall semester. These interviews took place at a time that was convenient for the participant and were conducted from my home office. My home office is quiet and private, and yields itself to productive, in depth, conversations.

Semi-Structured Interviews. After introductions, I reviewed the informed consent, and asked participants to sign, if I did not already have a signed consent on file. Then, if the interviews were in person, I had them complete the demographic survey. If the interviews were conducted over the phone, then the demographic survey was asked verbally after the interview.

The semi-structured interview protocol guided and focused the interviews for consistency (Merriam, 2009). The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes based on the level of detail and story-telling of each participant. During each of the interviews, notes of observations, such as body language or intonation, were written. Further, each interview was audio-recorded for later transcription. Finally, reflective summaries of each day at each research site were kept (Creswell, 2014). The audio from the semi-structured interview, field notes, and the reflective summaries were used as triangulation methods during the data analysis (Merriam, 2009).

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by a transcription service within one week of the interview. I received transcriptions from the transcription service with minor errors. I corrected the errors by reading the transcript and listening to the audio recording. Data from one interview was unable to be transcribed due to an unknown malfunction of the audio-recorded about half way through the interview. The data from this interview was partially transcribed, and notes from the interview were also used.

All data collected was kept confidential, and the participants had the opportunity to choose a pseudonym to be used in the report. The data was secured in a locked file cabinet, or if electronic, in a password protected folder.

Research Site Visit. In order to gain a better understanding of the institutional environment that the low-income single student mothers experienced, I spent two and a half days

at each research site. I spent my time informally touring the campus, meeting with current students, staff, and faculty, eating lunch in and studying in common spaces, which helped to contextualize the experiences of the single student mothers in this study. I noted my observations and perceptions in daily reflective summaries.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research is inductive and emergent (Creswell, 2014). As such, data analysis started while I was still visiting the research sites. After each interview was completed, the major themes and summaries were noted, and at the end of each day the interviews were compared. Broad categories and themes emerged throughout the interview process.

The audio-recordings were sent out for transcription, and upon return were checked for accuracy by simultaneously listening to the audio recording and reading the transcript (Creswell, 2014). Then, the transcripts were sent to the individual participants for their review and feedback. Merriam (2009) refers to this method of insuring internal validity as member checking. It is important that the participants recognize the content of their transcripts as well as the observation notes to ensure the validity of the data (Merriam, 2009). Two of the twenty participants gave feedback regarding their transcripts.

Once reviewed by the participants for accuracy, the data was read again, this time to gain familiarity with the content as well as relate them to the initial categories identified while at the research site. Creswell (2014) notes that gaining familiarity with the data allows the qualitative researcher to start making sense of the data and to reflect on it. General notes, themes, and thoughts about the data were recorded noted through this process (Creswell, 2014).

Next, the data were coded. Creswell (2014) defines coding as, “organizing the data by bracketing chunks and writing a word representing a category in the margins” (p.198). The coding process was emergent but rooted in Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) PPCT theory, and an excel file was used to organize the data verse writing words in the margins. Creswell (2014) notes that this is a combination of using emergent and predetermined codes, and it is beneficial to develop and use a codebook that can change based upon the data.

The coding generated from the data was used to create themes as they related to the overarching research questions (Creswell, 2014). The data, by institution, were analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of the influences of each institution’s environment on the persistence of single student mothers. Finally, the evidence from both institutions was analyzed together (Yin, 2009). Interpretations from the data analysis were derived through the theoretical lens of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) PPCT theory.

Validity and Reliability. Creswell (2014) notes that validity is one of the strengths of qualitative researcher, but that the researcher should actively incorporate as many strategies as possible to ensure the accuracy of their data. As such, multiple sources of information were included within the data; audio transcripts, notes on each interview, and reflective memos.

As previously mentioned, member checking was also used to ensure the accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2014). In addition to having the participants review their transcripts for accuracy, the major themes and findings from their interviews were spot checked for feedback and comment prior to the final product (Creswell, 2014). Finally, qualitative experts recommend that the researcher be engaged in the data collection for “a long enough period of time to ensure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon” (Merriam, 2009, p. 26). As such, I

visited each site and interacted with students, staff, and faculty as well as interviewed multiple single student mothers to reach a point of saturation (Merriam, 2009).

To ensure reliability, or the extent to which the study could be replicated, several strategies for consistency were employed (Merriam, 2009). First, I developed a detailed semi-structured interview protocol (Creswell, 2014). Further, I maintained an audit trail- a detailed description of how the data were collected and the decisions made concerning the data (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, Yin (2009) recommends keeping a case study database. A case study database is a way in which the data collected should be organized and documented, and by doing so, increases the reliability of the study (Yin, 2009). I created a similar type of database to file my reflective summaries, which included observations, conversations with faculty and/or staff on campuses, and other notations that helped provide insight into the individual institutional environments.

Limitations of Study

There are various limitations to this study. First, while both institutions selected were recognized by the IWPR SPSI as being supportive of student parents, they are both from the state of Pennsylvania which has a state-funded program for single student mothers. As such, the support for single-mothers in postsecondary education could be based upon the state-funding verses the institution. All but one of the women in this sample were participants in the state funded program. Another limitation is that both institutions selected were public community

colleges. While they were selected because of their similarities, the information is not generalizable to a different type of institution nor to a larger population.

The selection of participants was voluntary, thus the age, race, and ethnicity breakdown was not carefully controlled. Also, the assumption was made that the participants wanted to participate and were representing their perceptions and backgrounds truthfully and accurately. Since the study was voluntary, I made every effort to accommodate the participants. This included conducting phone interviews in approximately 30% of the sample. While Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) noted no known differences between face-to-face interviews and interviews conducted on the phone, rapport and nonverbal cues may have been missed (Merriam, 2009).

Only interview notes, reflective summaries of time spent on campuses, and interviews were chosen as sources of evidence within this research design. Further evidence might have been gathered if I conducted direct observation or participant observation; however, both sources of evidence were not feasible. Finally, the data from two cases are not generalizable to a greater population. They only represent the experiences of low-income undergraduate single-mothers at these two specific research sites, i.e., two community colleges in Pennsylvania noted as being supportive of student parents.

Chapter Four

Results

Introduction

This study explored the experiences and perceptions that influence the pursuit of postsecondary education for group of low-income single-mothers attending two community colleges in Pennsylvania noted as being supportive of student parents. I used Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of human development as a framework through which to examine these participants' experiences and perceptions at two institutions.

The analysis revealed more commonalities than differences across the institutions, thus the emergent overarching themes listed below are inclusive of both research sites and reflect the experiences of the single-mothers in the study:

- The participants pursued postsecondary education in hopes of obtaining a degree that would provide them with a career that could support their family.
- The participants' children presented barriers to their mothers' education; however, they are also the primary motivator of the participants' postsecondary pursuits.
- The single student mothers in this study created support systems. If they did not have family, then they built other networks, often from members within the institution.
- Public assistance and financial aid were necessary to the participants' success. However, the single student mothers in this study did not want to utilize public assistance because they found it burdensome to secure and emotionally taxing.

The following discussion presents the overarching themes and major corresponding themes using the voices of the participants.

Personal Resources

The Desire for a Better Life. The women in the study pursued postsecondary education in search of financial security and better lives for their children. The student mothers were motivated and inspired to complete their education out of a deep desire to set a good example for their children and provide for them. Ariel's comment regarding her motivation to return to college, and intent to complete, is not only representative of the student mothers, but also demonstrates their desires for a better life:

I wouldn't be back in school if it wasn't for my baby. It wouldn't have happened at all. It wasn't even in the plan for the future. I kept saying I'd go back to college, but never happened. I'd be like, I'll just go eventually. I'll go eventually...I wake up, I see the smiling face looking at me, and I'm like, if I don't get off of welfare, she's gonna want for everything.

Many of the women in the study discussed their desire to provide a safe place to live, food, clothes, and activities without receiving public assistance, and how not having to receive public assistance would make their children proud. Mary articulated how a desire for her children to proud of her motivated her to succeed: "I want them to be ... To let them be like proud of me in the future, no need for anything, Mommy will get everything for them."

The participants' strong hunger for a better life and motivation for financial security helped them continue in college, but it did cause the women stress. Many of the women in the study relayed feelings of guilt and sadness because of the amount of time spent in lectures, labs, or studying. The consensus from the interviews is that these women were willing to make the short-term sacrifice of not spending enough time with their children, or not having the resources

to provide for their children, for the long-term benefit of their education within reason. As Naomi stated:

I have sad, but hopeful, feelings because other people have more time to spend with their kids. I feel like my kids, nine and ten, are at a crucial age where they understand a lot. They miss their mother. I wish I had more time, but I always try to talk to them and just let them know why I'm doing this... When I talk to my kids they be like, "It's okay, Mom. We understand, you want a better life." I always think about that, like all of their dreams at the end.

In addition to the feelings of sadness and guilt because of time spent away from their children, most of the participants expressed levels of stress as a result of not having enough time to properly juggle children, college, a household, and work. Annie's comment summarizes the participants' feelings of stress:

I feel very overwhelmed with not getting enough done. Even sitting here, I'm like, having a mini panic attack because I'm like, oh crap, I still have stuff to do. But like, I don't even care because there's no point in it, because it's going to get done, and it's really not much to do.

The majority of the student mothers felt stressed because they weren't getting enough done either for college or for their households; however, they also learned how to negotiate these feelings because they did articulate limits of sacrifice regarding time spent with their family. Janey's comment encompasses this sentiment:

I was feeling like I can't be everywhere and I can't do everything. It really came back to, again, managing time and what could I do for my family and my kids more than the

classwork. The classwork was very hard, but if I apply myself, I can do it. I guess my issue is I felt like I was constantly applying myself and pretty much detach to almost ignore my family, which is not a good feeling.

To counteract these feelings, and to be academically successful, most of the women in the study described that they learned how to ask for help and utilize resources available to them. Three of the skills that the women asserted were essential in continuing their education were time management, organization, and self-care.

Time Management and Organization. All of the women emphasized that time management was an essential skill that they learned as student mothers. Time management was learned in a variety of ways. Some women learned it naturally through juggling multiple priorities, and other women were taught the skill through academic success workshops. Regardless of how it was learned, time management was critical to their success.

The women in this study had fairly tight day to day schedules. They typically started their days between 5:30-6:00 am and would study late into the evening. Mothers with young children aged five and under worked their studying into the hours in which their children were in childcare or were sleeping. Mothers with school-aged children frequently used the time when their children were participating in activities as time to study or complete homework. Further, mothers with children in this age group and mothers with teenagers cited doing homework with their children, simultaneously. The mothers with children over the age of five also indicated that they placed more responsibility on their children. One of the more extreme, but not completely atypical, schedules is Fatima's. She states,

I wake up at 3 a.m., I start studying, I finish at 6 a.m. I cook their breakfast for them, and they wake up, they eat. I'm trying to put on clothes and everything. Then I take the bus at 8, and I'm here at 8:30, and we have class at 9. I take class from 9 to 11. Then I work from 11 to 2. Then I'm trying to learn driving, so I drive one hour or two hours, then I go ... I take my kids from the day care, go back to the house, cooking, cleaning, and doing everything. Then ... Like trying to put them to bed at 9, before 9, and studying from 9 to midnight. This is my day.

Paula's comments demonstrate another example that of how participants place responsibility on their school-aged children:

My daughter goes to a charter school, so her bus comes in around 6:40. Clinicals, I have to be there 6:45. I leave 20 minutes before. She's already up by 6:00, so we both get ready. There's a window in between, like a 20 minutes window. I tell her specifically, 'You wait here', because the bus picks her up right in front of my home... Right in front of the driveway... I have cameras in front of my house recording 24/7. So I see that she gets on the bus. Nothing has happened. She listens to everything I say. Nothing has happened... Her bus comes back at 4:30. So, if I'm not back by 4:30, usually I'm back by, depending on the clinic, the latest I'll be back is by 5:00. So she'll be waiting for me 30 minutes or 15 minutes, give or take. So, I say, 'Just wait for me. Call me or text me as soon as you're at home. Then I'm going to be there.' She texts me, 'I'm home.' I say, 'Just wait in the room. Get yourself a snack.' But she listens to all my instructions.

Organizational skills are also critically important. The participants all discussed the importance of setting goals, prioritizing, and planning. They found that having a list of tasks that needed to be completed for home, children, school, etc. were helpful. Additionally, for the mothers with

older children, having task lists for their children assisted in keeping the household moving while the mother was in class or at clinical/lab locations. For example, Linda sites her planner and cellphone as being imperative to keeping organized:

So, I have a specific planner just for school. That has, as far as just what I need due for school. And then I have my phone as my planner for things that are going on in my son's life and things that are going on in my life. So, I manage the two. So, when I'm planning, like if I have a doctor's appointment, I have both planners, I carry both with me: my phone and my school planner. So, it's like, 'Oh can you do this day?' 'Oh, I have a test this day, so can I push the time for that doctor's appointment later?'

Working in tandem, the skills of time management and organization allow single student mothers to create schedules that work for them and their households. The relationship of between the two is well exemplified by Moana's summary:

Organization. I have to follow a routine and I can't deviate from the routine because then mayhem just happens... I say okay we have one car. It has to service everybody so we just kind of organize the schedules. Okay, so on Monday this is what is happening. Tuesday this is what's happening. I just basically have to organize it and stick to that routine in order to give me that chance to fulfill all of my obligations.

The participants also discussed the importance of self-care. The next section will discuss the various ways in which the single student mothers cared for themselves.

Self-Care. The literature suggests that stress and negative feelings are challenges to the postsecondary persistence of single student mothers. Although time management and organization helped the women juggle multiple priorities, many of the women in this study

directly articulated the importance of making sure they tended to their mental health. Roughly half of the single student mothers utilized the counseling services on their respective campuses, and many of them also had therapists or psychologists outside of the college. It was clearly demonstrated through their stories that reaching out for help and taking care of their mental health was a key aspect in their success. Jenn relayed a typical statement regarding the counseling provided by the college:

The school, when I need counseling, they're there for me...Because when you're in a difficult situation, you feel like nobody is there to help you or if there is someone to help you, you feel like you don't want to bother them even if it is your own family or friends, even though they say, "Yeah, just ask me for help." Sometimes you feel like you could be overwhelming,

Laura reiterates the importance of counseling, but also represents those in the study who have committed to counseling outside of the college:

That's huge for me. I have to always be in touch with my emotional and mental health. I do take anti-depressants, and I've done that since I started recovery, and I just try and do things that make me happy, make me feel good about myself, like swim classes for my son, like I try to be sociable. I try to take the girls to the fair. That stuff makes me feel good.

The single student mothers in this study were motivated to persist to degree completion as a way to provide a better life for their children and to be good role models. Their desire to provide a better life for their children led them to postsecondary attendance; however, the multiple demands of being a mother, student, and worker often resulted in feelings of sadness, guilt, and

stress. To remedy these challenges and persist, the single student mothers used their motivation and determination, but also learned to manage their time, organize their priorities, and employ their resources, especially regarding their mental health.

Support Systems, Supportive Others, and Campus Supports

The second sub-question of this study's overarching inquiry into how single student mothers persist in postsecondary education examines helpful and unhelpful institutional programs and practices. Four programs and practices emerged as helpful, and a few emerged as barriers. This section will review the barriers first as the single student mothers were able to navigate them due to the one of the helpful programs within both institutions.

The Admissions and Enrollment Process. Regardless of the institution, half of the participants within the sample cited the admissions process and initial enrollment into the community college as confusing or cumbersome. Several of the women in the study mentioned applications for the wrong term, having documents lost, or having to take multiple placement tests thereby causing confusion and inconvenience. Ariel's experience exemplified the women who mentioned the admissions process as being a challenge:

I applied for the spring. That was the fiasco with the college 'cause they were like, "Oh, you're applying for the fall." I'm like, I'm not taking classes in the fall. She's due, obviously first. It's not happening. Still, they had me for the fall so I had to get that fixed.

Another mother, Anna, shared her experience with the enrollment process:

Extremely infuriating. Actually, I remember ... Now I still laugh about it with my advisor, even though it wasn't that long ago but I'm like, if I didn't have my advisor to like step in, like I would have dropped out just trying to complete the enrollment process alone. I was

misinformed and given some bad information, and it was really hard relying on people to tell you what to do, but those certain people, and I'm not going to name names, they kind of didn't do their job and kind of misinformed me, and there were just really frustrating things sent from one person to the next and then being sent back to the previous person and kind of after saying, "Oh no, but they told me this was your job," and from them, "No it's not my job." And I was like, look I just want an education, can you just tell me where I go to get on the right path?

Financial Aid. Similar to the admission and enrollment process, the financial aid process acted as a barrier for the single student mothers in this study. Over half of the women in this study reported that financial aid was confusing, and they would have not been able to navigate it without the help of another program on campus. The mothers in this study were all of low socioeconomic status thus extremely dependent on their Pell grant and other federal programs to make their education attainable. However, the FAFSA, other forms needed by the institution, and general process was confusing to the single student mothers. As Linda summarized:

So I would say registering for classes and financial aid are the toughest part of going to school. Cause some classes you don't need, some classes you do need. Some they don't cover under financial aid cause it doesn't go with your major, and some they do. Knowing which ones is hard, and the paperwork they want is also hard.

Ariane relayed her challenges with the financial aid process:

The financial aid process, even with me having been through the food stamp process, was extremely difficult because when they ask you for your 2015-2016 taxes, most people

will think, "Oh yeah, I have my taxes prepared here. I can use those, but I couldn't. They wanted other paperwork.

Like Ariane, most of the women relayed challenges with the financial aid and/or admissions process, but they would immediately follow their challenges with praise of the programs and people who helped them navigate it. As Ariane followed up:

But again, if it weren't for people there guiding me, I would've again, raised a fit and had a tantrum and drop out because it was so hard. I remember literally being in tears from being so frustrated trying to fill out the paperwork for the college. It was just like, why do you need to know all this? Who has access to this information?

While participants did not have positive experiences or perceptions of admissions or financial, they found other programs in the college supportive.

KEYS. Unanimously, the participants in this study cited one program and the staff in the program as being imperative to their initial enrollment and continued success: the KEYS program. The KEYS program is a state funded program administered at community colleges that assists student parents who are eligible to receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits. The women in this study felt that without the KEYS program, they would not have persisted in postsecondary education. The KEYS program provided them with assistance for childcare, assistance with transportation, laptops if needed, an on-campus advisor who served as an advocate, financial incentives for good grades, attendance, and peer support. Naomi described how her KEYS advisor helps her with much more than just the program:

I'm in this program called the KEYS Program where they help single-mother students. They help us to be successful in college. That has been the biggest impact and chance for me. I started with the KEYS this semester. I been with them a month, and they have been very helpful with any support. One of my advisors in the KEYS Program, her name is Christa. She helps me out a lot. She has a master's degree in English. I've been going to her with extra help to help me with my English class and everything.

Another mother, Lori relayed how the KEYS program was her support system within the college, and even watched her son when she had no one else help her:

But, my KEYS advisors definitely helped me the most at school. I remember Mary keeping my son in her office one day so I could go to class. And she was just like, "Oh, it's a baby. Okay. I guess I'll keep him in my office for now." So, I think they're very encouraging.

The advisors within the KEYS programs not only served in an advising capacity, but they also advocated for the single student mothers. Many of the mothers in this study reported that they were first introduced to the KEYS program while in temporary housing because of the relationships the KEYS advisors had built with caseworkers in the area. The KEYS advisors would not only help them while they were in college, but they also helped them through the initial enrollment process. Anna's story was typical of the women who had been in transitional housing,

One of my neighbors, living with me, she also knows of everything (Anna's background), and she told me about the KEYS program in the college because her caseworker knew.

And then I was like, "Yeah, I want to go to college. If it is possible, if I get money for the

class and everything, I would like to go." Then I started come here (the college) with my baby. And then KEYS program I started talking to the two ladies. There was Miss Maggie and Miss Sadie, and they were very nice. They were very supportive, and they explained everything to me, and they told me what I have to do. Then I started doing my placement test, then registered for the class, being in the KEYS program, I was riding a bus to come to college and drop off my son to daycare. They helped me.

In addition to be advocates and advisors, the KEYS program creates opportunities for the women to interact with each other. The women in this study referenced regular meetings in which the women from the KEYS program had an opportunity to meet each other. Most of the women in the study found this support helpful.

Building Support Networks. The KEYS program served as the impetus for many of the participants to develop a support network. While many of them cited having good support networks outside of the college through family and close friends, about half of the participants did not. For these women, the support system the KEYS program assisted in building, was especially important. The program not only offered an advisor and advocate, but also a peer support network that could assist with babysitting, studying, and helping each other, as Lori shares:

I think in KEYS we have each other. And Patricia (KEYS Advisor) and I are trying to make a little group type thing where we can all help each other more, like when I keep this girl's kids, or she keeps another girl's kids when that girl goes to class. Most of us in this program don't have a support system outside of school. So, I think that having the support system within KEYS is really helpful to a lot of us.

Laura's comment is also typical of how participants describe the KEYS support:

Upon going to some of the meetings, I did run into a few mothers that I actually went to high school with, who our kids are around the same age. They know each other and have played with each other before. It helps. It does. I really think it does help. Especially ... I know it's for the single parents and those that are trying to really get through school. It's that extra push. If you don't have the family support or the home support, then you still have the school support, which is great.

.In summary, the participants in this study found the KEYS program helpful because of the resources it provided, including advisors to help them navigate the enrollment process, the advocacy and facilitation of campus support, and the financial assistance.

ACT 101. ACT 101 is also a state funded program to assist academically or financially disadvantaged student through postsecondary education. Many of the single student mothers overlapped into this program as well. This program assisted the single student mothers in this study with additional academic support: Anna summarized it well:

There is a program called ACT 101. They also help. When I need to register for the class or any course that I have, they help me. ACT 101, recently helped me with an assignment. I needed help, so yeah, they're very helpful and they're very friendly. I get a lot of support.

Single student mothers frequently cited other campus resources as being helpful. Counseling, tutoring, the library, and the on-campus childcare all were cited more than once. The mothers with children under five years of age were the participants who mentioned the on-campus daycare thus this result is specific for single-mothers with children under five years of age.

Campus Resources. The mothers in this study all mentioned various campus resources that helped them to successfully continue their education. These resources included counseling, tutoring, library resources, and the on-campus childcare. Outside of the KEYS program, Counseling was the most cited institutional program utilized by single student mothers. Through the KEYS program, many of the single student mothers had learned the skill of self-care, and they had reached out to the counseling center for assistance in managing their multiple roles and priorities.

The library and tutoring were other campus resources the single-mothers had been referred to through the KEYS program. For many of the participants in this study, a quiet place to study and/or free tutoring was helpful in maximizing their time and energy. As Amanda summarized:

You have a lot of resources here. The library has meeting rooms and different areas that you can focus and study. Photocopy, printing, computers, all of that's available here.

There are a lot of resources. Then, like I said, you have tutoring, you have free tutoring on campus.

The referrals and utilization of the multiple resources on campus assisted the women in their successful completion of a course, semester, or academic year. Further, through the KEYS program and the connection to multiple campus resources, the women were able to build a college support system. For many of the single student mothers, the support system within the college was the only support they had in the postsecondary endeavors. As Linda shares:

I am kind of flailing in that area (family support of college). I'm kind of left to my own resources when it comes to school. My mom on occasion, if needed prior, she would drop

me off to school and pick me up, but since then, there have been a lot of additions on to her plate, so she couldn't even if I needed her to now. Like I said, I'm the first to go to college, so it's kind of like, "oh well." Being as though I stopped going for a while, it is easy for them be like, "Oh well she's just playing. She's never going to finish." ...If you don't have the family support or the home support, then you still have the school support, which is great.

Faculty were another integral piece of the single student mother's support system. The participants found the relationships and connections they built with faculty to be helpful. Faculty at both institutions often took on the role as confidante. Mary described how her psychology professor helped her get through the initial separation from her now ex-husband:

But I talked with my psychology professor, and I asked him. I said, "Look. I'm doing my best with my kids and I love them more than anything in this life, but I feel like they love their father more than me." He was like, "No, no, no, no. They know that Mom is here, and that she loves them and doing everything for them. But they are not sure about the father. That's why they thought maybe he will go, maybe they will not see him again." Especially, he travels to Egypt many times and he stay there, like, for two months. So, I'm finding myself like I have to answer their questions. "Where is Daddy?" Especially the weekend, "Where is Daddy? Why he's not coming to take us the weekend. We miss Daddy."

The faculty also allowed the single-mothers in this study special permission or accommodations due to their children. Ariel relays:

My paralegal 101 professor. She saw I was having a hard time and she referred me to KEYS, to see if I could get resources because I missed like two of her classes due to appointments with welfare. She was my one day a week class. I wasn't allowed to miss more than three... I had just moved, and I didn't have daycare secured yet...so ...yeah, I just took her (her child) to class.

Faculty also helped the participants by extending deadlines, as Kara shares in her comments about trying to juggle home schooling her children and being in school herself:

So the course was absolutely not supposed to be self-paced but I handed a lot of stuff in late. Mainly just ... I don't want to say because I knew she (Faculty) was okay with it. It was helpful because I could focus on the other class, then on the one I turned in stuff late. There was less time to spend feeling sorry for myself because I knew I still had to get stuff done.

Finally, the participants also recognized faculty for going above and beyond for many of the mothers in this study. Amanda relays the general perceptions of faculty:

With this school, I think teachers are much more invested in their students' success. Teachers really care about their students on an individual level. You can talk to them after class. They have office hours. You can email them, they get back to you right away. If you have a concern or ... Like you're having real conversations, real connections with these people. They genuinely want you to succeed. They genuinely want you to get the grade, and they want to help you get there if you put the effort in. Unless you're really just not even trying to put the effort in, you're going to succeed in this college because the teachers really care.

A final program the participants mentioned as being helpful was Emergency Assistance, administered through the Student Affairs division at their colleges. Emergency Assistance was available for all students at both institutions, but had been utilized by more than half of the single student mothers. One of the single-mothers explained that she was able to utilize emergency assistance secured through her advisor in the KEYS program:

When they didn't give me my food stamps on time, this was while back, last Spring or Fall, whenever. They gave me the gift cards to go to the store, and gift cards to go back and forth to the store. It helped a lot.

Another student shared an experience from their campus where they allow a specific amount of emergency assistance within a specified period:

So you learn, there's a lot of help. It's just, imagine that little key, to open that door. Like I had to get my car fixed. They allot \$1,500 I believe, every six month period. But if you have a vehicle that needs repairs, you get an estimate, you bring it to them, and if okayed ... they'll help you fix the car. Because what they want you to do is, they want to help you.

For many of the women in the study, unplanned circumstances such as a vehicle break down, not having enough money for food, or some other unplanned extenuating emergency could prevent them from continuing their education. An emergency assistance fund gave them another resource to employ on their quest for their degree and financial stability.

The Societal Factors

Participants' use of various public services and programs was a significant factor contributing to their persistence. This study's final sub-question is an examination of the broader

societal factors that the participants perceived as helpful, or as barriers. All participants except for one single student mother received assistance from Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Over half of the participants in the study received assistance from other programs as well, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Child Health Program (CHIP), Housing Assistance, and/or assistance with utilities. As a result of their socioeconomic status, the mothers in this study also received educational assistance from the Federal Pell Program, Federal Work Study Program, State funding such as PHEAA, ACT 101, and/or KEYS, and the ability to take out subsidized and unsubsidized student loans.

Public Assistance Programs. The support from these programs made it possible for the women to attend college and negotiate the financial burden. Moana, who shared that attending college was a struggle for her financially, said that she received SNAP benefits and that, “That saves me more than anything because I don’t have to worry about how I am feeding them (her children) or that kind of stuff. Yeah, that (SNAP) really helps me out.” Naomi shared a similar feeling:

I’m just glad for the extra help and everything. I don’t know how my life would be without it. It probably would be very hard because for the help from them giving me food stamps (SNAP) so I can provide food for me and my kids is. It helps a lot and I appreciate it.

Although the women were grateful for the support, receiving public assistance was difficult for them for three reasons. First, most of the women did not want to receive, or “be on welfare” thus they expressed feelings of inadequacy, embarrassment, and humility. Second, the process was cumbersome, confusing, and time-consuming. Third, for many of the women, it impeded their ability and/or desire to work.

Receiving public assistance was perceived as being difficult for the women because it was something they “did not want to do.” This feeling was pervasive among the women, and was influenced by the way they were treated by the individual caseworkers in the public assistance offices and fear of the way others viewed them. Ariel shared her initial experience of applying for public services while she was pregnant with her daughter:

It is hard, especially for people who just started to file. My favorite (sarcastic tone) was when I first filed, I walked into the office, seven months pregnant, and I was like, I need help with assistance. I got an appointment for cash (TANF), and I walked in and the lady was like, "You can walk ten miles to the bus stop." I looked down, I looked up, I looked down again. I'm like, in what world can a pregnant woman walk ten miles to the bus stop? She just shrugged her shoulders and she said, "Here's a paper to get waiver for the work program." I'm like okay. I'm still wondering where in the world I can walk ten miles to the bus stop.

Not as extreme, but similar in the way they were treated, Amanda relayed trying to explain what had happened to cause discrepancies in her SNAP paperwork:

I go in there to talk to a person to explain what happened, this is why ... They don't care why. What they care about is do you have form this, form that, and this paper documentation printout, this, that and that. They won't listen. You need all your paperwork and you have to have everything completed thoroughly, and then it still might be misplaced, and you have to start over in a month. They don't care.

In addition to the perceptions of that the staff are not empathetic, the participants also found the application and renewal processes for public assistance programs confusing and cumbersome.

Echoing what Amanda had relayed with discrepancies in her forms, Ariane shared a story of barely receiving her assistance for a month because of a missed phone interview. The liaison from the KEYS program assisted her thus it worked out, but as Ariane relays, it is confusing:

Sometimes it's kind of confusing, some of the questions they ask you. I think it would be better if they highlighted some of the areas they wanted you to fill out. I know that depending on if you're doing for health insurance or food stamps, you have certain questions you don't have to answer and questions you do need to answer. You submit all your information and they tell you basically, "I'm going to give you this date. We're going to call you for an interview" ...And sometimes they do and sometimes they don't. I know this time around I was supposed to get a call on September 12th, I think it was. I never received a phone call. I waited, had my phone turned up and everything, never received it. Never received a phone call. Actually, had to talk to my advisor from KEYS, and she had contacted somebody to find out the number I call so that I could reschedule, or set up an appointment with them. It worked out, thank god.

In summary, because of the negative perceptions the mothers had about receiving public assistance, the confusing process, and the poor treatment, many of the mothers delayed receiving assistance until they could no longer do so, as Janey describes:

I do get assistance with food. I had been approved for cash assistance last semester. I waited until last semester. I toughed out the whole beginning of the program, but last semester, it just became too difficult, so I decided to swallow my pride and be able to do this to help the family while I'm in school and alleviate a little bit of anxiety there.

Other mothers in the study felt trapped in their receipt of public assistance because of the way in which the system is set-up. As Ariel describes her decision to take the public assistance, work, or receive child support:

First off, I get \$200 (TANF) a month for two people. The child support, they garnish from her father, which is \$400 a month. But, if I get off welfare, I lose daycare. I'm not making enough to actually be able to sustain myself, but I'm also not making ... I would not be making enough to put her in daycare if I just took the child support. The most money I get is from food stamps (SNAP), which is \$300 a month, and now that I'm in housing (Housing Assistance), if I get a job, my rent goes up to astronomical prices. I have to do work study instead (Federal Work Study).

Naomi's experience reiterates the limitations on the ability to work that receiving public assistance yields:

Yes, because when I changed my hours, like if I'm full-time, they (SNAP) took me down drastically. Even if I'm getting more hours, I still feel as if I need the help, but the Welfare Office really doesn't care. I feel like somebody that's working and needs the help, don't get much help. If I laid around on my butt and then didn't do anything, I feel like I would get all the help and get a pass all the time. The only good thing is with my hours being cut, I did get more food stamps so that was a positive thing. They give me more food stamps.

Many of the single student mothers in this study found a way to earn money without effecting their public assistance. As Ariel stated above, she received federal work study. The federal work study program as well as the other federal and state aid programs were imperative in the single

student mother's academic success and persistence. Through a combination of the public assistance programs and educational programs, the single-mothers in this study were able to support themselves and their families.

Federal and State Educational Programs. The single student mothers would not be able to attain a postsecondary education if it was not for the various federal and state educational programs. All participants received federal and state financial aid, including half of the participants utilizing their access to student loans. Financial aid, along with the public assistance the mothers received, helped to support their family while they earned their education. Janelle's summary is typical of the single-mothers in this study in her use of loan refunds and/or other refund:

Student loan refunds and credit. I get a tax return, so I live off of the tax return as long as possible. I won't have that next year, because I will have not enough work hours in over this last year with school to have that to rely on. As of this year, though, basically, tax return. I had to cut my hours at work, but I was working part-time minimally. Student loan refunds. If I have to use credit for something to hold me over, I will. Interest and more interest.

Over half the mothers in this study also relied heavily on their federal work study position as the federal work study program allows students to earn a paycheck but does not affect public assistance. As Fatima reports:

For now I support us because I'm taking cash assistance from the government and I took food stamps, and I'm working. Like, I work part-time here, work study, to help with the bills. It is only 15 hours per week, but it helps.

Although they provide the financial assistance needed for the single-mothers to afford postsecondary education, the participants noted that application for federal student aid (FAFSA) and the application for state aid included a lengthy process. As noted in other major themes, financial aid was one of the toughest programs and processes for the single student mothers to navigate.

Summary

The overarching and major themes from the semi-structured interviews with twenty single student mothers within the context of their institutional environments were presented in this chapter. The following themes emerged from the data and were supported by the voices of the single student mothers in this study:

- Single student mothers in this study pursued their postsecondary education in hopes of providing a better life for their children.
- While their children posed barriers to their education, they were also a source of inspiration and motivation in their postsecondary pursuits.
- Single student mothers in this study built support networks. They often built their support network, in part, through the institution.
- For the women in this study, public assistance and financial aid were two necessary but not coveted, tools in their quest to earn their degree.

The next chapter will provide a discussion of the results and their implications to policy, practice, and future research.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter provides a summary of the study and its conclusions. This chapter also presents implications and recommendations for practice, policy, and future research.

Significant Findings

When analyzed, the data revealed more commonalities than differences given the institutional context. All emergent themes from the data were inclusive of all participants regardless of the site. The following section presents a discussion of the overarching themes from this study and other significant findings, most notably the influence of the KEYS program on single student mothers themselves and its transformative environmental influences.

A Different Picture of the Low-Income Single Student Mother. Previous research paints a bleak picture of persistence among low-income single student mothers due to multiple risk factors, including multiple priorities of being a caretaker, worker, and student (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Costello, 2014; Gault et al., 2014; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010). However, the data in this study presents a different picture. One of the major findings from this study is that with appropriate time management, goal-setting, and organizational skills, it is possible to pursue postsecondary education while being a low-income single-mother, caretaker, and worker was possible. The women provided insight into various resources, tools, and strategies that made it possible for them to keep consecutively enrolling each semester and successfully completing their degree requirements. These strategies included setting and holding to rigid schedules, setting goals and tasks for themselves and their children, including their children in household responsibilities, and reframing their expectations in each of their roles. For the mothers who had children under five years of age, utilizing the time that their children were

in daycare and/or asleep was imperative. The strategies that were important for mothers who had older children included using the time that their children were in school or activities to study or attend class. Further, these women also asserted that giving their children responsibilities, goals, and tasks helped the household stay on track and made it possible for the single student mothers to attend clinicals, labs, or to study. Finally, about half of the women mentioned that they just had to let some things go, such as a perfectly clean home or home cooked dinners every night. This is important as it demonstrates that with the proper skills and discipline, it is possible for single student mothers to persist despite the multiple demands on their time.

The participants in this study also recognized the importance of asking for help and taking care of their mental health. Like previous research, the participants in this study expressed guilt over time spent away from their children and not holding up to their self-imposed expectations of what it means to be a “good mother.” Further, the women in this study expressed feelings of isolation, sadness, anxiety, depression, and other emotions that correlate with mental health distress, distress which has been noted as a barrier (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Costello, 2014; Gault et al., 2014). However, most of the women also articulated that they were seeking therapeutic counseling or services through the institution to assist them in coping. Many of the women remarked that this was one of the primary resources that aided in their college persistence. This is a significant finding as the challenges with mental health of low-income single-mothers has been noted by previous research; however, this finding gives some insight to how they are trying to cope with it, and provides limited evidence that they are participating in their own self-care. Further, it is notable as it yields insight that with the proper resources, stress and challenges to mental health do not have to be barriers to educational persistence for single student mothers. Moreover, it yields a better understanding of

environmental influences, i.e., the two community colleges that are conducive to the low-income single student mothers in this study seeking help, speaking openly about it, and considering mental health assistance as one of their tools for success.

Power in the Mother-Child Relationship. As noted in the overarching theme, children often present barriers to the single student mothers, but they are also their most powerful source of motivation and commitment. This study provided deep insight into the relationship between the mother and child. The children were unanimously described as the reason the single student mothers embarked on their postsecondary journeys. The desire to be good role models, set good examples, and provide better lives their children grossly outweighed the short-term sacrifices, including their exhaustion, stress, and financial worries. Although these findings are similar to those of Cerven (2013) and Wilsey (2013), it is important to note that the current study revealed the participant's deep desire for a better life for their children was powerful enough to keep them focused and committed to the goal of postsecondary completion despite their challenges. This finding stretches the current body of literature which focuses on the child being the motivator of low-incomes single mother's initial access into postsecondary pursuits versus motivation to complete. In fact, many of the mothers in this study had faced situations where they wanted to drop or stop out of their education, and the thought of setting that example and/or not being able to provide for their children drove them to ask for help, study harder, talk to their professor, and/or find some other alternative route so they could continue..

Support Systems, Supportive Others, and Support Programs. While previous research noted the importance of single student mothers having strong support networks and feeling a sense of belonging at their institutions in their retention (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Brown & Adansi, 2007; Bruns, 2004; Cerven, 2013; Lovell, 2014; Romo & Segura, 2010;

Schumacher, 2015), the data from this study indicates that the single student mothers at the two institutions studied created a support network to help them navigate the academic experience. Some of the women in this study had significant familial support whereas others did not. Despite their individual situations, within the context of their postsecondary endeavors, they built a support network. This is particularly important as it further expands on previous research demonstrating the importance of support networks for low-income single-mothers. This study shows that not only are they important, but the woman in this study created their own support networks within the presumably supportive institutions. Specifically, the participants perceived tutoring, the library, counseling services, and to a lesser degree, the on-campus childcare center as their most helpful campus resources. These resources allowed the single student mothers to employ productive time management skills, reach out for help, and practice good self-care all while on the college campus thereby maximizing their time.

The current study relayed some important insights regarding childcare. The literature indicates that on-campus childcare, childcare subsidies, and assistance securing childcare are imperative for the persistence of single student mothers (Cerven, 2013; Costello, 2014; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Romo & Segura, 2010; Schumacher, 2015). However, insight from this study indicates that while on-campus childcare was helpful, childcare subsidies and assistance in securing quality and consistent childcare was even more pertinent in their postsecondary pursuits. This finding contrasts with the current literature, and is important because on-campus childcare centers, nationwide, are struggling to stay open (IWPR, 2016) and this study suggests there might be another way in which to assist single student mothers in overcoming the childcare barrier. Through assisting single student mothers in securing reliable and quality childcare as well as the assistance needed to finance such childcare, single student

mothers can focus on their postsecondary pursuits, regardless of having access to a childcare center on campus.

The faculty at both institutions helped create a sense of belonging for the single student mothers in this study. The classroom was perceived as a welcoming environment, one that several study participants noted as comfortable for the inclusion of their children if necessary. Faculty were frequently cited as one of the factors who supported single student mothers due to the understanding and rapport they had built both inside and outside of the classroom. As a result, faculty were a part of the single student mother's support network. They often served as mentors or advisors to the women in this study. The positive perceptions of the faculty and classroom experiences are notable as they have been supported in the literature as being key factors in student persistence (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Lovell, 2014; Schumacher, 2015).

Assisting in the overall postsecondary environment of both research sites was a comprehensive support program for single student mothers. This comprehensive support program is also known as the KEYS program. The KEYS program is a state funded program to assist parents receiving SNAP or TANF benefits in certificate or degree programs at one of Pennsylvania's 14 community colleges, and it will be covered thoroughly later in this chapter. However, its influences in the environments of the postsecondary institutions in this study should be noted as the program provided positive climate perceptions for the single student mothers. The perception of a welcoming or unwelcoming institutional climate influences persistence, especially for single student mothers (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Johnson, 2010). A comprehensive support program created an environment where single student mothers received assistance navigating challenging college processes, were referred to campus resources, and were connected to other mothers. The data that emerged relating to the KEYS program and the

climate created by the program gives further insight into environments that contribute their intent to persist until degree completion.

The Policy Context

All of the mothers in this study received educational assistance from the Federal Pell Program, Federal Work Study Program, State funding such as PHEAA, ACT 101, and/or KEYS, and the ability to take out subsidized and unsubsidized student loans. All participants, except one, received assistance from Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and over half of the participants in the study received assistance from other programs as well, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Child Health Program (CHIP), Housing Assistance, and/or assistance with utilities. Thus, the utilization of various public services and programs despite their feelings towards them, was a significant factor contributing to the single student mothers' postsecondary pursuits. The next section will explore the emotional and transactional aspects of public assistance, financial aid, and emergency assistance programs.

Public Assistance from the Emotional Perspective. Previous research asserts that the welfare reform act of the mid 1990's stigmatized those who must utilize public assistance, and negatively influenced single-mothers' perceptions of being able to obtain a postsecondary education due to a work first policy (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Johnson, 2010). The findings from the current study support the assertion of the stigma in relation to receiving public assistance; however, the women in this study perceived public assistance as a necessary resource in which to support their families to continue their postsecondary pursuits.

Unanimously, the women in this study did not desire to be on public assistance. They loathed it. Most them expressed great emotional difficulty with the need for assistance, but felt it was the only way to support their family and ultimately provide a better life for their children.

Much of their emotional strain resulted from their concern of what others might think about them and/or their children, or how others, especially the employees within the public service agencies, treated them. The data gleaned from this study demonstrates the power of specific stereotypes within our society, and powerful impact that they have on marginalized populations. A stereotype frequently mentioned by the women in the current study was that of being lazy and/or stupid, both stereotypes delayed some study participants in seeking needed resources. As financial stress is a significant barrier to single student mother's successful postsecondary attainment, this finding is important.

Public Assistance from the Transactional Perspective. Like the emotional strain of needing to utilize public assistance, the process of applying for public assistance and maintaining eligibility for its receipt was perceived as also being burdensome. The complexities of our public assistance programs have been well noted in the literature (Wilsey, 2013; Wilson, 2011), and once again this study provided similar insight. The participants specifically cited the various forms, multiple offices, and disjointed processes that one must navigate to secure funding from any single program as being challenging and problematic. Further, they noted the complex supporting documentation that would have to be submitted with each form. The findings from this study demonstrate that despite needing to navigate complex bureaucratic system, there was little information to assist someone in doing so, leaving many of the single student mothers feeling frustrated and helpless. This study further revealed that the single student mothers relied on the resources available to them within their postsecondary institutions for support and guidance, particularly their advisors and other single-mothers who utilized public assistance.

Financial Aid. The single student mothers would not have been able to obtain a postsecondary education if it was not for the various federal and state educational programs. All

participants received federal and state financial aid, including half of the participants utilizing their access to student loans. Additionally, over half the mothers in this study also relied heavily on their federal work study positions since the federal work study program allows students to earn a paycheck without impacting resources received from public assistance. Although they provide the financial assistance needed for the single-mothers to afford postsecondary education, the application for federal student aid (FAFSA) and the application for state aid were noted as taking a significant amount of time to complete, being confusing and not well explained. This finding is particularly important as financial stress is a significant barrier for single student mothers' postsecondary persistence, and further supports previous research (Wilson, 2011). Further, the lack of knowledge and the complexity of the process could inhibit the single student mothers from seeking and securing the resources necessary to continue their education. Once again, the students in this study noted the support of the comprehensive support program and other single student mothers thereby emphasizing the importance of supportive others and support programs.

Emergency Assistance Funds. In addition to public assistance and financial aid, many of the participants mentioned the need to utilize their institution's emergency assistance funds. These funds, whether held through a college foundation, financial aid office, or program itself, provided a safety net for the single student mothers in this study. A few mothers mentioned using the fund to fix their cars, or to cover a utility bill when public assistance was delayed, or to buy groceries when their SNAP funding was temporarily reduced. As the participants in this study were low socioeconomic status, one unplanned financial stressor could have caused them to abandon their educational path. However, they had financial support from their institutions through these funds.

The KEYS Program and the Environment

The data from this study provides insight into how a comprehensive support program, such as KEYS program, influences an environment, subsequently influencing the choice for single student mothers to persist through their postsecondary pursuits despite their many challenges. As previously mentioned, yet important to note again, the KEYS program is a state funded program to assist parents receiving SNAP or TANF benefits, and as implemented at the two research sites in this study, provided environments that were conducive to the success of single student mothers.

The KEYS program provided support on an individual basis, assisted in the facilitation of support networks within the broader collegiate environment, and assisted the single-mothers in navigating the policy environment through partnerships and advocacy with public assistance agencies and the financial aid offices. Many of the single student mothers in this study described deep struggles with their mental health, specifically they often battled depression, anxiety, and other symptoms of debilitating stress due to being both a mother and a student. While this finding is consistent with previous research regarding impoverished single-mothers (Broussard et.al., 2012; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010), the KEYS program at both research sites implemented tools and strategies to help the single student mothers learn how to ask for help, seek resources to help them cope with the stress created by being single student mothers, connected them to resources to receive and finance the assistance, and created an environment in which it was acceptable, not taboo, to admit that they were struggling. Further, the KEYS facilitators worked with the women in this study to create goals and strategies for themselves regarding their careers and academic plans. The data revealed that this individual planning

helped the participants learn how to set goals, manage their time, and prioritize, all skills that were critical to their persistence.

In addition to helping the women individually, the KEYS program created a support network within their postsecondary institution. The women in the study shared stories of meeting other KEYS participants at monthly meetings, being connected for study groups, childcare duties, and/or being referred to other college resources. Previous research supports the importance of such support networks in postsecondary persistence (Bruns, 2004; Cerven, 2013; Costello, 2014; Schumacher, 2015); however, the findings from the current study provide a deeper understanding of a model in which support can be fostered within the postsecondary environment, itself, despite the level of support with which the student initially presents.

Further, the KEYS program recognized the students as mothers too. Multiple study participants shared experiences of bringing their children into the KEYS office, to the college campus, and to KEYS events. The KEYS program fostered an environment where the single student mom was recognized as both student and mother, a finding that extended to the perceptions of the faculty as well. This is especially important to note as the climate of an institution can directly influence the single student mother's choice and intent to persist (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Johnson, 2010).

Finally, the guidance and advocacy of the KEYS facilitators within the financial aid and public assistance context was imperative. Previous research has highlighted the challenges faced by single student mothers regarding the lack of knowledge about financial aid and public assistance and the complex processes and procedures to secure the resources needed (Johnson, 2010; Huelsman & Engle, 2013; Wilson, 2011). While the bureaucratic systems are indeed

challenging, the current study demonstrated that the burden was eased when another party, i.e., the KEYS facilitator, served as an advocate and a guide through the processes.

It is important to note that a component of the KEYS facilitator's role is to serve as a liaison to the area public service agencies. First, it allows a conduit between the college and the public service agency, opening lines of communication and providing support an advocacy on behalf of the single student mothers. Second, the data revealed that the assistance received from the KEYS facilitators helped mitigate the negative experiences perceived from the public assistance agencies. The negative experiences could have acted as barriers due to not having the needed financial resources; however, the KEYS facilitators were able to intervene and prevent the single student mother from dropping out. Finally, their role as liaison provides an opportunity for the college to reach out and educate those who need public assistance about financial aid resources and other postsecondary resources, a group whom research has shown has limited to access and knowledge about the related topics (Wilson, 2011).

The KEYS program helped create an environment conducive for single student mothers to pursue postsecondary education because it provided resources to the single student mother herself, in her immediate environments of school, public assistance offices, etc., and within the policy context. Further, through programs like KEYS, stereotypes and stigmas are being challenged as the program participant narratives are shared with policymakers, legislators, and other organizations at the state level with whom the program is affiliated (Bone, 2010).

The Environment and Single Student Mothers

Research has been clear that low-income undergraduate single student mothers do not persist in their education at the same rate as other populations, and previous literature has also provided insight as to why single student mothers do not persist (Austin & McDermott, 2003;

Brown & Adansi, 2007; Cerven, 2011; Gault et al., 2014; Gault, Noll, & Reichlin, 2017; Huelsman & Engle, 2013; Matus-Grossman et al., 2002; Radey & Cheatham, 2013; Wilson, 2011). The two research sites chosen for this study were chosen because of their recognition as being supportive environments for single student mothers. In studying these two institutions, I was hopeful that the data would reveal some insight as to why single student mothers continued their pursuit of postsecondary education. Further, through investigating the experiences and perceptions of the single student mothers at these institutions, I believed the best practices revealed from this research could be beneficial to other community colleges as well. The data supports the idea of the environment influencing the women in this study, and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) human ecology model gives insight as to the reasons behind their persistence. However, contrary to expectations, the environments were not profoundly different at the two institutions. Instead, they had more similarities due to the way in which the KEYS programs were implemented and perceived by the single student mothers. The facilitators in the KEYS program at both institutions helped create an institutional culture that produced a positive climate for the single student mothers in this study. Further, the way in which KEYS program was situated within the institution allowed for collaboration within the larger environment thereby creating a supportive environment for single student mothers. The next section will examine the environments of the institutions and their influences on single student mothers through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) human ecology model.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) human ecology model was developed on two imperative assumptions: first, people and their environments are inseparable; and second, change, or development, occurs through interactions with one's environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Individual's experience these environmental contexts throughout their lives. They grow and

change through direct interactions with people, objects, or symbols, i.e., proximal processes. Throughout any given day, an individual may experience multiple people, roles, and settings, i.e., microsystems, and the connections among them are known as the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The exosystem encompasses the contexts in which the individual may not be present, but that influences them; whereas the macrosystem encompasses the broader culture and ideology (Arnold et al., 2012).

The KEYS programs, as implemented at the two research sites, created environments in which single student mothers in this study had positive experiences despite their barriers. As the data supports, the single student mothers at both institutions struggled with the admissions, financial aid, and public assistance processes. In many cases, the participants claim they would have stopped, but the KEYS facilitator stepped in, and guided them through thereby creating a positive direct interaction with the institution. This direct interaction, according to Bronfenbrenner (1979) is a proximal process. The proximal processes facilitated through the KEYS program staff, at various layers of the environment, changed how the single student mothers perceived the environments thus their behaviors within the environment. In other words, in the human ecology model, their continuation in their educational pursuits were a result of proximal processes developing their subsequent behaviors over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The following sections will highlight some of the proximal processes at the various layers of the environment, starting from the macrosystem and working inward to the individual.

Macrosystem. Single student mothers are often met with stigma and stereotypes that change the way they interact with the exosystem and microsystems (Abramovitz, 2006; Lundberg, Pollak, & Stearns, 2016). The current study demonstrates that stigmas and stereotypes still exists as evident through the negative emotions the single student mothers

perceived regarding how they would be viewed in asking for public assistance, or through the worry that they were not fulfilling the correct image of a “mother.” The stereotypes and stigmas prevalent in society were challenged by the KEYS program through the reports, program updates, and narratives of success shared with the community, policymakers, and legislators. Further, the success of the KEYS program and its presences on the college campuses helped create a climate that challenged the stigma of single-mothers through the recognition that these women were both students and mothers. The actions of the KEYS program at the macrosystem influenced the perceptions of the single student mothers at all levels of their environment.

Exosystem. The current study demonstrated the challenges that single student mothers experienced within the policy context. Most of them expressed frustration in securing their public assistance and financial aid. Left on their own, many of them claimed that they would not have continued through the process to secure the resources needed for their educational endeavors, i.e., their direct experience with their environment would have caused them to drop or stop out because they did not have the tools necessary to overcome the challenge. However, with the assistance of the KEYS program facilitator, they were able to navigate the process with support, i.e., the KEYS program got them through it. The KEYS program changed the proximal process, instead of dropping or stopping out, the KEYS program equipped the single student mother with the tools she needed to interact with her environment. The result of the positive direct experience with her environment was that she kept moving forward. Over time, moving forward has translated to persistence.

Microsystem and Mesosystem. The microsystem encompasses an individual’s daily life, i.e. their family, college, school/childcare facility, neighborhood, etc., and the connections across the microsystems comprises the mesosystem (Arnold et al., 2012). The experiences that

single student mothers perceive in the microsystem and mesosystem have great influence on their choice to continue their education. The KEYS program at both institutions created environments in which positive experiences were perceived by the participants in this study. The immediate environment of their college was viewed as supportive. Not only were their KEYS facilitators housed at their college, but their faculty recognized them as students and mothers, and they allowed them to work in such a way that they could feel successful in both roles. Further, the single student mothers were able to build a support network through their college campus that extended across microsystems, i.e. into the mesosystem, through meeting other single student mothers, exchanging childcare, or utilizing on campus childcare. The connections across microsystems into the mesosystem created a welcoming environment for the single student mothers. Further, their direct interactions with campus personnel and each other reinforced their educational endeavors and influenced their choice to continue in their postsecondary pursuits.

Implications for Practice

There were several resources and tools provided by the institutions that the single student mothers in this study noted as helping contribute to their positive experiences and perceptions.. Thus, as practitioners in higher education, implementing these resources or tools could positively influence the persistence and completion rates of single student mothers on our college campuses. The recommendations for practice are as follows:

- A comprehensive support program. A comprehensive support program, similar to the operation of the KEYS program at the two research sites, provides expert advisors working alongside the single student mothers, advocating for their needs, connecting them to various campus resources, referring them for stress and mental health

concerns, and helping them navigate college processes, secure financial assistance, and/or childcare if needed. These experts connected the single-mothers on campus thereby mitigating feelings of isolation and poor fit in college environment that had been documented in previous research (Brown & Adansi, 2007; Bruns, 2004; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Fenster, 2003; Johnson, 2010). Based on the data that emerged from the participants in this study, the comprehensive support program should include the following elements:

1. A support group. Institutions should consider having a support group for single student mothers as a component of the comprehensive support program. The support group should offer a time for the single student mothers to interact with each other as well as learn valuable skills, such as time management or study skills. Further, as many of the participants in this study noted time constraints, a recommendation for practice is to explore virtual opportunities for single student mothers to connect. This may be possible through social media like Facebook or Twitter but could also expand to Face-timing or other synchronous yet virtual options. This would allow single student mothers the opportunity to exchange stories and experiences at a convenient time and location thereby allowing them to feel more connected.
2. Strong partnerships between public assistance agencies and postsecondary institutions. As the women in this study noted,

education is one way for low socioeconomic and first-generation student to overcome poverty and provide a better life for their families (Pandey et al., 2004). As many single student mothers encounter caseworkers, it is imperative that they have foundational knowledge about the local postsecondary institutions. Further, this data that emerged from the current study provided insight into the value of strong partnerships. Thus the stronger the partnership between the postsecondary institution and public service agencies, the better they can collaborate for the success of the single-mothers whom they both serve.

3. Postsecondary institutions and public assistance agencies should work together to help single student mothers create and implement a plan to support their families while attending college and post-college. While attending college, Federal Work Study programs should be considered and recommended. Many of the undergraduate single student mothers in this study found the Federal Work Study program as a great benefit, and it could be a benefit for other low-income single student mothers as well. Further, reframing the college recruitment process by emphasizing career and academic planning at forefront of the college enrollment process and assists the

public service agency in a plan to eventually eliminate the single-mother's need for public assistance.

4. Postsecondary institutions should allow public service agencies to conduct workshops or seminars on their campuses. Such workshops would provide one way in which to help inform low-income students, especially single student mothers, of the assistance programs available, their eligibility requirements, and application procedures.
 5. Postsecondary institutions should consider adopting a workshop series that focuses on financial support while attending college, emphasizing education regarding federal and state aid.
- Professional development should be provided to faculty on the topics of nontraditional students, especially single student mothers. The data revealed a better understanding of the positive influence that faculty have on student retention, especially to the participants in this study when they have the skills and knowledge to be valuable resources and allies. To provide a supportive environment, faculty should be given the knowledge and resources to provide their students with the best learning environment possible.
 1. Professional development could be conducted face-to-face covering topics such as resources for single-mothers or having various public service agencies educate faculty on the community resources.

2. Professional development could also take the form of a shared website that is updated with information and referral resources so that faculty could access it if they needed the information.
- To assist in the persistence of low-income students, especially single student mothers, institutions should consider implementing an emergency assistance fund through their Foundation Offices, Financial Aid and Scholarship Offices, or through another department on campus. Regardless of where the emergency assistance fund is located, it should be well communicated to students.
 1. Communication strategies could include e-mail and social media campaigns targeted to students as well as an educational campaign notifying the faculty and staff at the institution so that they could serve as a resource.
 2. The Emergency Assistance fund should be located on the institution's web page.

Implications for Policy

As noted, the KEYS program operates as comprehensive support program for the single student mothers at both research sites, but it is a state funded program to support single student mothers through the attainment of their associate's degrees. The Pennsylvania Keystone Education Yields Success (KEYS) program assists parents receiving TANF and SNAP benefits in earning certificates or degrees at one of the state's 14 community colleges. The KEYS program provides the college with the resources to hire a facilitator. The KEYS facilitator is responsible for helping the program participants identify career fields, navigate the enrollment and financial aid process, and serve as a liaison to the area welfare agencies (Bone, 2010).

Further, the KEYS program allows for students to count their vocational training as a core work requirement for up to 24 months thereby assisting students in meeting the welfare's policy's work requirement (Bone, 2010). While the KEYS program enjoys the support of the state, challenging budgetary times pose significant threats to the KEYS program as do underprepared students, lack of enrollment increases, and the inability to expand to areas not served by a community college (Bone, 2010). The results of the current study demonstrate that the KEYS Program has the necessary components that create a supportive environment for single student mothers to earn their degree and complete their quest to provide a better life for their children. Therefore, if states want to influence the economic mobility and decrease the number of women and children in poverty, the following policy recommendations should be considered,

1. The state of Pennsylvania should continue the funding of the KEYS program.
2. There is still great need outside of the parameters of TANF and SNAP eligibility guidelines. Policymakers should explore the options of opening the KEYS program to all single student mothers who qualify for a Pell grant.
3. The state of Pennsylvania should streamline its application for student aid. One of the comments shared by many of the participants in this study was that the application process was confusing. Indeed, the application process is confusing to many students in the state as it requires a separate application with a different deadline from the FAFSA. The state of Pennsylvania should review its policy regarding state aid, and implement as many similarities and data sharing tools as possible for the following reasons: first, when working with low-income and first-generation students, multiple processes further confuse an already complex system; second, clear communication will help remedy the complexity of the system; third, the variation between the state

and federal process further confuses a complex system; and finally, aligning the two policies and procedures would increase efficiency.

4. Other states should adopt similar programs to provide environments that are supportive of single student mothers' postsecondary success.
5. In an environment that is financially constrained, the importance of subsidies, especially childcare, need to be thoroughly reviewed prior to being cut as they are difference makers for single student mothers.

The current study also provides insight into recommendations for federal policy. First, recommendations for policy revision within the welfare system. The Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) negatively impacted the collegiate enrollment among adult welfare recipients by imposing specific requirements on weekly work hours (Kim, 2012). Further, welfare recipients could only count specific job training and employment specific education to their weekly work hours if they participated in community service or some type of subsidized or unsubsidized employment (Kim, 2012). These limitations provided barriers to postsecondary institutions, especially for low-income single-mothers, until the states were able to separate the TANF programs (Kim, 2012). Simultaneously, the nation has embarked upon training the American population for 21st century jobs, and within the sector of higher education, funded initiatives to increase college access and success (Kim, 2012). These goals within the current policy environment are incongruent. Zhan and Pandey (2004) note that postsecondary education is one of the ways in which impoverished single-mothers can escape poverty and gain financial mobility; however, the current policy environment impedes both their access a success due to the complexity of the process, the need to work/volunteer along with their participation in postsecondary education, and single-handedly raise their children. Policy

recommendations supported by the data from this study as well as the research include aligning the welfare policy with the nation's education and workforce agenda, providing adequate support for childcare while student parents are studying and/or working, and using education as method in which to eliminate the need for assistance (Johnson, 2010; Kim, 2012).

Another policy revision within the welfare system is to eliminate the redundancy and inefficiencies. The results from this study supported the claims by Fenster (2003), Johnson, (2010), and Wilson (2011) that the eligibility requirements and processes to receive benefits are burdensome, redundant, complex, and confusing. The welfare system should revise its policies and programs to create simple and efficient methods of aiding those in need.

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) enables students who have financial need to access and afford a postsecondary education. The FAFSA process was confusing and complex to the participants in this study. Consistent with previous research that those in the lowest income levels experience the most confusion and inconsistent information, the recommendation for this policy would be simplification (Wilson, 2011). Although much work has been done in the simplification of the FAFSA in the last few years, the participants still cited a need for additional clarification and understanding.

Finally, an overarching theme in this study was that while the single-mothers utilize welfare as a resource to support their families while pursuing higher education, they did not want to because of the complex process and the ways in which people perceived them. It is important that stigmas and stereotypes be considered and acknowledged when revising or creating policy so that we don't further marginalize a vulnerable population through the policy structure in our society.

Recommendations for Research

This study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the low-income single student mother's experience at two institutions that had been recognized as being supportive of single student mothers. Accounting for the fact that the low-income single student mothers exist within a particular context, i.e., their institutions, this study was designed as a basic descriptive and interpretive qualitative study with a lens of an embedded case study. The data revealed that the single-mothers at these two institutions shared more commonalities than differences across the institutions thus the focal point of the study were the emergent themes across all participants. While the data from this study helps us better understand low-income single student mother's experiences in contexts that are noted as supportive, it might be helpful to gain a deeper understanding of low-income single student mother's experiences at institutions that do not carry such a notation.

Further, while the current study provided insight into how institutions can create environments that assist single student mothers, it is not generalizable to a larger population. Further, the demographic characteristics of the participants in this study illuminate the experiences of low-income single-mothers, but there are single-mothers within every socioeconomic status group and from various backgrounds. For instance, single student mothers who live just above the income-level to receive public assistance may have very different experiences. Thus, further qualitative research should be done to better understand how socioeconomic status influences single student mothers' postsecondary experiences. Further, this study did not deeply examine how academic or career field influenced the single student mothers; however, certain degree programs require increased time spent away from the family in laboratories or clinical settings. It would be interesting to gain a deeper understanding of how

various academic discipline influence the postsecondary experiences of single student mothers. Finally, this study focused on women who were persisting. What about women in the same environment who did not persist? Further research can gain insights into why the women did not persist in an environment that has been noted as being supportive of single student mothers.

As a qualitative study, this study yielded a greater understanding of the components that help make an environment conducive to the persistence of single student mothers. These factors included emergency assistance programs, support programs, access to resources to help single-mothers combat mental health issues, and comprehensive support programs. While we have insight into why these programs help single student mothers persist, further research is needed to understand each individual student. Additionally, it would be interesting to study the influences of different types of comprehensive support programs, for example, state-funded versus non-profit or grant funded, on the persistence of single student mothers as well as to study the levels of emergency aid needed to help single student mothers continue.

Further statistical research regarding single student mothers is needed. Qualitative studies, like the current study, have helped establish policies and practices that help single student mothers access, persist, and complete postsecondary education; however, examining factors that statistically influence single student mothers to persist, or not, and can be generalized to a larger population is needed. A comparative study of single student mothers at institutions with comprehensive support programs and those without comprehensive support programs would be helpful in determining the differences, if any.

Finally, the student mothers in this study expressed feelings of guilt and sadness for time spent away from their children, but it would be interesting to explore the perceptions of the children of single student mothers. This type of research could illuminate ways in which

institutions could further partner with public service agencies or their other community resources to provide opportunities for children on their campuses.

Conclusion

As community college enrollment continues to decline nationally (Juszkiewicz, 2016), but the enrollment of single student mothers continues to increase (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2017) higher education administrators need to ask themselves what type of environment and climate they are creating for their students. As four out of ten women at two-year colleges fear dropping out because of dependent care obligations (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2017), what supports can we, as practitioners, put in place to acknowledge multiple priorities and create a system in which a post-secondary credential or degree is attainable? The women in this study believed that they would persist and complete their associate's degree if not the bachelor's or a graduate degree, and they all believe that their education was their path out of poverty. The key to their continued postsecondary pursuits is a system in which they could navigate, resources that they could access, and advisors to help keep the connected to supportive others and to advocate on their behalf. As a practitioner, this has caused me to review the policies and structures within my own institution and implement changes.

Prior to this study, the KEYS program at the college in which I work was a part of the Grants Office. It was not included within the Division of Enrollment Management nor was there much communication between the KEYS program and any of the offices that report to Enrollment Management, including Admissions, Financial Aid, and Student Success. Additionally, there were several other support programs that could benefit single student mothers that also operated as silos within the institution. One program was a program supported through

a combination of nonprofit donations. This program had a lot of overlap with the KEYS program and was not being utilized to its fullest potential.

Since completing the data collection phase of this study, the KEYS program facilitators have been reorganized into the Student Success Department, and an action plan to increase persistence and retention for single student mothers was written. The action plan includes a full-time counselor to coordinate the various efforts on campus for single student mothers, the use of an emergency assistance fund, and partnerships with local nonprofits and public assistance agencies. The action plan was submitted as a grant request to some key community members, and the full-time counselor position was fully funded for one year this past fall. The full-time counselor has recently been hired, and the coordination of a comprehensive support program for single student mothers is currently being implemented on our campus. The persistence and subsequent degree completion for single student mothers is important to the entire community. In my county alone, 46% of the unwed births are to women in poverty and the majority only have a high school education or some college (Towncharts.com, retrieved on February 4, 2018).

Further, the primary industries in this area, i.e., advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and information technology, require at least middle skills training, or postsecondary education. For the economic viability of the region in which I live, continuous review and revision to the programs and policies that make it possible for single-mothers to earn their degrees is imperative.

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Appendix A**Single Student Mother Demographic Survey**

Name: _____

Pseudonym (if preferred): _____

Age: ____ **Number of Children:** _____ **Children's Ages:** _____

Please Indicate Your Race/Ethnicity:

Hispanic/Latino/a: Yes ____ No ____

Racial Category (you may select more than one)

___ **American Indian/Alaskan Native**

___ **Asian**

___ **Black or African American**

___ **Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander**

___ **White or Caucasian**

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Thank you for participating in this study. As you know, I would like to learn more about single-mother's experiences at the community college. This interview will take approximately an hour to an hour and a half to complete, it will be audio-recorded, and I may take notes. Your information will be kept confidential, and you may choose to be referred to in the research by another name. Do you have any questions?

1. First, I would like to know a little more about you? Tell me about yourself and your background.
 - Parent – Child/children
 - Family?
 - Student?
 - Worker?
 - How you stay motivated, or what motivates you?
 - What kinds of support do you have (financial)? How do you live?
2. Tell me a little bit about your children/child?
 - a. Ages of child/ren
3. Besides school and taking care of your child/children, what other responsibilities do you have?
 - a. Work? Number of jobs or work hours?

- b. Family?
 - How do you manage all the responsibilities (child/children, school, other)? What strategies do you use to cope with multiple demands?
 - o Student
 - o Parent
 - o Other
 - What does a typical day look like for you? What about a typical week?
 - Are there other people who help? What roles do they play?
- 4. What motivated you to go to college?
 - a. Why did you choose to go to college?
 - b. Degree, or program of study?
 - c. Goal in coming to college?
- 5. Tell me about getting into college?
 - a. Who helped you?
 - b. How did you learn about the process?
- 6. Describe your experience been in college.
 - a. Outside of classroom (advisors, student groups)
 - i. What types of things do your peers or advisors do that have helped you?
 - b. Inside of classroom (coursework, faculty, people in class)
 - i. What types of things have your faculty done that have helped you?

- ii. Are there any parts of course syllabi that have been helpful?
7. What has else has helped you be successful at _____CC?
- a. What internal resources, like your motivation or your willpower, have assisted you? What external resources, like you friends or kids, have helped?
 - b. How has _____CC helped you
 - i. What role have the support programs played (fill in with specific program)
 - ii. What role has faculty or staff played?
 - iii. What role have your peers played?
 - c. Outside of college- what has helped you?
8. What has been difficult for you at _____CC?
- a. Internally- affecting yourself personally? What about externally, like your kids or friends?
 - b. Within the college?
 - c. Outside of the college?
9. What do you wish you had that you don't? What would really help you?

Appendix C

Recruitment Flyer

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!



**ARE YOU A SINGLE
MOM?
ARE YOU TAKING SIX
CREDIT HOURS?**

Volunteer for a Research Study!

Participate in a qualitative study that will help a college administrator better understand the experiences and perceptions of single student mothers. The interviews are voluntary and will take around an hour to an hour and a half.

You must be at least 18 years old, have children under the age of 18, be Pell eligible, and enrolled in at least six credit hours.

Who?

Single Mothers

Why?

To provide a deeper understanding of your experiences in college.

Where?

A public place on campus or close to campus!

When?

Call / Text researcher for more info!

SYDNEY BEELER

University of Kansas

**(724) 244-2848
Sydbeeler@gmail.com**

