DISSERTATION

NONTRADITIONAL COMMUNITY-COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH CHILDREN:

WHAT IT MEANS TO PERSIST TO DEGREE

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ABSTRACT

NONTRADITIONAL COMMUNITY-COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH CHILDREN:

WHAT IT MEANS TO PERSIST TO DEGREE

Fifteen nontraditional community-college student-parents from three Mountain West colleges participated in this phenomenological study, which describes the participants' experiences after they had delayed college attendance and then became full-time students while parenting, working part-time, and managing academic responsibilities. The purposeful sample of student-parents represented mixed demographics: three men and 12 women, ages 21 to 43; marital status of nine single parents and six married parents; diverse backgrounds; three college drop-outs; one participant with a bachelor of science degree; four military veterans; two participants who had completed drug/alcohol rehabilitation; and all participants with a child under kindergarten age. The methodology included a 90-minute interview with open-ended questions, interpretive phenomenological analysis, and the delineation of five themes that emerged from the findings of the student-parents' shared experiences. The themes revealed that student-parents attended college to increase their skills and knowledge with the goal of bettering their lives and the lives of their families through a meaningful career. The student-parents had varied interests, abilities, and career goals, and they faced numerous challenges while they attended college. Student-parents appeared to focus on completion of their degree by prioritizing responsibilities and making decisions that would allow them to be financially, academically, and parentally successful despite challenges. Their specific stress factors, coping strategies, and time prioritization were similar, yet some were unique to the individual. Balancing physiological,

mental, and emotional needs was important to the participants while they focused on passing the tests necessary to accomplish their goals. Parenting strategies included shared study with the child when the mode was fun or engaging. Focused study required an environment free of distraction. Parents agreed that a positive mindset was a motivation for persistence. These student-parents' experiences, strategies, and resolve to finish offer guidance to community-college faculty, administration, counselors, advisors, support services, and other community-college student-parents in the associate-degree completion process.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The inspiration for this research emerged from a simple comment from a student as she handed me an assignment. Donna had explained earlier in class that her entrepreneurship paper was not done and that she would bring the paper by my house that evening. That night Donna handed me the completed assignment. Her comment was "My husband and I fight all the time over who has to take care of the baby because we both have lots of homework." Her eyes were teary. I was touched by the emotions of the conflict as I tried to envision the circumstances.

My deep concern prompted many questions about Donna's situation. I understood that she and her husband had competing demands for time. I wondered if she would survive to graduate. Her statement impacted me then, when I was her university instructor. It empowers me today, as it did 10 years ago, to accomplish the research of this study.

A large percentage of the community-college student population is nontraditional students, many of whom are parents. As students attempt college to better their futures, educators need to know not only how to help them complete assignments, but also how to be supportive as they persist to obtain a degree. Their daily lives reflect struggles with competing responsibilities for time. This study attempts to document student-parent experiences in their journey toward completing a degree.

With their increasing enrollment, the growth of community colleges in the United States continues. Today U.S. community colleges serve almost half of the undergraduates in higher education. For fall 2013, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) recorded an enrollment by attendance status of 2,804,305 full-time and 4,061,687 part-time students in community colleges. Nationally, for-credit enrollment in community colleges has increased

21.8% due to their explosive growth from fall 2007 to the present (Phillippe & Mullin, 2011). Growth in community-college numbers reveals the number of associate-degree students in the United States who persisted to degree has doubled from 2000 to 2010 (NCES, 2012). In other words, in 10 years, from 2001 to 2011, the number of associate degrees reached approximately one million (NCES, 2012).

The students who enroll at community colleges have two primary reasons for seeking a 2-year degree beyond high school: (a) to further their education to lead them to a better job or career path (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006), and (b) to maximize their educational investment—community colleges cost less than the 4-year institutions (Murray, 2011). For nontraditional students, the reasons for attending community colleges become more complicated as a variety of broad issues begin to affect their pathway to completion of a degree.

Nontraditional students comprise a large portion of college students in higher education within the United States. They are a broad cross-section of adults, which makes a definition or description of the term *nontraditional* difficult. Many nontraditional subpopulations cross boundaries of definitions (Kim, 2002). It is, however, important that all able, nontraditional students have the opportunity to succeed in obtaining a postsecondary education if that is their goal. This population's persistence in completing may exhibit differently, depending upon the dominant factors in their respective lives. It is important to examine each subpopulation through research that reveals the lived experiences of individuals within each group (Pascarella, 2006; McPhail, 2011). One starting point for this research is with specific, nontraditional student groups in community colleges.

The enrollment of nontraditional students in community colleges has increased steadily from 1980 to the present as displaced workers, underprepared adults, reverse-transfer students,

and others seek this option as more affordable (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002; Mullin, 2012). Assessing the engagement of nontraditional students in community colleges becomes complex because these students constitute a large cadre of students with diverse background, attendance patterns, and needs (Horn & Carroll, 1996).

Nontraditional students come from varied backgrounds: different ethnicities, first-generation students, diverse social economic status, and assorted family composition. When educational researchers separate this cadre of nontraditional students into groups by characteristics—for example, an ethnic group as Hispanic or marital status as single—they still have unique challenges based on their individual situations. Each student, with unique circumstances, challenges, and abilities to work through difficulties, does not fall neatly into the broad category of *nontraditional student*.

Using a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing the needs of nontraditional students has had limited success in increasing graduation rates. For more than a decade, the average graduation rate for associate-degree students in 2-year community colleges has remained about 23% (IPEDS, 2011). Forty-six percent of community-college students with the goal of receiving an associate degree leave during the first year (NCES, 2012). As the status quo for attrition, this rate has been a concern for community-college educators and administrators, who are realizing that a new emphasis on completion must become policy and practice for their institutions.

As a result, in April 2010 the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) met with five other national organizations to plan for change in college-completion rates. The result was the signing of a commitment agreement, Democracy's Colleges: Call to Action. The goal of this document was to produce 50% more students with high-quality degrees and

certificates by 2020 (McPhail, 2011). Action plans, which placed emphasis not just on increased enrollment but also on completion of a degree or certification program, followed this decision.

Call for Completion

The college-completion effort encompasses all of higher education, which includes community colleges, 4-year universities, research institutions, and various affiliated organizations. The community colleges have developed action plans with suggestions for implementation. Specifically, these actions include five accountability measures: (a) focusing on student success rather than enrollment numbers; (b) juxtaposing data with anecdotes and accurate portrayal of contextual information; (c) asking constituents connected to community colleges, "What is completion for you?"; (d) defining categories of students by their goals; (e) developing a student-resource toolkit; and (f) analyzing obstacles to successful completion (McPhail, 2011).

Across the country, community-college personnel are realizing the importance of gaining student perspectives related to persistence and completion to degree. The leadership of AACC has encouraged transparency and communication about what is needed for students to succeed in college from the perspective of the student. The AACC focus groups have raised questions about completion for which they seek answers. It is apparent that the completion movement needs reliable data from varied groups of community-college students (McPhail, 2011, pp 9).

The AACC focus groups have acknowledged that research efforts are needed to examine community-college student experiences. The AACC has encouraged colleges to use accountability indicators to determine what helps students succeed (AACC, 2013; Brown, King, & Stanley, 2011; Oriano-Darnall, 2008; Phillippe & Mullin, 2011). This trend may reveal the in-depth perspective that surrounds persistence. One function of this dissertation has been to focus on exploring the issues that perplex individual students during their community-college

experience and what has worked for them in their persistence efforts (Brown et al., 2011; McPhail, 2011).

Several studies have included a recommendation for future research to examine individuals from specific groups of nontraditional community-college students; particularly student groups with specific characteristics (Brown et al., 2011; Oden, 2011; Pascarella, 2006; McPhail, 2011). Two studies approached the subgroup examined in this study, but did not use community-college students. In the first study, Quimby and O'Brien (2006) examined the well-being of nontraditional female students and their academic success. In the other study, Van Stone, Nelson, and Niemann (1994) examined the views of poor, single-mother students and the effect of their sociological and psychological beliefs on their academic success. Research focusing on these subgroups, although they were not community-college students, revealed some of the hardships encountered and efforts needed for a student-parent to persist to degree. Common hardships revealed in both studies included the competing demands for time due to multiple roles of parenting and being a student. Common efforts revealed in both studies were the formation of meaningful support relationships with classmates, and demonstration of confidence and satisfaction in the roles of student and parent. Van Stone et al. (1999) added that students often made reference to the importance of their family's emotional support. The single-mother students also mentioned that the emotional support helped them with academic success.

Data from the *On Track to Complete?* report (Horn & Weko, 2009) reveals that nontraditional students who had dependents averaged 20% of the enrollment in community colleges (Horn & Weko, 2009). This is a fairly large population of students. In the past, students who left postsecondary community-college education provided general rather than specific reasons for leaving college, such as personal, financial, or unspecified (McPhail, 2011). This

information has been helpful, but it lacks the substantive detail of description from the voices of the individual students who persisted. I am interested in those students who persist rather than those who leave. I am also interested in how their motivation and tenacity relate to persistence as it is discussed in the literature (Allen, 1999; Deci, 1975; Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000; Hensley & Kinser, 2001).

Definition of Nontraditional Student

The term *nontraditional student* has evolved to represent a large percentage of community-college students from varied backgrounds. In much of the literature, *nontraditional* refers to students who are age 25 or older, but it has also been defined using background characteristics or risk factors of the students. Age alone as a definition has been inadequate. Thus, nontraditional students have often been described by at least one of seven descriptive characteristics: (a) delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, (b) attended part-time, (c) were financially independent, (d) worked full-time while enrolled, (e) had dependents other than a spouse, (f) were single parents, or (g) did not obtain a standard high-school diploma (Horn & Carroll, 1996).

Other definitions for nontraditional students have used broad categories such as minimally nontraditional (one characteristic), moderately nontraditional (two or three characteristics), or highly nontraditional (four or more characteristics) (Horn & Carroll, 1996). Terminology for classifying or describing nontraditional community-college students often has varied for different studies (Bean & Mitzner, 1985; Horn & Weko, 2009; Southerland, 2010; Torraco & Dirkx, 2008). This variation illustrates the difficulty in grouping these students. Further, it gave me another reason to study very specific groups or subgroups using individual perspectives of what it means to be a nontraditional student engaged in the process of persisting.

Further, the current study narrows the choice to nontraditional student-parents who selected community-college associate-degree programs.

Terms Used in This Study

This study defines a *nontraditional student* as a parent who is enrolled full-time in a community college, has at least one child not yet in a K–12 school, and has delayed college for at least 2 years after graduation. For purposes of readability, the term *student-parent* will mean the same as a nontraditional community-college student. Also for readability, the term *college* means a community college. The term *degree* means an associate degree. The term *persist* in this study means to remain in an associate-degree program, obtain a minimum of 15 credits, and have the intention to complete an associate degree. The term *persist to degree* means to persist to degree attainment. The term *preparedness* means readiness for college, with adequate knowledge and skills that can meet the challenges of academic, family, and workplace responsibilities. The term *targeted intervention* means direct instruction of a specific skill or information supplied to fill a gap in the knowledge base of a student.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of full-time, nontraditional, community-college students who had children, had delayed college, and were working part-time. The study was intended to explore issues and factors that influenced the students' persistence while they attended a community college. The study identified emerging themes related to the persistence experiences of community-college student-parents.

Research Questions

Based on the review of the literature and a lack of research pertaining to community-college associate-degree students with children, the following general research question and

subquestions guided this study. The general question is "What are the lived experiences of nontraditional community-college students with children as those students persist to an associate degree?" The related subquestions, which address academic, family, and work responsibilities, are as follows:

(a) How do nontraditional students with children describe their experience of being a nontraditional student in a community college?

(b) Why did nontraditional students with children return to college at this time in their lives?

(c) What do nontraditional students with children describe as their goals for attending college?

(d) How do nontraditional students with children describe their daily challenges of persisting toward an associate degree?

(e) How do nontraditional students with children set their priorities and manage their obligations?

   i. How do nontraditional students with children manage academic requirements along with work?

   ii. How do nontraditional students with children manage academic requirements along with family issues?

   iii. How do nontraditional students with children manage their financial obligations?

Significance of the Study

Insights and suggestions from, and based on the lived experiences of nontraditional students with children may help future student-parents navigate completion to their degree

(Clark, 2012). Community-college administrators, faculty, staff, and other support-service staff might benefit from this study because nontraditional students will likely reveal unique perceptions about their persistence. The qualitative study will complement the quantitative literature by adding students' lived experiences related to goals, challenges, and the management of priorities as they persisted to degree. These professionals could use the findings of the study to coach future students, to develop improved curriculum delivery, to improve support services, or to inform learning communities within the community college.

Delimitations

The study was limited to students who were attending a community college in the Mountain West region of the United States. The study explored the experiences of nontraditional community-college student-parents who had completed more than 15 credits of college. Participants had delayed entrance to college for 2 years or more, and they maintained full-time-student status and part-time employment of up to 14 hours per week.

Limitations

The study focused on western mountain-region community-college students. Therefore, the results are limited in their ability to inform and are not generalizable to the larger nontraditional student population who attend community colleges.

Researcher Perspective

My interest in this topic emanates from my experiences in education. My commitment to students, particularly to those students who have encountered hardship or disadvantages in life, is part of who I am. The personal and professional reason for this research is to advance the leadership of learning to subgroups of nontraditional students. Opportunity for those eager to

learn and advance their families into higher achievement and an improved life motivates me. I want to help in some way.

Most recently, my leadership has been restricted to public and private schools, higher-education instruction, and Montana Extension Service programs. In the past, I directed programs guiding young adults in skill development related to life skills, culinary arts, family life, and career foundations. During this time, I directed preschool assistants, supervised student teachers, and developed curriculum. I keep valid licensure for principal and teaching to ensure readiness to serve. My educational practices included holistic human development, multidisciplinary approaches, student and faculty engagement, problem-solving and decision-making skills, and understanding oneself to align with one's career goals.

I acknowledge that I have a background that includes upper-middle-class culture with some elements of deprivation. This dichotomy provides me with a lens through which I can view and appreciate both comfort and challenge. I recognize that my background may be very different from some of the participants in this study. I recognize, also, a possible similarity: that I have overcome challenges to achieve an academic goal.

The goals of student-parents who want to improve their lives are important to me, and shaping persistence efforts for community-college student-parents remains an important purpose for me as both a researcher and a practitioner. With this study, I desired to expand my investigations into the persistence of a unique group of nontraditional students who encountered challenges in life and college. The knowledge and insights I and others might gain from these accounts have the potential to help students in similar circumstances improve the well-being of their families and communities.

Administrators, staff, faculty, and counselors may benefit as well from information about persistence as these nontraditional students describe it. Student-parent perspectives may help professionals understand the nontraditional student-parents in the context of their own institutions.

Finally, the direct application of these findings will likely help me in coaching or mentoring nontraditional community-college student-parents in the future. And the direct application of the most appropriate strategies based on the findings may facilitate this unique group of students in persisting to meet their own goal of degree completion.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for this study is anchored in studies about nontraditional, adult undergraduate, and community-college students. From this collective group, the most relevant literature came from studies of community-college students and studies of specific subgroups of nontraditional students. I analyzed these studies for their relevancy to the research purpose and question. In this chapter I will examine each study for what is known about nontraditional, adult, and community-college students with children related to persistence. To determine gaps in the literature, I will note what is not known about these same populations in relation to persistence to their degree.

Nontraditional Student by Definition and Criteria

Kim (2002) organized a well-rounded discussion of what nontraditional means at the community-college level through a meta-analysis of an Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) search of nontraditional-term criteria. The Kim study provided a summary of definitions of nontraditional students based upon three criteria: (a) age 25 or older, (b) background characteristics, and (c) risk factors. Kim also identified needs of nontraditional subpopulations, which included transition classes, integrated curriculum that provides opportunity for application, or acquisition of soft skills for the classroom and the workplace. Kim suggested that these transition classes could help students bridge knowledge gaps in their high-school education as they begin courses at a community college. Kim (2000) concluded that research on nontraditional students and their persistence should be specific to subgroups. Examples of specificity in research of these subgroups might include first-generation college students with low income (Rendon, 1995, 2000) or faculty influence on Hispanic college students (Nora,

Kraemer, & Itzen, 1997). Kim (2002) suggested that nontraditional students be identified by specific terms such as *reentry students*, *educationally disadvantaged students*, *first-generation students*, or *minority students*. Examination of these subgroups would focus attention to what it is like to be a nontraditional student according to their unique attributes.

Literature about the traditional student conveyed the importance of peer group influence, social and political movements, and exploration of new ideas as the students acquired a degree (Astin, 1993). In contrast, the literature about nontraditional students, particularly adult students, emphasized the importance of education that offers relevancy of education to one's life, accommodates individual circumstances, and supports continuing education in one's chosen areas (Clark, 2012; Maslow, 1970).

It is important to acknowledge that background experiences and generational differences represent variations between the two categories of students. Traditional and nontraditional students have commonalities and differences largely because of the diversity of humankind in general. The tendency to overgeneralize or assign attributes to any subgroup because of the uniqueness of individuals within all subgroups of traditional and nontraditional students warrants caution (Pascarella, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Similarly, Southerland (2010) reviewed studies in his dissertation, *Engagement of Adult Undergraduates: Insights From the National Survey of Student Engagement,* seeking the extent to which specific characteristics and factors predicted adult success in college. Southerland examined six studies that used varying definitions for adult students. He concluded that although no standard definition existed for the term *adult student*, there was agreement among the six studies that functionally independent adults need to be studied based on their unique settings and individual characteristics.

Southerland used the data from the 2005 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) with a random sample of participants from 519 institutions. These institutions were 4-year colleges nested, meaning they were affiliated with wealthier institutions, which often provided monetary resources for them to participate in the NSSE. Therefore, generalizability is limited to only those institutions similar to the ones in the study. The information is still somewhat useful, however, for other studies that include adult or nontraditional student variables.

These variables framed the four categories of Sutherland's survey that related to questions of adultness and engagement. The independent variables for each student, for example, were place of residence on or off campus, full-time or part-time work, work on or off campus, hours per week providing for dependents, education of parents, classification level (e.g., traditional, nontraditional), and change in economic conditions. It was apparent that nontraditional students who had a high percentage of off-campus working hours had less time left in a week for academics and family responsibilities. Leppel (2002) concurred that increasing hours worked beyond 20 hours a week related negatively to GPA and persistence.

Southerland referred to the NSSE for measures of engagement on five benchmarks. He also used these five benchmarks to compare adult students to younger students. For some variables, he used dichotomous *t*-tests to compare adult to younger students against independent variables—e.g., time studying. Although the study reported complete and valid results, the most interesting result was confirmation that age is not the best indicator of student performance or degree completion. Southerland concluded, as mentioned previously, that adults need to be studied based on their unique settings and individual characteristics. Several researchers concur in their suggestions that qualitative inquiry should explore specific subpopulations that reveal

information about unique student scenarios (Horn & Carroll, 1996; Pascarella, 2006; Southerland, 2010).

The clearest definition in the literature for *nontraditional* still used the age of 25 but added one additional descriptor (Bash, 2003, Bean & Metzner, 1985; Choy, 2002). Of interest was that most nontraditional or adult students possessed at least one characteristic in common with traditional-age students, such as “full-time college student” or “partially relied on parents for support” (Philibert, Allen, & Elleven, 2008). The analysis revealed commonalities and differences between traditional and nontraditional community-college students, such as motivational factors to persist to degree. Some of the motivational factors were different between traditional and nontraditional students. For example, traditional students might need social engagement to a greater extent because nontraditional students might consider family as fulfillment for their social needs. Other supports may vary depending upon many factors such as academic preparation, self-efficacy, family background, and socioeconomic levels.

In general, within each grouping or subcategory of college students, unique attributes and common characteristics surfaced; two such examples are a single female student and first-generation student. The common unifying characteristics of nontraditional students were their needs to continue building their self-confidence and to find support among their college peers and faculty that would facilitate completion (Clark, 2012).

Similarly, Horn and Carroll (1996) used characteristics rather than age to define nontraditional. Specifically, they delineated nontraditional students by the following criteria: (a) had delayed enrollment; (b) were part-time students who worked full-time, or a minimum of 35 hours per week, while enrolled; (c) were financially independent; (d) had dependents other than a spouse, (e) were single parents, or (f) did not have a high-school completion certificate. Horn and

Carroll examined community-college students for patterns related to these characteristics and confirmed that the part-time community-college student was less likely than the full-time community-college student to persist to degree.

In summary, Southerland (2010) suggested that three important characteristics of adult nontraditional students emerged from the findings of his study: Adult nontraditional students were functionally and financially independent, they had a history of work experience, and they were able to balance responsibilities of nonschool and academic commitments. The research shows that often each researcher defines adult nontraditional students differently. For example, Kasworm (2003) defines adult students as having two or more of the following characteristics: they are 25 years or older, working full-time, enrolled part-time, raising children, coming back to school after time away, and supporting themselves financially.

A qualitative study of persistence among adult women by Cox and Ebbers (2010) examined five women ages 25 to 38; four of them had children and attended a Midwestern urban community college. Cox and Ebbers used the term *challenge of balancing multiple roles and responsibilities while maintaining a sense of steadiness*. The participants drew on previous experiences of difficult times they had endured to develop strength and aspirational capital to persist in their education goals (Cox & Ebbers, 2010). Cox and Ebbers recommended that research be conducted with more participants that included more than one institution.

Nontraditional Student Characteristics As Influences on Attrition

Bean and Metzner (1985) were the first of many researchers to define nontraditional students as those who were over age 24, had part-time attendance, and commuted to school. The model has been useful as a reference today because the findings are still confirmable (AACC, 2013). At the time of the study, most 2-year students fit within this 24-year-old-and-above

demographic. The average age of students in community colleges as of 2005 was reported as 29 (Cox & Ebbers, 2010). A trend for students to enter community colleges was attributed in part to lower tuition, students' ability and preference to stay at home, and shorter commuter distance (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Cox & Ebbers, 2010). However, with this trend toward students attending community college, little research has examined attrition factors for community-college students.

Some largely quantitative studies have examined nontraditional commuter students' attrition rates and influences that attributed to student attrition. The Bean and Metzner Student Attrition Model (1985), which examined some attrition influences, illustrated how family and educational background, academic preparation, and environmental variables may determine a role in the academic and psychological outcomes of college. According to Bean and Metzner, environmental variables such as finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and transfer opportunities had more significance than academic variables on the departure or persistence of nontraditional students. Bean and Metzner (1985) identified distinguishing characteristics of the nontraditional students by (a) enrollment status, (b) age, (c) environmental factors of ability to pay for college, (d) work responsibilities, and (e) status as a parent to dependent children. A key finding in their research was the difference in the attrition process between traditional and nontraditional students: The researchers found that, for nontraditional students, external environment factors had more influence on attrition than social integration into the institution.

Metzner (1989) studied specifically the quality of academic advising effects with nonresident-commuter, 4-year college freshmen. Minority students were underrepresented, stopouts (students who leave college and then return later) were excluded, and 72% of the

participants enrolled for the second year; so the results were not representative of the freshman cohort. The purpose of the study was to investigate, using a survey with six dependent variables, effects of perceived advising quality, levels of advising quality, and effects of advising quality on attrition. Good advising was positively associated with retention, while poor or no advising was negatively associated with retention. Although Metzner included no advising as a variable in the study, the reasons freshmen failed to receive advising (i.e., communication about availability and scheduling of advising, high student-advisor ratios, student initiative) were unknown. Metzner recommended further investigation into reasons for lack of advisement and for development of interventions for this group of commuter students.

Accordingly, Tinto (1993) modified his Model of Institutional Departure in the second edition of his book, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, to include greater focus on student involvement and engagement, along with institutional integration. Tinto's original research had placed importance on the 4-year institutional role in attrition and retention. The new focus absorbed research of qualitative and anecdotal inclusions related to departure. In his revised work, Tinto placed dual responsibility with the student and the institution to examine and implement practices to address gaps in students' education, improvements that provided more engaging learning in the college pedagogy and used improved assessments that more accurately captured the needs of students.

Figure 2.1 shows the Tinto's influence on the Bean and Metzner Model (1985). Dashed lines from social integration and from background and defining variables reflect the relationships between these variables and the psychological outcomes and student dropout. The bold lines indicate background, academic variables, and environmental variables as stronger indicators of dropout.

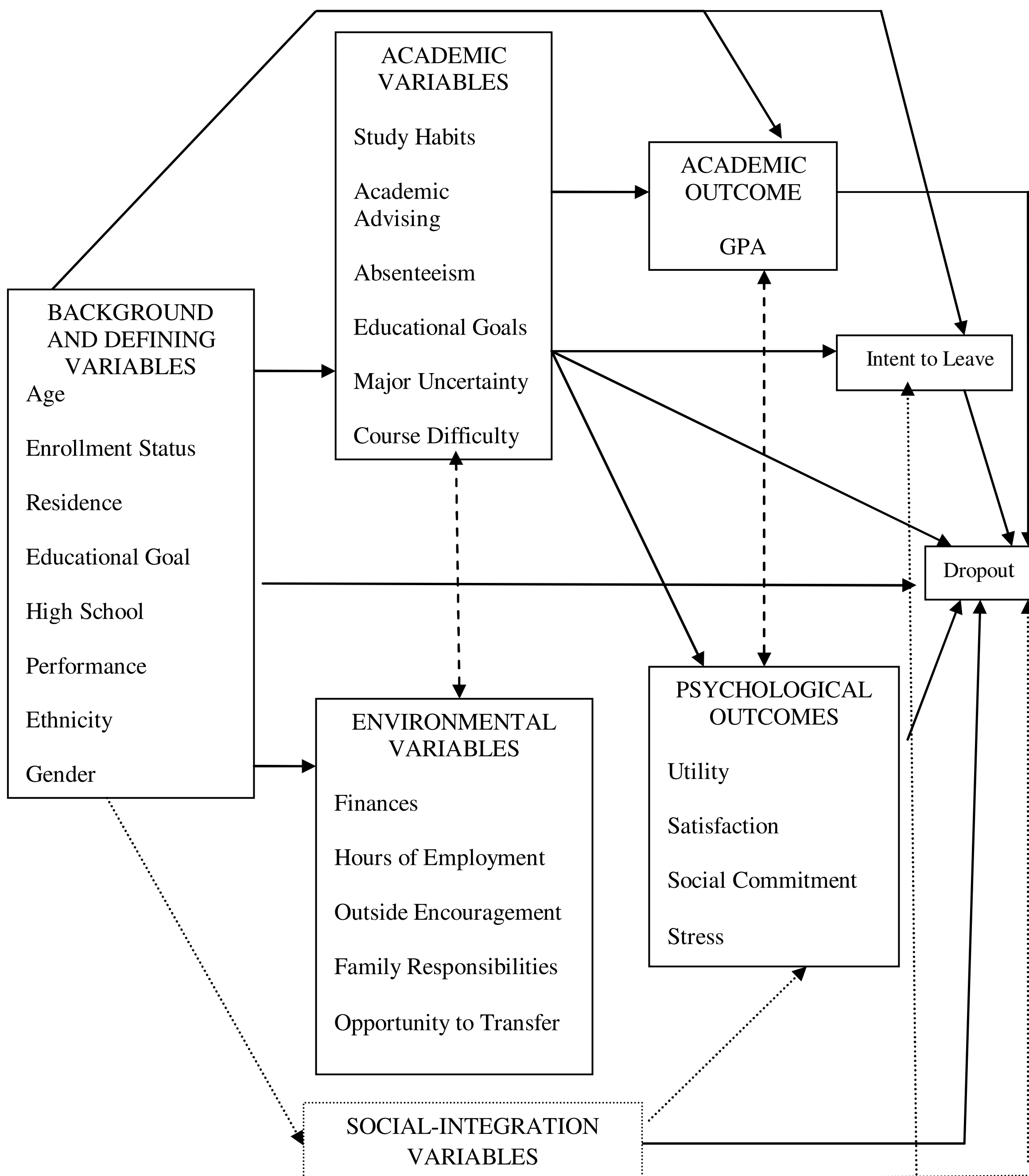

Figure 2.1 A model of nontraditional student attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 491).

It is important to note that Bean and Metzner (1985) examined nontraditional students in 4-year institutions. Most of the literature on retention has used traditional students in 4-year institutions for their studies; therefore, the findings are not generalizable to the large percentage of nontraditional students who comprise the undergraduate college population (Kuh, 1996;

Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). However, Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2010) examined unmarried college students, a large subpopulation of both community and 4-year institutions.

Figure 2.2 illustrates the Conceptual Model developed by Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2010) which depicts how postsecondary education appears to affect family formation and stability. The Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen Model illustrated four characteristics influencing potential improvement of single-parent college student lives. The characteristics: (a) social interactions, (b) time use, (c) economic resources, and (d) mental and physical health contain positive and negative elements. The positive and negative elements, often unique for each individual, affect the college experience for the student-parent, the child, and family well-being (Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen, 2010). Little evidence exists on how postsecondary education affects family well-being and the intricacies of support for the child of the student- parent

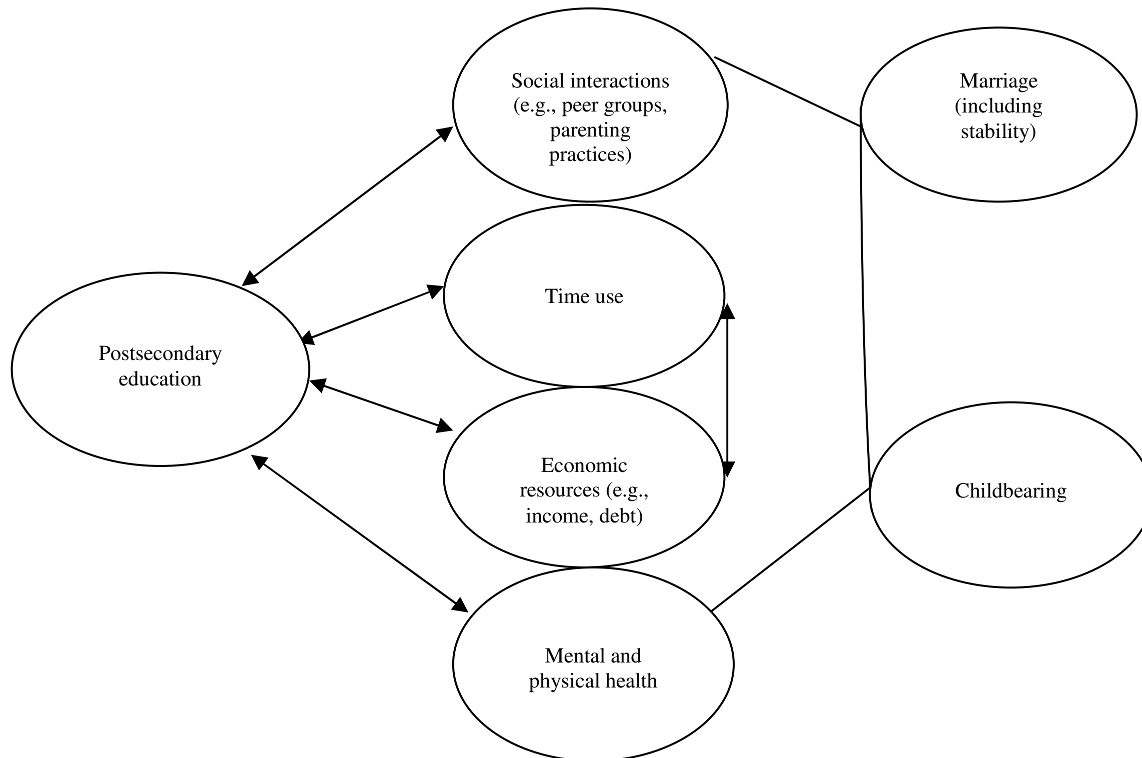

Figure 2.2. Characteristics From Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen Model.

(Brock, 2010, Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010). The model furnished a lens for the discussion of the student as a parent, their family, and their well-being.

Further, the Goldrick-Rab and Sorenson model (2010) was developed from the results of a study that analyzed data from primarily community-college student-parents who were single. Social interactions were those that occurred within the community college and the family that provided support. The results suggested that time factors were a constraining factor for everything parents did, including spending time with their children. Economic resources reflected an upstream battle with the diminishment of financial-aid grants, which nudged the students to look to loans or special aid programs. Finally, students also had to maintain their mental and physical health to avoid attrition. This required them to balance fitness and health with the other influencing factors (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010).

Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen used the National Center for Education Statistics Student Aid Study, 2003–2004, and numerous other qualitative research studies to examine statistical data from the National Center for Education Statistics reported in 2009. Based on this review, they concluded that policy must change to facilitate the degree completion of unmarried parents.

Similarly, Deutsch and Schmentz (2011) in a qualitative study found a common sentiment from participants regarding the characteristic of time in relation to child responsibilities, household chores, class obligations, and studies. A study participant stated, as an exemplar, “On Tuesdays I’m here from 9:00 in the morning until 9:00 at night and my poor child is at school; and then he’s with me for a while and then he goes off with somebody else for my night class” (pp. 492).

Torraco and Dirkx (2008) reviewed and analyzed 71 peer-reviewed studies. Their search criteria were adult transitions to the workforce using six established workforce programs. The

researchers determined that programs should develop basic skills in the context of occupational preparation. The study defined academically underprepared adult students by the following characteristics: (a) working-age adults 18 years and older; (b) deficiencies in basic skills of reading, writing, math; (c) low-level job skills; (d) disproportionately racial/ethnic minorities; (e) low-wage jobs; and (f) an average of 11 years' lapse time before a return to school for high-school dropouts.

Windham, Rehfuss, Williams, Pugh, and Tincher-Ladner studied community-college students grouped by age to determine whether or not their participation in a study-skills course affected retention. A quasi-experimental study indicated that successful completion of a study-skills course resulted in fall-to-fall retention for students who enrolled in the institution, based on participant performance on the ACT Compass placement test (2006). Students in the study who successfully completed the study-skills course had a 63.6% higher college retention rate than those who did not take the course. In comparison, students aged 19 to 24 had a 25.7% higher college retention rate than those who did not take the course. The retention rate was the highest in the age group of 40 and older, at 70.7%. Windham et al. (2014) noted that the ACT Compass reading scores, the only continuous variable included in the study, were a significant predictor of retention ($p = .001$) to the next year for first-year students. These outcomes give one pause to consider other factors in addition to study skills that may facilitate retention of students in a community college.

In other related research, many colleges—for example, Salt Lake Community College (SLCC)—use and develop their own exit surveys of graduates to tabulate suggestions that, when implemented, could aid other students in degree completion (SLCC Survey Documents, 2011). Similarly, Marlow (1989) suggested studies of nontraditional students be conducted on campus

to determine unique characteristics. Marlow recommended that these studies focus on the students themselves and their needs while attending college. Other research has revealed that changes in procedures often help students focus upfront; suggested reforms include simplifying complex application forms, offering dual-enrollment programs that shorten college time, providing on-campus child care, reducing student work time, and offering intervention counseling (Fike & Fike, 2008; Oriano-Darnall, 2008). Oriano-Darnall (2008) recommended the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE), which is used by more than 100 community colleges across the nation. The instrument focuses on entering-student issues and common concerns, and on marshalling action plans by college teams to address those concerns.

Programs of Support for Success

Much of the literature I reviewed suggested institutional policy regarding nontraditional student needs and circumstances, while the fact remains that financial support and personnel commitment to students requires institutional action (Brock, 2010). Institutions often evaluate what might be done to help support students to navigate the process more effectively. Institutions of higher education, community colleges included, have listed specific services that both nontraditional and underprepared students in community colleges can access (Brock, 2010).

The ASHE Higher Education Report (2009) by Amy Bergerson outlines and describes a comprehensive framework for effective programs in this context. This document suggests that policymakers and practitioners look closely at their existing program needs and pay careful attention to the targeted populations for which a program is designed. Seven programs that are federally, privately, or locally funded attempt to support primarily low socioeconomic and first-generation students in their efforts to enter and succeed in college. These programs, a representation of the wide expanse of national programs, include TRIO, GEAR UP,

Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID), Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA), "I Have a Dream" (IHAD), Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI), and Puente. Bergerson (2009) explains the purpose of each program, which is beyond the scope of this present research; however, colleges and nontraditional students would be well-served if they were knowledgeable about each of them. Many of the programs incorporate precollege students, providing early intervention with the purpose of college success for the underserved. Once students are in college, other programs serve to provide needed remediation or targeted intervention for those who are underserved.

Columbia University Teachers College researchers examined College 101 courses in Virginia community colleges (Karp et al., 2012). The study used extensive observation checklists and interviews at three community-college sites. These courses, often referred to as *developmental, student success, introduction to college,* or *college orientation,* provided foundational information for first-year college students. The courses vary widely across the country. The research team discovered that College 101 courses in Virginia were restricted by the teaching of too much inappropriate content. The curriculum, determined by administration, at time did not address the most imperative student needs. College 101 courses in the study lacked teach-for-application components and the development of metacognitive thinking skills necessary for student success in the workplace or for transfer to 4-year institutions.

Courses and programs for academic and other supportive purposes reviewed in the study included a combination of institutional and local community-support programs (Torraco & Dirkx, 2008). Bridge Programs and Career Pathways Programs categories had the highest completion and advancement rates, surpassing those of Adult Basic Education Programs, Developmental Education Programs, and English as Second Language Programs in the

completion of nontraditional student (Torraco, 2013). Torraco and Dirkx (2008) found that adults sometimes choose between basic literacy and job-skills programs, when most adults need both. The adults preferred and chose programs because the related skills were taught in the context of real-world experience and application to a career.

Another support program described by Etienne (2012) focused on motivational factors that influence persistence in developmental-education students. The participants in the Etienne study were four exemplary developmental-education students at a southeastern community college in the United States. Etienne explained developmental education as programs that address academic preparedness through remediation, academic support, or preparatory studies that promote cognitive abilities in postsecondary learners. The research focused on factors and attributes that promote student persistence. Etienne referred to the seminal research of Bandura (1997), which related to self-efficacy as a help to accomplish one's goal. Deci and Ryan (2008) reported that the link between intrinsic motivation and goal accomplishment is important for students who persist to their degree. Faculty and counselors purposefully selected participants of the Etienne study (2012) based on the students' positive attitudes toward assignments and faculty, and their engagement with other students. The counselors of the community college believed these attributes furthered the success of the developmental students.

Another study, by Lutes (2004), revealed community support for community-college students. The Lutes study found that community-college students often benefitted by searching the local community for special or unique services that helped them with family, transportation, and health-related issues. The Northwestern Michigan College in Traverse City, Michigan helps nontraditional adult learners who return to school through the support of 17 agencies that donate scholarship money and provide a network for services. This Bridge program was designed to

procure contributions from professionals in business for use with nontraditional adults returning to the community college. The services include day care, transportation, housing, financial aid, reduced health care costs, and supplemental educational support for core skills and computer training (Lutes, 2004).

Similarly, Lutes (2004) described how Austin Community College made 381 direct person–to-person contacts and 900 indirect contacts with single-parent students to offer community support in the form of disseminating information about how to overcome barriers in their efforts to succeed in college. Of the 82 students who applied for and received services, benefits materialized as financial assistance with child daycare, textbook purchase, and classroom support. This assistance helped 89% of the students continue through the second semester (Lutes, 2004). Important assistance included workshops focused on resume writing, communications, problem solving, self-management, and community support for food and clothing. These sources of support attributed to the students' success rate.

To study community outreach, Leonard (2002) developed a framework for retaining nontraditional students at open-admission institutions. Similarly, Leppel (1984) reported that student motivation appears to be enhanced when support from the community, employers, and career counselors points the students to skills that are needed and highly relevant to job procurement.

Challenges and Uniqueness of Nontraditional Students

Etienne (2012) revealed that learning in the context of career or job enhances the motivation and determination of nontraditional students to complete their degree. Adults learning in a context of relevancy to their lives show increased engagement (Knowles, 1970; Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). In turn, engagement has

shown to increase retention and persistence of college students (Pascarella, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Silverman, Aliabadi, and Stiles (2009) described nontraditional students with unique needs who are often overlooked by colleges. These include commuter, reverse-transfer, and returning students who limit their time in campus involvement, because of logistical factors such as getting to campus and having multiple family obligations. Likewise, Chickering and Gamson (1987) provided a list of important engagement indicators that colleges could use to bring nontraditional students into faculty-student interactions. These indicators included student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task to practice or comprehend information, high expectations, and respect for diverse talents and ways of learning (p. 8). In addition, Kuh et al. (2005) substantiated that students need to form connections with multiple people at their institutions. These connections afford nontraditional students the opportunity to ask questions and get answers as they adjust to college.

Studies by Cross (1981) and more recently Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) documented broad change factors that require new learning for adults. According to these researchers, some of the changes adults returning to college experience that affect their learning consist of demographic, social, and technological changes. Adult students must learn about information technology and shifts that occur within careers to be able to adjust to related changes that have occurred in the workplace.

Other research reveals that adults evaluate their individual learning and course satisfaction based upon a variety of frameworks (Howell & Buck, 2012; Knowles, et al., 2005). Many adults value relevancy to their lives in learning situations. In the general sense, Knowles et al. (2005) described his theory of adult learning as a philosophy, a set of guidelines, and a set of

assumptions focused on understanding the adult learner as a phenomenon. The phenomenon resulted in a fundamental model of core principles for understanding adult learning from the learner's perspective: (a) need to know, (b) self-concept, (c) prior experience, (d) readiness to learn, (e) orientation to learning, and (f) motivation to learn. These principles illustrate the contexts as individual differences, situational differences, subject-matter differences, and differences in the goals and purposes for learning. This foundational model evolved from many theories of adult learning within a variety of circumstances (Knowles et al., 2005).

In another investigation, Howel and Buck (2012) used two survey instruments that measured course satisfaction to acquire feedback from 1,725 nontraditional adult students and 214 instructors at five institutions of higher education dispersed geographically throughout the United States. The institutions were also affiliated with the Consortium for the Advancement of Adult Higher Education (CAAHE). The researchers administered the two surveys in nearby public universities and community colleges as a convenience sample. Study findings revealed four areas that most determined satisfaction for adult students when they took a postsecondary course: (a) relevancy of subject matter, (b) faculty subject-matter competency, (c) student workload, and (d) general classroom management. Factors of class size, faculty status, student grade, and faculty-student interaction were not among the top four factors of course satisfaction for these adult learners in higher education (Howell & Buck, 2012).

The literature indicates that several factors influence adult-learner persistence. Southerland (2010) identified living close to campus (Kuh, Gonyea, & Palmer, 2001), full-time attendance (Chen, 2007), and readily available on-campus support services as dimensions of persistence for adult learners in post-secondary education (Bean & Mitzner, 1985; Cross, 1981; Tinto, 1997). And a wide variety of support services need to be tailored to the adult or

nontraditional student for those students to show persistence toward degree (Cross, 1981; MacKinnon-Slaney, 1994; Marlow, 1989; Seidman, 2005).

A monolithic adult-student identity does not exist. Rather, in their many roles, adult students have common and diverse experiences, beliefs, and responses; and they note mostly positive connections in academic contexts (Kasworm, 2005). Kasworm (2005) studied adult-student identity in intergenerational classrooms using constructs of age and maturity, in contrast to the vast number of studies that have analyzed the constructs of class, race, and gender in community colleges. Kasworm's (2005) study included 28 adults over age 30 who represented a diverse group of freshmen-through-junior status students, in good academic standing, in a college-transfer program, and who had completed at least 15 hours of academic coursework beyond developmental studies. Self-reported demographics were by gender (15 men and 13 women), marital status (13 married, 8 divorced, 6 single, and 1 other), and employment (15 full time, 6 part time, 7 no response). Kasworm (2005) noted that maturity was a strong factor of student success regardless of class, race, and gender in the two community colleges.

Adults in the study expressed an increase in self-efficacy and security in their identities as they progressed through their course pathway (Golden, 2003). Kasworm (2005) revealed constructs of student self-image that potentially could guide future studies of nontraditional student participation within the community-college setting. The progression of day-to-day classroom engagements led students in their judgments of appropriate social norms, academic performances, and ideal student image. As adult students further understood their own identity, they also recognized opportunity for meaningful experiences on the pathway to achieving a credential (Kasworm, 2005).

Several studies stressed the self-efficacy, security, and confidence of adult students, which influenced their daily learning experiences and commitment to academic success. Fundamentally, the studies revealed that the choices of the students to commit to a college program affected their persistence. Chemers, Hu, and Garcia (2001) studied academic self-efficacy with 373 first-year college students at the Santa Cruz campus of the University of California and found powerful relationships between self-efficacy and GPA. They found that students hold higher expectation for themselves in part because they trust their capabilities, see the world as less threatening, and are energized by the challenges of life rather than immobilized by the treats. Chemers et al. (2001) found that confident students work harder, persist longer, and use better learning and problem-solving strategies.

In a similar study of the self-efficacy of GED students in college, Golden (2003) examined how self-efficacy influences academic success. Golden conducted the qualitative research at Kent State University, interviewing adult GED graduates about what determined their success in the matriculation process. Students revealed evidence of confidence, self-knowledge, and the desire to help others. Two student comments illustrate positive attitude of persistence, which reflects self-efficacy: The first, "I get too much achievement just out of being here every day and coming to the classes and doing the work—that makes me no longer feel like a failure" (p. 15); and the second, "I did it because I could. I always deep down thought that I could go to college or go to school and be successful in that realm. I just wasn't focused" (p. 15).

Strauss and Volkwein (2004) attempted to investigate the dynamic of students' commitment behavior and their persistence through a study of fifty-one 2-year and 4-year public institutions. The researchers used a quantitative cross-sectional design, a multivariate analysis, and Hierarchical Linear Modeling. The most salient survey items focused on students'

background, gender, racial group, marital status, dependent children, encouragement from others, financial aid and attitude, social integration and growth, academic integration and growth, and grade-point average. Importantly, the research examined underrepresented group results. Important findings were the powerful predictors of student commitment and persistence, which Strauss and Volkwein (2004) revealed as classroom experiences, faculty-student interaction, and intellectual-growth experiences. Student friendships, social involvement, and growth (maturation in different areas) were connected to student commitment. Influential but weaker predictors were age, ethnicity, marital status, and financial aid. Strauss and Volkwein recommended targeting the classroom experience of 2-year students. Also, they stated that faculty availability and advisement needs to be a target of program efforts. Nitecki (2011) also stressed faculty availability and faculty advisement as she reviewed a paralegal professional program and the Early Childhood Education program associated with high retention rates for an urban community college. The programs were well organized and emphasized professionalism and responsibility; but their most positive influences were the faculty advising, one-on-one mentoring, and supportive student-peer-group components.

Social mobility and increased financial stability are major incentives, goals, or benefits for students returning to college (Levin, 2007; Philibert et al., 2008). Haveman and Smeeding (2006) have described access to higher education as a pathway for students to a higher standard of living. Their solutions consisted of strengthening all stages of education, beginning with K through 12, to maximize learning that leads to the reduction of future services. The authors concluded that remediation needs to begin early, in K–12 programs, to free community colleges from remediation courses and move students more quickly to completion. Of further interest,

Haveman and Smeeding (2006) discovered that 28% of community-college enrollees already had obtained a bachelor’s degree and often were returning to take courses for technical certification.

At the onset of college, orientation programs are generally designed with the traditional student in mind; orientation specifically for nontraditional students is virtually nonexistent (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). Further research to explore specific elements of adult and nontraditional student needs is recommended; such research could explore those needs through both research-based surveys and interviews and institutional evaluations (Griffith, 2011). Griffith (2011) has raised the following questions concerning the usefulness of orientations for nontraditional students: “(a) Did orientation committees make useful attempts to engage nontraditional students in debriefings? (b) Did these committees try to tailor their communications to their needs? and (c) Would the nontraditional students evaluate these orientation groups for the quality of helpfulness as it related to their success in classes and completion?

Two quantitative studies, by Sorey and Duggan (2008) and Justice and Dornan (2001), examined differences between traditional-age and nontraditional-age students from the viewpoint of their meta-cognitive abilities in learning and persistence to degree. Sorey and Duggan examined predictors of persistence, while Justice and Dornan examined strategies for self-cognitive monitoring and use of meta-cognitive strategies. Justice and Dornan’s (2001) findings suggest that adult students did not meet the stereotype of declining memory ability, particularly when they were engaged in the learning strategies of hyperprocessing and generation of constructive information. Older females in the study were more intrinsically motivated than younger or male students. In general, adult students seek to understand material learned rather than simply to memorize it (Knowles, 1970; Richardson & King, 1998). Each study purported to

seek understanding of learning motivation, styles, and affective-teaching and student-learning strategies, and the relationship between academic achievement and persistence for the participants. In their study, Justice and Dornan's (2001) suggested the usefulness of an analysis related to specific academic support for nontraditional students to better assess their cognitive and management abilities. Mature students in this study reported increased use of higher-level cognitive-memory strategies. Unfortunately, the small sample size was viewed more as preliminary and so not conclusive.

Impact on Persistence of Gender, Ethnicity, and Other Unique Characteristics

Studies that examined the influence of gender and ethnicity of adult learners on persistence often revealed other mitigating factors such as financial aid, parent's education, number of semester hours enrolled, and use of student-support services as slightly more predictable factors in persistence. Fike and Fike (2008) did not find gender and ethnicity to be significant predictors of retention after they controlled for covariates. A study that examined academic and environmental factors that influenced persistence in Hispanic college students (Arbona & Nora, 2007) found that the precollege variables of continuous enrollment from high school into college, and high achievement scores in mathematics were more salient in predicting college completion for students who started in community colleges than for those students who began in 4-year colleges.

Results of studies by Lee (2001) and Pascarella (1999, 2006) indicate that community-college students who transferred to 4-year colleges shared many social and academic precollege characteristics with their peers, and likewise that they graduated with similar rates as those students who directly entered 4-year institutions. A small survey that used a limited sample, conducted by Caporrimo (2008) at Queens College with 4-year college seniors and

nontraditional community-college students, challenged these similarities. The Queens College adult community-college students who had children were more interested in family social responsibility than the 4-year institution senior students were (Caporrimo, 2008). Rosaria Caporrimo was the instructor at both the 4-year college and the community college. Some of her students questioned the rigor of community college, but she told them that she put the same content and rigor into both curriculums. Caporrimo noted that courses at both institutions reflected the same intensity and expectations in terms of critical-thinking skills, excellence in writing, and students' ability to monitor their individual learning.

Another example study by Leppel (1984) revealed that academic performance was a factor in the withdrawal of Hispanic students, determined by their substandard performance compared to other students. Specifically, Leppel (1984) studied the motivation of 129 returning and continuing students from a night course at an urban school of business and economics. Leppel found that returning students were more motivated than continuing students and devoted more time to studying. In addition, women and married students had higher internal motivation and higher grades than males and some single students.

Similarly, Greene, Marti, and McClenney (2008) utilized the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) and found that African American and Hispanic students reported being more engaged in college than their white peers. Accounting for precollege variables, the study determined differences between these subgroups in the amount of time and energy invested. The study used 3,143 participants from five Florida Community Colleges between 2002 and 2004. Results showed a negative association between engagement and grades of single-parent, African American students compared to their Hispanic, White, and Asian counterparts. Hispanic community-college students exhibited lower grades than their white

counterparts. The study used the Effort-Outcome Gap (EOG) measure, which reflected that African American student worked harder to persist and achieve educational goals than their peers, who were generally less academically at risk and faced fewer institutional barriers.

Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) suggested in their work that, because of their physical characteristics and acculturation, Hispanics may be less susceptible to racism and discrimination than their African American counterparts, which resulted in higher levels of self-efficacy for Hispanics. These researchers found that the self-efficacy levels of Hispanic students correlated to levels of confidence and perception of their academic achievement potential. The higher the level of self-efficacy, the more willing and eager a student may be to engage in learning tasks (Bandura, 1997, 2000; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Pascarella, 2006). Ancis et al. (2000) also reported a high level of engagement was advantageous for African American students to persist. Another study by Greene et al. (2008) noted that Hispanic and African American students persisted to the second term in lower rates than their white peers. The discussion acknowledged other risk factors associated with persistence, such as being a developmental student, needing remediation, or having young children (Greene et al., 2008).

Yoder (2011) interviewed 20 very at-risk community-college students who were near graduation from a Pennsylvania community college. The participants were a cross-section of community-college graduates with the following unique characteristics: They were immigrants, high-school graduates who did not pass college-entrance exams, single parents, and high-school dropouts who took the GED. They ranged in age from 20 to 50 years in age, with nine males and 11 females, of whom nine had children. The graduates completed a variety of majors, had diverse occupations, and were all in degree programs. The purpose of the study was to identify what it meant to persist against great odds in the community-college experience.

Results of Yoder's (2011) study revealed that the population viewed themselves as problem-solvers capable of achieving success if they decided to do so. If one support system failed, they sought another. The participants used a variety of developmental courses, learning-center tutoring, college-success courses, advisors, library assistance, and financial aid. The participants often expressed that teachers who were supportive and used clear teaching methods helped them understand expectations. The participants appeared to have self-efficacy and determination to take individual action for daily responsibilities. The Yoder study also included useful appendices for participant profiles, tables for degree completion themes, and exemplars in quotation format. Interestingly enough, there were no questions concerning family responsibilities or the influence of young children on students' journey of persistence.

Additionally, MacCann, Fogarty, and Roberts (2012) noted that, in relation to other unique characteristics, part-time students were less able than full-time students to set the most important priorities for time efficiency. MacCann et al. found that the limited time available to full-time students generally influenced their commitments to the top priorities of work, school, and family responsibility. In contrast, part-time students tried to incorporate additional activities into their daily lives.

Stress Factors That Impact Nontraditional Students

Based upon the general theory that adult students need accommodations to facilitate their persistence, Kirby, Biever, Martinez, and Gomez (2004) studied adult students who attended Weekend College at a small Catholic university in a Southwest metropolitan area. Voluntarily, 566 nontraditional students above age 22 completed a 23-item survey related to family and workplace stress. Of the 564 students who indicated race or ethnicity, 41% were White, 39% were Hispanic, 14% were African American, 2% were Asian American, 1% was American

Indian, and 3% indicated *other* as their race or ethnicity. The researchers found that adult students needed information about how to reduce stress while attempting to balance college, work, and home responsibilities. Some students felt that the resulting pressure and anxiety were not worth their efforts, and in the end stress affected their persistence.

In a phenomenological study, Cox and Ebbers (2010) used a retention analysis of adult educational experiences of women to study single adult women from a Midwest community college. This subgroup of nontraditional students encountered having to juggle multiple obligations and experienced overload without the support of family or a spouse. The women described stress as emotional, financial, and physical according to Cox and Ebbers. The authors concluded that postsecondary institutions have a need to understand adult women who come to their campuses. In other related studies, Richardson (1994) and Shell and Husman (2008) concluded that maturity facilitates decision-making and self-regulation in college; Kasworm (2003) elaborated with the notion that adults make meaning out of situations based on their varied structures of beliefs and values related to learning relationships of the classroom. Similarly, Baxter-Magolda (2008) observed students maturation and noted that many college students were approaching self-authorship, but many needed more situations in which to practice their problem-solving skills. Within the context of the varied stress-inducing factors, the community-college classroom can provide the safe environment for student-parents to further develop themselves and their thinking skills with a variety of supports.

Several studies indicated that students felt stress and pressure to accomplish with the emotions of tension and anxiety. Often stress was created by the multiple roles nontraditional students must fulfill. Each role added responsibilities within a finite amount of time and human energy. Dill and Henley (1998) found that little research had been conducted in the previous 10

years concerning stress in nontraditional students. These researchers used a Likert-type scale, the Adolescent Perceived Events Scale (APES), for college students to measure stress. They found that time and role demands were the sources of anxiety and tension for nontraditional students, who simply do not have the time to spend with friends and peers because of other obligations. In contrast, traditional students reported more vacations, trips, and summer breaks than the nontraditional students.

Hammer, Grigsby, and Woods (1998) adapted the Work-Family-School Conflict Measure to use in their study. The measure consisted of survey items on a 1-to-5 Likert scale, followed by three open-ended questions. The questions related to the impact of school on family, work, and social life. Factor and regression analyses indicated that 40% (n = 185) of participants reported that attending school interfered with family time or events. In contrast, many adult students reported that attending school enriched family life, and some of them said that setting a good example was recognized by their children. Better time-management and coping skills evolved as a result of their attending college. Interestingly, only 1.5% of couples and 10% of single parents reported a low level of concern for child-care problems.

Hammer et al. (1998) examined the issue of workplace stress relative to college students; their study indicated the following results: Twenty-one percent (n = 96) of participants reported that school takes time away from work. Some students felt stress and tiredness, but the positive outcomes of increased knowledge, skills, and confidence outweighed the negatives. They stated that increased knowledge, respect, ability to apply learning to the work environment, and career enhancement were benefits in the work setting. In another study, Kirby et al. (2004) recommended that course assignments focus on their application to work situations, and that students consult supervisors with questions regarding real-world application of classroom

information. These studies point to the relationship between relevance and lower stress levels for adult students, who value the relevancy of class learning to the work world in which they function (Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1970; Knowles et al., 2005).

Peirceall and Keim (2007) studied mechanisms students use to cope with stress while they were attending community college. The study consisted of a small cluster sample of 212 traditional and nontraditional students from two community-college psychology classes. Heterogeneity was increased in the study through its use of both day and evening classes. The researchers used the Perceived Stress Scale, a tested instrument, because of its simplicity (14 items), reliability (.85), and validity with college students. Items included a wide variety of stress categories that used a Likert scale ranging from 0 to 4. The study did not determine the reasons for student stress, but rather revealed ways of coping and perceived stress levels. (One might be able to discern reasons for student stress through this study by reviewing the interview questions to which participants responded.)

In this study, students who chose activities of a positive nature and shed less desirable activities reflected better coping strategies. Stress relievers included talking to family and friends, relaxing, and exercising, among other things. Paradoxically, these stress relievers take time, which in turn adds an element of stress related to time management (Pierceall & Keim, 2007). Findings revealed that women students were more stressed than men, and that nontraditional students had lower stress levels than traditional students. Dill and Henley's (1998) findings concurred with those of Pierceall and Keim. Dill and Henley examined 94 traditional and nontraditional students also in psychology classes in a southwestern, 4-year, research university. Their findings revealed that nontraditional students viewed returning to school and attending classes as desirable and referenced home responsibilities as stressors. In comparison,

traditional students viewed class performance, peer and social events, and parental pressure as stressors.

In yet another study that focused on stress factors, Willis (2006) a neurologist and teacher, synthesized the research of brain function and learning. Willis studied stress factors with functional MRI (fMRI) scans, neurotransmission, and recall. The details are beyond the scope of this study, but in general, positive stress reduction increases the brain's capabilities for retrieval of stored information (Willis, 2006).

Two considerations related to social/emotional/psychological well-being pertain to physiological processes. The first, exercise in many forms, often has an end result of relaxation, which reduces stress. As the nervous system calms or the body relaxes from exercise, dopamine is released, which enhances executive function of the frontal lobes of the brain (Willis, 2006). Increased learning may occur when stress is lowered. However, a second consideration relates to the use of cannabis, alcohol, and other drugs. These substances have a negative effect on learning, attention, and retrieval and serve as nonmotivators; therefore, they are considered harmful coping mechanisms for stress reduction (Crane, Schuster, Fusar-Poli, & Gonzales, 2013; Stavro, Pelletier, & Potvin, 2012).

Retention and Attrition of Nontraditional Students

Similar to the Willis study, Oden (2011) studied factors that affect the persistence of nontraditional students in 2-year colleges. Oden's research did not include the criterion of being a parent. Oden based the study on the model of Bean and Metzner (1985), using the external influences as variables for a quantitative analysis. The study results repeated findings that traditional students appear to have greater need for engagement within the institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993, 1997), whereas nontraditional students have greater need to

consider the real-world responsibilities of work and family, and the need for improved quality of life (Kasworm, 2003a. 2003b; Kirby et al., 2004).

In a quantitative study, McGivney (2004) studied data on retention and attrition patterns of adult students over age 25 and claimed generally different reasons for attrition rates in these students than the reasons given by traditional students. McGivney suggested that the paucity of detailed information in the literature about such personal experience would be better examined through a qualitative study.

Similarly, in another quantitative study, Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) examined 11 factors related to attrition/completion. The researchers confirmed that characteristics of full-time student status, minimal part-time work, positive interactions with instructors, and supportive family increased the likelihood of completion. Importantly, Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) revealed that child-care issues related to time limitations adversely affect completion unless child care is distributed among caregivers. Student-parents who share child care with others see a value in a variety of good role models for their children. And such arrangements also often enhanced the psychological well-being of both the child and the student-parent (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).

Other research results suggest that additional financial hardship accompanies female student-parents already committed to loans and grants because they incur expenses with their children beyond those of traditional students. Often spouse support was not available (Gerrard & Roberts, 2006). Gerrard and Roberts (2006) pointed to frustration and stress filtering through the family when even food choices are severely limited because of few financial resources. Adult women often operate from a disadvantage, but still tackle the economic pressures, heavy work, and family demands, viewing the short-term challenges as worth the return for the expected

long-term payoffs, including personal growth and satisfaction (Levin, 2007; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). College attendance patterns also affect persistence and future earnings. King (2002) cites that, even with grants and loans, students "will pay in lost earning power" if they delay or extend entry into the job market as "full-time, college-educated workers" (p. 79).

Wolf (2011) studied the external factors of family-support systems and their influence on the persistence of underserved college students. Oden (2011) and Wolf (2011) concur in their findings that the external factors were stronger forces for persistence than social integration for these students. Further, their persistence was enhanced by support, primarily from family, and by self-determination. Wolf (2011) used interviews with an emphasis on family, to capture patterns among an underserved population in the community college. Themes that emerged from participant responses were sources of financial support, prioritization of needs, and the value of ambition, openness, and communication skills.

Summary

The studies in the literature review revealed the many definitions and characteristics of nontraditional students. Most studies emphasized the importance of professionals understanding the uniqueness of each individual and the context of the lived experiences. Students who were underprepared, came from some ethnic groups with language difficulties, were economically disadvantaged, had delayed college, attended college part-time, or had dependents were less likely to persist. This current study explores a subpopulation of nontraditional community-college students with children, who were full-time associate-degree students, worked part-time, and had distinct challenges. Some challenges were similar and some dissimilar to other college students I reviewed in the literature. The literature revealed that stress from competing demands for student-parents' time was relieved, in part, with exercise, pleasant activities, and knowing

their child was in a caring environment. College educators, administrators, support professionals, and staff who understand the nontraditional student's daily life will be better able to help other students as they pursue their degree. Finally, those in community-college leadership positions may find the common themes and scenarios helpful as they guide this ever-increasing population of nontraditional students.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of full-time nontraditional students with children who delayed college and were working part-time. I used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the research methodology because of its strength in allowing the research to focus on the meaning of persistence for nontraditional community-college student-parents. The study revealed factors that influenced their persistence in an associate-degree program at a community college. The study also explored the phenomena related to the persistence experiences of these nontraditional community-college student/parents.

This chapter includes five main areas: (a) an explanation of the research methodology, procedures, and appropriateness of the chosen method of inquiry for the purpose of the study; (b) the procedures used for population and site selection: (c) the data collection and recording techniques and transcription procedures; (d) the details about data analysis; and (e) the procedures that ensure trustworthiness. The chapter begins with the research questions, followed by an explanation of IPA and a discussion of the role of the researcher when using IPA. Descriptions of the population, participants, and site selection follow. The chapter concludes with explanations of data collection and analysis procedures, and provisions that assure trustworthiness of the study.

Research Questions

Based on the review of the literature and a lack of research pertaining to community-college associate-degree students with children, the following general research question and subquestions guided this study. The general question is "What are the lived experiences of nontraditional community-college students with children as those students persist to an associate

degree?" The related subquestions, which address academic, family, and work responsibilities, are as follows:

(a) How do nontraditional students with children describe their experience of being a nontraditional student in a community college?

(b) Why did nontraditional students with children return to college at this time in their lives?

(c) What do nontraditional students with children describe as their goals for attending college?

(d) How do nontraditional students with children describe their daily challenges of persisting toward an associate degree?

(e) How do nontraditional students with children set their priorities and manage their obligations?

    i. How do nontraditional students with children manage academic requirements along with work?

    ii. How do nontraditional students with children manage academic requirements along with family issues?

    iii. How do nontraditional students with children manage their financial obligations?

Research Methodology

Qualitative researchers seek understanding of how people interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and describe the meaning of their experiences (Merriam, 2009). I selected a qualitative research strategy for this study because it allowed me to be open to the perspectives and experiences of a population increasingly prevalent in our community colleges. I assumed a

constructivist paradigm using IPA to cocreate the meaning of persistence with the participant. IPA allowed me as the researcher to record, analyze, and interpret the voices of nontraditional student-parents who were completing a community-college program (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Interpretative phenomenology involves probing for meaning; in this study that was a sense of what it meant to persist as nontraditional student-parents in the context of their social, economic, and academic world, the community-college experience (Smith et al., 2009). Interview questions, probing questions, and the processes of interaction between the researcher and each participant brought a unified purpose to the study.

Patton (2002) explained the essence of shared experiences, which is uncovered as participants describe their daily experiences with the researcher. Interpretive inquiry enabled me to collect insights from the daily experiences of individual nontraditional student-parents in their community-college settings relative to the phenomenon of persistence. The inquiry involved a process of engaging with each participant. Meaning was embedded in the stories the participants told. Once experiences were interpreted, their meanings could be understood (Denzin, 2001). The emphasis of the inquiry was to seek understanding, to reflect, and to interpret. Smith et al. (2009) explained that the cyclical approach of close attention to and engagement with text, and the reflection that acknowledges preconceptions actually facilitated bracketing ("setting aside assumptions," Schwandt, 2007, p. 24). Smith et al. recommended the hermeneutical center ground between empathy and questioning, through the use of many levels of interpretation, including the metaphors in the text and conceptual annotations that contained a range of provisional meanings. Some of these provisional meanings emanated from the face values of the present and an imagined future that participants expressed in text.

Population and Site Selection

The study was conducted within three community colleges located in western mountain states; Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado. I selected 15 students, from a voluntary pool of qualifying students from each institution. I used a purposeful sample of students who met the criteria for the study. The qualifying criteria for the nontraditional community-college students were (a) having delayed entrance by 2 years or more to the community college, (b) having full-time-student status, (c) having earned 15 community-college credits, (d) working part-time up to 14 hours per week, and (e) having a child or children, one of whom is not yet in kindergarten. I used personnel with whom I had established professional relationships at each of the participating institutions to help with recruitment. The gatekeepers at each institution provided names and contact information from a population that would meet the qualifications.

Upon the approval of the study by the Colorado State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), I sent a letter of cooperation to the gatekeepers (see Appendix B). The qualifying two gatekeepers and I screened the qualifying student-parents, with strict adherence to the above criteria. These students were recruited by academic advisors/counselors, through college email using a recruitment flyer, and by Web-page announcements of the student-affairs director for the institution, as my gatekeepers suggested. The recruitment flyer (see Appendix C) was posted via listserv or blind carbon copy (bcc) using distribution lists of the students who were enrolled full-time at each institution. The flyer indicated qualifications and conditions for the study.

Recruitment Process

Recruitment was conducted somewhat differently at each college. The smaller community college actually furnished a list of students with phone numbers for me to call directly. The initial list included 14 names of community-college students whom the gatekeeper

thought qualified. I called each of the 14 students. Of those, five responded and only two fully qualified and were willing to be interviewed.

The second college used the flyer with a listserv. The flyer mentioned the name of the gatekeeper as the contact person. The gatekeeper screened students who contacted her for their qualifications. She then had them sign the demographic-data questionnaire and consent form. The students then emailed or called me to arrange an interview time. I interviewed three student-parents by telephone and four student-parents face to face at the college.

The third college provided me with 675 email addresses of full-time community-college students who had completed a minimum of 15 semester credit hours. I then sent the flyer attached to the email of 11 distribution lists. I used the blind carbon copy (bcc) feature of email to ensure confidentiality. The flyer I used for the third college was modified slightly to list me rather than the gatekeeper of the college as the contact person. Five student-parents completed the demographic questionnaire and consent and returned them to me by email attachment. I conducted phone interviews with five student-parents. I interviewed the remaining four participants onsite at the college.

Final Selection

I selected 15 participants for the study from those who fit the original criteria and volunteered. My first consideration in selecting participants remained their commitment to participate (Moustakas, 1994). I concur with Fraelich (1989) that it is important for the researcher to engage with potential participants to gain their commitment to the time and effort required. I cared about the participant's eagerness to contribute with honest, thoughtful, and complete responses. Before the interview, I explained to each participant the expectations, safeguards, and use of data noted in the signed consent form.

Data Collection

Each selected student completed the informed-consent form (see Appendix D) and the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix E), and I reviewed both documents before we began the 90-minute interview. The consent form explained the purpose of the study, the process for data collection, and how transcripts would be handled and later destroyed. Demographic questions included factual information about the participant's age, gender, number and ages of children, years since last college attendance, chosen associate-degree program, current class load and credits, number of adults in household, identification of primary breadwinner, work hours outside the home and description of work, and contact information.

Before each interview, I asked participants if they had read and understood the consent form. I was relaxed, flexible, and adaptable, with the intention of developing a relationship of trust, as credited to Lincoln and Guba (1985). I conducted the 90-minute interviews in quiet locations: empty classrooms, conference and meeting rooms, and one just outside the building at a staff picnic table. The gatekeeper for each campus reserved the rooms approximately one to two weeks ahead of the scheduled interview. Generally, phone interviews were scheduled soon after the student saw the flyer.

The small community college was my most flexible setting. One interview was onsite the day I arrived. The other interview was delayed until the end of the week on a Saturday morning because of severe winter weather. I made three day trips to the second college campus for interviews and recruitment. Three interviews were face to face and two were by phone. At the last campus I visited, face-to-face interviews were scheduled and conducted during the 3-day time frame.

I used a digital recorder to document the interviews; I labeled each recording by participant pseudonym, college code, and date. I transferred the recorded interviews to my laptop for transcription. Field notations and bracketed notes in the actual transcription were useful to help me recall conditions, impressions, behaviors, and other descriptive phrases that accompanied the interviews. Fields notes and observations I made before and after the interview supplemented the interview with data useful for contextualizing and understanding the experience (Merriam, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). The interview contained informal, open-ended questions (see Appendix B). Open-ended questions probe for detail, rich description, and depth and breadth to reveal thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the participants (Gibson and Brown, 2009). Some probing was necessary to capture more detail and help participants more fully describe their experiences. I was sensitive to each participant's manner and comfort with me as I chose whether or not to pose new questions. A second or third follow-on question often helped participants clarify, expand, and complete thoughts and feelings in the interactive process while maintaining their comfort levels (Smith et al., 2009).

I transcribed the interviews as soon as possible, within 1 to 3 days of their completion. Transcripts were verbatim; authentic language expression included grammatical errors captured on the digital recorder. Each participant reviewed the completed transcription for accuracy and returned the verified transcription with final corrections to me by email.

Data Analysis

I closely followed the recommendations of Smith et al. (2009) for data analysis. These researchers have suggested a framework for data analysis that draws on many processes, including six iterative steps: (a) initial reading, reflection, and note taking of the line-by-line transcriptions, paying close attention in the process to participant claims, concerns, and

understandings; (b) making notes of semantic content, textual analysis, and interpretative impressions of similarities and differences, echoes, amplifications, and contradictions; using wide margins for themes, and underlining important text; (c) developing emergent themes, and noting transcript examples and verbatim quotations as evidence of feelings, attitudes, perceptions worthy of further reflections and analysis (Bowen, 2010); (d) grouping parallel and opposing themes; and (e) noting emergent themes from the provisional notes, underlined material, phrases. Themes first appeared as discrete chunks of transcript that reflected interpretive understanding of the participants' meaning.

Because verbatim quotations often represented more than one theme, I made notations related to each theme and subtheme as evidence of feelings, attitudes, and perceptions worthy of further reflection and analysis. I noted and grouped converging and opposing themes. I repeated the above steps for each participant, allowing for new themes and patterns to be revealed across participant transcripts. Finally, I constructed tables using codes as tools to enable me to view themes, pseudonyms, and line numbers from the transcripts (Saldana, 2013; Smith et al., 2009).

Trustworthiness of Data Collection and Analysis

I checked the trustworthiness and reliability of the data and my analysis using the following procedures. I compared transcriptions for consistency and accuracy. I did member checks of the entire transcription with each participant within 3 to 4 days of the interview. Member checking done soon after the interviews assured accuracy, consistency, and clarity related to themes of persistence for each participant. To enhance credibility, I carefully determined common and contrasting themes, carefully coded the results, and determined the representativeness and saturation level of example quotations (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Quotations and vignettes representative of the phenomenon of persistence reflected mostly thick,

rich description that transports readers to the setting and gives the discussion an element of shared experiences (Creswell, 2013; Ponterotto, 2006). I retained the idiographic focus of the individual; at the same time, I made claims for the larger groups of 15 student-parents (Smith et al., 2009). I am confident that the data collection and analysis of the material offer evidence of rigor and completeness that would pass an independent audit (Smith et al., 2009).

Summary

The analysis of the lived experiences of the 15 nontraditional, community-college student-parents who were nearing the completion of their programs revealed similar and unique insights of what it meant to persist to degree. The student-parent experiences the participants described in this study fill a gap in the literature. The subgroup of nontraditional student-parents needed guidance and support, but they had significant insights about their capabilities. The usefulness of the study rests on the trustworthiness and credibility of the research methodology. In the end, the research goal was to increase the opportunity for professionals in the field to understand the essence and lived experiences of nontraditional, community-college student-parents and what it means for them to persist to degree.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter reflects the findings based on the experiences of full-time, nontraditional community-college student-parents who participated in this study. These 15 student-parents who delayed college and worked part-time shared insights about the challenges of their daily lives while they were attending a community college. By examining their daily experiences, the study revealed factors that influenced the persistence of these student-parents to attend a community college. The findings consist of identified themes and subthemes related to the phenomena of persistence of the 15 community-college student-parents. The first section provides a biographical sketch of each participant, and the second section provides the findings and the how the participants answered the research questions.

The participants in this study were nontraditional student-parents from three Mountain State community colleges. The participants included three men and 12 women ages 21 to 43, each with one child under kindergarten age. Some student-parents had more than one child. The marital status of participants included single, divorced, and married. Three had attempted college but dropped out; however one participant had completed a Bachelor of Arts degree. All were full-time students who had completed a minimum of 15 credits toward their associate degrees. Four of the participants had served in the military. Two had used drugs and alcohol in the past but had completed a rehabilitation program before they attended college. All participants shared unique experiences that had influenced their decisions to attend and persist in a community college.

Biographical Sketches

The biographical sketches that follow describe each participant. Each sketch uses the pseudonym of the participant, demographic information from the questionnaire, and a few descriptive facts from the interview.

Participant 1: Amy

Amy, 31, a female single parent with one child in preschool, worked 34 hours a week while taking three classes. Her program was for an associate degree in accounting. Her future career goal was to become a certified public accountant (CPA). Amy planned to continue at the state university in the fall of 2014 with a major in accounting, and finally complete her education with a Master’~~s~~ of Accountancy (MAcc).

Amy portrayed herself as directed, focused, and knowledgeable about what study habits and lifestyle choices worked for her while she was in college. She expressed appreciation of the small community college she attended as a supportive community and likened it to a family. Part of this appreciation related to her ability to make good grades, develop a few meaningful mentor relationships, and have an internship with an accounting firm. This internship provided hands-on experience, making her academic learning more meaningful. Amy participated on campus in several service programs. The most valuable program to her was with the National Society of Leadership and Success (NSLS), which allowed Amy to hone her leadership skills. Amy believed that her ability to set an example using leadership principles helped in all areas of her life.

Participant 2: Ben

Ben, 29, a male married parent with two boys ages 2 and 6, worked 40 hours a week while taking three classes. Ben and his wife had received 4-year degrees before he attended the

community college. Ben was completing an associate-degree program in nursing. He planned to continue in the nursing program at the state university in the fall of 2014. His future career goal was to become a registered nurse with a bachelor's degree and ultimately obtain a doctorate degree, licensed as an independent nurse practitioner.

Ben attributed much of his past success to his military training and two tours of duty in Iraq, a helpful Veterans Administration coordinator, and his own family. His experience in the military made him accountable, responsible, and a good communicator. These three traits, although modified, carried over into his studies and home life. He referenced his appreciation for his wife, his boys, and the opportunity to live on their 12-acre farm.

Participant 3: Christy

Christy, 41, a female single parent with two children ages 4 and 6, worked 12 hours a week while taking five classes. She was focusing on her immediate program for an Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN). Her future career goal was undetermined. According to Christy, the nursing program at the 4-year college was "highly competitive": Only one out of three students from the associate-degree program would be accepted into the 4-year program.

Christy was working on an improved self-identity. She reported that her mother was intelligent and self-taught, a woman who read lots of books although she did not complete high school. Christy had worked as a staff member in a 4-year institution, received a minimum wage, and realized there could be no further advancement. This realization had been an incentive for her to break through the "glass ceiling" and attend a 2-year community college.

Participant 4: Donna

Donna, 32, a female married parent with two children ages 2 and 4, worked 10 hours a week while taking four classes a week. Donna's program was for an associate degree in science,

and specifically in medical laboratory technology. The college she attended was the only one in the state with national accreditation for this specific area of specialization. Her future employment depended on her acquiring more certification. Donna's educational and career goals included obtaining a specialized degree and working in the cytology field or with a blood bank. The final degree she wanted was a Bachelor of Science (BS).

Daily challenges of taking care of the children all day by herself had left Donna little study time. Despite this, Donna stated that her grades, with a 3.75 average, were pretty impressive.

Donna and her husband were a military family. The GI Bill had financed most of her educational expenses and insurance. The military was moving the family to Oklahoma in April of 2014. One challenge was that, after her husband moved, Donna would need to return to the state of her current college to complete her internship there rather than where she was relocating. Returning for the internship was to be a new challenge because the family would be separated.

Participant 5: Darcy

Darcy, 38, a female single parent with three boys ages 18, 9, and 2, worked 30 hours a week while taking five classes. Her program for was for an Associate of Science (AS) degree, with an emphasis on nursing. Her one future career goal was to become financially independent. Other career goals were undetermined.

Darcy worked as a manager of a rafting company in the summer. Her older boys had responsibilities with her in the summer, where they had an adventurous life. In the winter, the boys had responsibilities for each other, the home, and their studies while Darcy attended class. Darcy had experienced the death of a daughter and withheld details for reasons of privacy.

Participant 6: Gina

Gina, 43, a female single parent with one child age 5 in day care, worked variable hours during the school year while taking four classes. She worked long hours in the summer as a bartender. Her current program was for an associate degree in human services. Her future career goal, after she earned a master's degree in counseling, was to establish an Oxford House, a center for women continuing with sobriety.

Gina spent the largest portion of her time on campus either in class or getting homework done. Her son was in the community-college day care all day. Gina struggled with a steep learning curve because of her 23-year gap between high school and college attendance. She experienced challenges in learning technology and with her recovery from substance abuse as she worked to complete her program in social services.

Participant 7: Jacob

Jacob, 33, a male single father with one child in day care, worked 12 hours a week as a photographer and juggler while taking three classes. He was in an associate-degree program in psychology. Jacob hoped to continue at the state 4-year institution, staying in the field of psychology until he received a doctorate degree. Jacob maintained that his future career goals were in the fields of photography or psychology. He would like to teach photography or psychology in a school system or college.

Jacob developed a Facebook page for his photography business. Jacob socialized with friends; his closest friend was 85 years of age and a source of sound advice. Jacob had amazing skills as a juggler. Juggling brought him some income and relaxation. He also wanted to be a supportive father and more a part of his daughter's life.

Participant 8: Kim

Kim, 32, a female single parent with two children ages 1 and 6, worked part-time on the weekends; she took four classes during the week. Her associate-degree program was in anthropology. Kim had moved from an urban area in California and really appreciated the rural area where she now lived. Eventually Kim planned to transfer to a state 4-year institution for a bachelor's degree in archaeology. She planned to do archaeological research in the locality where she lived.

Kim experienced a life change when her husband was diagnosed with brain cancer in September 2013 and passed away 5 months later. The change affected her finances, her schedule, her emotional stability, and her life overall. Kim relied on support from her academic advisor, her mother, and those close to the situation. She found solace in grooming and training her horses. She stated that her children became a source of joy and purpose for her to continue in the study she valued.

Participant 9: LeAnn

LeAnn, 32, a single female parent with one child age 2, worked 20 hours a week in a child-care center while taking four classes. Her program was for an associate degree in early childhood education. Eventually, LeAnn wanted to obtain a bachelor's degree in early childhood education.

LeAnn had substantial challenges related to caregiving for family members while she worked and attended classes. She cared for a mother who had experienced repeated heart surgeries; her son, whose birth had been delayed as a result of her preeclampsia; and younger siblings who were in the home.

Participant 10: Michael

Michael, 26, a male married parent with one child age 18 months, worked 40 hours a week while taking five online classes a semester. His home and job were in Alaska, while the community college he was attending was in a western mountain state, so online classes worked best for him. Michael's degree was in applied science with a mortuary minor. He was a licensed funeral director. His wife stayed at home with their child.

Michael claimed to be a people pleaser. He indicated that it pleased his father to see him select a career that served people. Michael also liked that his career goal provided increased financial support for the family. He viewed the job of funeral director as one that incorporated hard work and communication skills into a service industry. Part of the hard work entailed preparing the deceased for viewing according to the preferences of the deceased's family members. Michael stated that he had learned communication skills, which aided his business operations. Good mentoring and extensive work experience in Alaskan funeral homes gave him confidence for relevant coursework at the community college.

Participant 11: Tricia

Tricia, 32, a female single parent with one child age 3, worked from 15 to 20 hours a week while taking four classes. Her program was for the applied-associate-of-science degree, with a major in business management. She wanted a bachelor's degree in arts and media management. Her future career goal was to run a theater venue, which would combine her previous work experience in customer service and the hospitality industry with management.

Tricia knew herself, her capabilities, and her propensity to do well if an area of study was interesting to her. Likewise, she knew when an instructor or a topic did not interest her, and she did not exert effort in those courses. Tricia demonstrated self-efficacy and self-direction with the

initiative and courage she showed in her decisions to move to a new state and start college. She explained that the management degree was what she most needed to put her life and job experiences together. Tricia wanted to have completed college and be established in the business/entertainment career when her child began kindergarten.

Participant 12: Jennifer

Jennifer, 25, a female married parent with one child age 3, worked 10 hours a week on the weekends and took five classes during the week. Her husband provided much of the income for the family. Jennifer decided to return to school using the GI Bill. Her interest was psychology. Jennifer was considering forensic psychology and obtaining a master's degree. She was also interested in post-traumatic stress syndrome and schizophrenia research; her time in the military had influenced these interests.

Jennifer explained how the military also had influenced her maturation, with the development of self-discipline. This habit transferred to college academics. The first time she went to college she did not study, and she failed. Jennifer believed that her lack of motivation in the past was the result of her age and peer influences, and because she wasn't responsible for paying her tuition back then. In the military, there were consequences for disobedience. Consequently, Jennifer changed her habits and continued to be more duty oriented with a work-hard mindset.

Participant 13: Lynne

Lynne, 21, a female married parent had a 2-year-old child. Lynne worked 20 hours a week while taking four classes. She was in the associate of science (AS) degree program, foundational for becoming a dentist. Lynne spoke of her career trajectory and the process of coordinating with her husband to accomplish school in the least time possible. For that reason,

Lynne was taking as many required classes as she felt she could handle while being a full-time student. Lynne and her husband decided to go to college at the same time. Lynne's mother cared for the baby. Lynne and her husband could see each other and their child in between classes.

Lynne did not need financial assistance because her parents had saved for her college expenses. Her husband used the GI Bill for his college expenses. Lynne felt that she was more a traditional student by age, but nontraditional by situation. She made the most of her college experience by joining clubs and being in activities. She was in Student Community Outreach, and the History, Summit, and Equality clubs. Lynne enjoyed college but at the same time felt sad that her mom had more time with the baby than she did. Next year, the child would qualify for the day-care center. Her physical activity was speed skating.

Participant 14: Sandi

Sandi, 32, a female married parent with two children ages 1 and 3, worked from 15 to 20 hours a week while taking four classes. Sandi's husband was the major breadwinner. Sandi worked at an accounting office 2 days a week, and then brought bookkeeping work home. She was in an associate-of-applied science program for accounting. Her career goal was to become a forensic accountant and possibly work for the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Sandi was dismayed by a few business managers with whom she worked because of their embezzlement practices. She was uncomfortable and eventually left the firm. That situation in part prompted Sandi's decision for academic study and a career in accounting. Sandi expressed her enjoyment of simple family fun. And she appreciated her husband taking the children for periods of time so she could study.

Participant 15: Maria

Maria, 27, a single female parent with two children, a 4-year-old in preschool and a 1-1/2-year-old in day care, worked 21 hours a week. Maria had two part-time, minimum-wage jobs while taking four classes. She was in an associate of science (AS) degree program to help her become a pathology assistant. Maria wanted eventually to attend a 4-year institution to become a forensic pathologist.

Maria was stretched for time and energy. Her goal was to finish school as soon as possible. She lived with her father, who helped financially, while she went through a divorce. Her community-college costs were paid by a Pell Grant. Other aid helped pay for her children's preschool and day care. Maria's soon-to-be ex-husband did not help her financially. He took the children for parts of the weekend while Maria worked her two part-time jobs. Maria paid close attention to the physical and psychological needs of her children, and she was able to keep balance and fun in the daily routine.

Interview and Analysis Themes

This section includes the findings reflected in the descriptions of participants in their interviews and my interpretive analysis as the researcher. I present and explain the identified themes and subthemes. Quotations using the voices of the participants are representative of the themes. This interweaving of analytic commentary and raw extracts of quotations reflects a dialogue between the participant and the researcher like that described in *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (Smith et al., 2009).

Five major themes and a number of subthemes emerged from the data. The data revealed the challenges of 15 Mountain West community-college students from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives as they persisted to obtain an associate degree. All participants answered the

carefully worded questions based on their perceptions of what each question meant to them in their situation. As a result, the following themes and subthemes emerged.

Theme 1: Reasons for Attending College

The student-parents of this study decided to attend college, specifically a community college, for reasons related to improving their lives. Within the first subtheme, “Why go to college?,” the student-parents described the experiences that led them to go to college at this point in their lives. Within the second subtheme, “Why attend a community college?,” student-parents describe reasons they decided to attend a community college. The decisions were based on circumstances in the student-parents lives. In most instances, the decision by student-parents to attend a community college resulted from multiple factors that might include circumstances, a logical decision to attend, or both. Circumstances that may have prompted the decision include experiencing a crisis, having an educational plan for achieving specific goals, or a combination of reasons. Some student-parents had made judgments that led them to choose a career path they believed they needed for success in life. In each circumstance, the student-parents followed through with their decision to attend college.

Why Go to College?

Their decisions to begin college for the first time or to return to college were based on a combination of ideas the student-parents had for improving their lives. These ideas or thoughts were based on previous life experiences; advice from people who the students felt were experts; potential career opportunities; employment or career statistics; or devotion to an ideal career that the students believed aligned with their values. Regardless of the logical-thought pattern, these student-parents developed a commitment and a firm resolve to improve their lives by attending college.

Career opportunity. Having a job or a career, and supporting a family were often the reasons participants gave for attending college. For example, at the time of the interview, Ben was completing his last courses at a community college and was in the process of applying to a 4-year institution for his bachelor's degree in nursing. He stated, "The biggest thing for me was a job and career and supporting my family." Ben revealed more explicit details of what a career meant to him, such as being able to use higher-level thinking skills and having an opportunity to make decisions in the practice of nursing and medicine. His desire to use his cognitive abilities in a career reinforced his decision to attend college—a community college first, and then the 4-year college.

At the time of the interview, both Michael (age 26) and Ben (age 29) were similar in how they planned their educational steps and professional goals. School was more than education for them. School meant fulfillment through their career. Michael commented, "This degree will help me move on with this passion for 'helping families.'" Similarly, Ben explained, "This degree will give me a profession that uses advanced thinking, decision making, and application in practice." Having made their career decisions, a common theme for Ben and Michael was watching for openings in community-college programs that aligned with their career choices. Ben said,

> [A] chief factor at the time, on doing it, was getting accepted to the program. It's a competitive program with nursing at ... [named] College. A lot of other students have applied several years in a row looking for a seat. Going straight into college was just that availability again, having been accepted into the nursing program, having an offer to get into nursing school, I took it ... jumped right into it.

Similarly, Michael said, "One year I didn't get into the program. I waited a whole year to get back into it."

Ben and Michael prepared for their college and career challenges by learning the nuances of their careers ahead of time. Both Ben and Michael had discussed their ideas and asked lots of

questions of people with whom they worked to prepared themselves for their careers. Ben spoke of what colleagues had told him about higher-level thinking skills and his career opportunity:

> What I am hearing from other colleagues, from my National Guard Unit down in Cheyenne, and they are seeing, in the bigger scenes, [is] it being more competitive. Folks that have been working several years up to [a] decade on an associate-degree nursing license are being told that if you want to keep your job, you have *X* amount of time to finish a bachelor's. At a facility down towards Cheyenne, in Denver, the more populated areas, southern Wyoming, and Colorado, they're wanting more. They cite critical thinking with it, to achieve through upper-level theory classes, looking at dynamics and decision making and application of nursing practice. They want, as a profession, they want more advanced thinking. They are putting more responsibility on the nurses to act [make decisions] independently.

In the same vein, listening to people in the workplace about career expectations, Michael learned much of his needed skills on the job from managers, partners, and owners of the funeral home. Michael decided on college because of a manager who taught him on the job, an owner who attended a college, and an employer who encouraged him to attend and finish. Michael said,

> One of my managers who left the company taught me a lot about the industry. You have to get through an apprenticeship to get your license in Alaska. He was my master. [Also] One of the owners is an alumnae from [the college]. He told me a lot about it. He went there. You learn a lot. The computer is easier ... the way they do stuff, it's pretty simple. That's how I figured it out.
> The new owner owns about six funeral homes throughout the state ... is a great guy. He looked at me and said, "You are one of my best guys. I think you are already great. We'll make sure you manage until you get to the top and retire." A boss and owner that can talk to you like that helps out a lot.

Moreover, Christy voiced that the decision to attend college was about a career that fit the person: "The goal of education is more than an education goal ... [for] a career; it's about a career that fits you." Christy changed from one academic study to another when she realized she wanted to actively help people rather than be in a lab. She wanted the career that fit her:

> The medical assistant was the easy, in the moment; just sign up for the class and get through it. [But] I don't have that business side. The degree I was pursuing was split between medical and business. It seemed like a decision was already made to switch to get into the LPN program. It's like, I'm going for it now. I thought, I want to shift to the patient side, to the LPN program.

Salary levels. Salary levels were another reason for student-parents to attend college. Most of the student-parents wanted to earned above minimum wage and have enough for some extras beyond fixed expenses. For a short time, the student-parents were willing to live on a tight budget if the result would likely bring a higher income when they graduated from college. Sandi admitted she didn't "need to be rich and have millions." She explained,

> It's nice to know that you feel confident that you're [earning enough], that you're able to pay all your bills and you have a nice place to live, a car that starts every day, has air conditioning. I just want to make enough money so that I can take care of my family. I can give my kids small extra things. We can take some vacations [and] be comfortable.

Salary was also a determining factor for Maria. She shared that, between her two jobs, she made $700 a month, barely enough to pay fixed expenses for bills and gas for the car. Accordingly, she was anxious to complete her degree, move out of her dad's house, and make a better salary. She explained,

> School is a necessity ... otherwise, what is going to happen to your family, where are your children going to be, where are you going to live? When you've been working for a long time you realize how the world works ... realize what your potential life is going to be looking like, without college.

Crisis recovery. Three student-parents began attending college following a crisis, a time of intense difficulty. Each of these student-parents decided to attend after experiencing a death of someone close to them, a personal addiction rehabilitation, an unexpected pregnancy, relief from depression, or a combination of these or other challenging personal events. These student-parents explained that a circumstance in which they needed a new focus, a new direction, or a new career offered the potential for a better life. Darcy, for example, realized she needed to do something better for her children than be a bartender, something better than going from job to job. She stated, "I needed to find a career." She also recounted a deeper reason: She had become pregnant and also was leaving an addiction-rehabilitation center. Part of the rehabilitation for her was making a plan to attend college:

> When my oldest boy was 6 years old, his father disappeared with him, taking [him] out of the state and away from me. I lost my mind and my will to live. I became addicted to drugs and had no job and was living from place to place. I was in a rough and scary place. I woke up one day in jail, and four months' pregnant. I decided, "No, there's something better for me." I got a job and got back on my feet, decided to fight for my oldest boy... As soon as I was stable enough with my kids, I made the choice to go back to school. So I decided to come to college.

Self-fulfillment. A few student-parents admitted that their decision to go to college was to become knowledgeable in a field they enjoyed, and also to enter an occupation that they would enjoy. Work was to be the culmination of their passion. Kim began with her husband's encouraging comment, "Why don't you get a degree in something you want to do!" She admitted,

> That's what I started off doing. I would like to work in the field of anthropology or archaeology. I'd like to get my bachelor's in anthropology, minor in history, and eventually sometime down the road teach one or both of them.

Tricia also sought personal fulfillment in her educational path. She knew she was good at working with people, inspiring musicians, artists, and organizing venues to promote their talent. Her fulfillment by "setting the stage" was in fact her reason for planning what she would study to make her life more rewarding. Tricia said, "I'm hopefully going to run a theater or venue. I want to work with a theater venue or be in charge of scheduling programs because I'm good at putting people together." Doing this meant going to college to study management and then advance into arts and media management.

Why Attend a Community College?

Most student-parents had a primary reason for attending a community college. Most participants reported the reasons they chose to attend a community college as follows: (a) cost of tuition and fees, (b) variety of associate degrees, (c) selection of general foundation courses, (d) convenience of location, (e) efficient use of time, and (f) availability of support services. Some other reasons were that the community college had a good reputation, the student-parent had

friends who attended the same community college, and the college supported nontraditional students who were intimidated by 4-year colleges. Remediation, developmental, and tutorial programs were also factors that influenced some participants' decision to attend a community college.

Along with their personal decision to attend a community college, student-parents selected an associate-degree program. Some student-parents settled into a program with a career goal in mind. They then took steps to arrange for financial support, part-time work, child care, and classes that fit into their schedule. These arrangements often reflected several additional reasons they had for attending a community college. The following sections include the primary reasons student-parents chose a community college.

Lower tuition and fees. Some students calculated the actual semester tuition and fees for different colleges. After doing the calculations, several realized that a community-college price tag was lower than that for the 4-year state university. They computed other cost factors—e.g., living with parents, living in the community, having a terminal degree in 2 years. After they calculated the total costs, they decided to attend the community college.

Lynne considered many factors before she selected a community college, especially the cost of attendance. For community college, "Cost was important, easy on the budget, and schedule flexibility. We [Lynne and her husband] get to carpool three days a week." For these reasons, Lynne and her husband chose to attend a community college together. Lower tuition was also why Donna selected a community college. She answered, "It was just a lot more affordable. Typically the degrees and the certifications are the same [as the 4-year college]."

Variety of associate degrees. A community-college associate degree affords the student a variety of curricula and vocations. Usually, brochures, websites, and catalogues list the

community-college programs. The materials briefly state the instruction, including the skills and knowledge that prepare the student for a career and transfer option to a 4-year institution. Student-parents reviewed programs and the descriptions that outlined the various courses. They usually aligned their interests and abilities with the associate degree that most closely linked to their purposes and goals.

Darcy explained that, as she became stable and felt ready for school, she inquired about the variety of programs and degrees at the local community college. She said, “I decided to come to [named] College [and] listen to all the great ideas that they had. What was the most interesting to me was the medical field. They have great medical programs here.”

Likewise, in her community-college selection process, Tricia looked primarily at programs and their course content. Tricia said, “I picked [named] College. It just seemed like a good school. It had the finance degree and business, which was what I was interested in rather than the arts degree and business.”

Similarly, Michael waited for an opening in a specific program at a recommended community college. The option was an online mortuary science program, which allowed him the flexibility to remain employed as a funeral director in Alaska. Michael explained,

> I started taking some classes that were required to get into the program that I’m in now. I just took my time. One year I didn’t get into the program. I waited a whole year to get back into it. To be an embalmer, which is another part of the funeral-director part, you do have to go to school.

Availability of general foundation courses. Some beginning students are in an exploratory stage. When they have only a general idea about the area they want to study, they often feel comfortable learning foundational material that could be a base for several career directions within the 2-year program or for transfer to a 4-year school. At the beginning, Darcy seemed appreciative that “you come to a community college and you get your generals out of the way, and then you go into your specific place.” Lynne was an example of a student-parent who

wanted to begin at a community college and then transfer. Lynne said, “I want to get my associate’s of science, then go on to a 4-year. I want to become a dentist. This just seemed like the right place to start to get the first 2 years done.”

Efficiency in time and location. Some student-parents based their decision to attend a community college on efficiency in time and location. Once accepted to a community college, student-parents could take advantage of on campus programs, facilities, scholarships, and subsidies that increased their efficiency during the day. Sometimes it took a period of time before the student-parents realized how to become more efficient. The inefficiencies of time spent in travel, extra gas money, and human energy reflected valuable time that they instead could expend on studies, rest, and family. The student-parents appeared to increase their efficiency measures as their experience at the community college evolved. They often selected the college that increased efficiency in their day.

Lynne was a self-proclaimed “over-worker,” which in a sense is a way to get the most out of time and opportunity. She chose a college for many reasons, including whether it allowed her to get things done efficiently. For example, one service at her school, the writing lab, helped her keep her grades up. Lynne joined four clubs because they were on campus, another efficient use of time and place. She stated, “I’m going to get my money’s worth.” With her mother taking care of her child all day, Lynne could move through her day maximizing a schedule designed for efficiency.

Tricia also planned work, day care, and school close-by for efficiency. Tricia said, “Everything is pretty close together. It’s pretty easy to get to work from here, so it is less stressful.” In this scenario, efficiency, convenience, and stress reduction overlap.

Both efficiency and inefficiency appeared in LeeAnn's daily routine. She chose to attend the community college because it was the closest community college in the area with the type of degree she wanted and it also had a child-care center. Still, the 1-hour drive each direction was an exertion of human energy. LeAnn, however, recovered some time while on campus. She achieved efficiency using daytime on campus to study in the library. She described her trips and day this way:

> We live an hour away from campus. We drive an hour to campus. I drop him [her child] off usually around 8:30 to 8:45. Then I walk across and get ready for my classes. Then I go to classes, do homework, and pick him up about 4:00 to 4:30. Then we drive the hour. Dinner and we play a little bit. He's usually exhausted from school so he goes 7:00 to 7:30 to bed.

Attending the community college, LeAnn benefited from the efficiency of having her child in a child center at the community college. She described how the child center helped her be more efficient during the day and afforded her more time to be home and go to bed earlier in the evening:

> This semester I feel it's really been the easiest of all of them, because he [her son] gets to go there [child center], we're in the same location. I go to my classes and I also have time to go to the library and do my homework. By the time I am done with my homework, I can pick him up and we can just come home, make dinner, eat, do our nightly routine, and get him to bed. I can pack and get organized for the next day. I can go to bed. I don't have to do homework until 1 or 2 in the morning. It's giving more time with him.

Availability of support services. The availability of support services attracted the community-college student-parents when they realized a program or an individual could help them successfully complete a course, a project, specific problems or papers, or a program itself.

Maria stated she didn't need academic assistance or other support services, but she did use the counseling services, which were free. Maria was experiencing anxiety, even as she began the community-college program. The anxiety was related to uncertainty in her divorce process. She said, "I do see a counselor through the school. I have a free counselor who I go visit."

Community colleges offer a variety of services, and unlike Maria, Gina needed academic support. Gina was intimidated by college, having built a wall, a negative image in her mind, from high-school experiences. Gina turned that aversion into a positive mindset by deciding to attend a community college with the consolation of knowing that support services were available. She used TRiO personnel, her professors, and small study groups to assist her in understanding course content. Gina said,

> Stan [fictitious name], is the guy I talk to about TRiO. Through the Trio program, Learning Center, applying for a tutor ... to help me organize my thoughts, working [in] a group, realizing I don't need to do it by myself, and asking for help from professors, [all have been] a big thing for me.

Similarly, Lynne used support services for academic reasons, primarily to build a high grade-point average. Eventually, she wanted to get into dental school, and a high grade-point average was important for acceptance into a dental program. She also used the community-college writing lab extensively:

> The first two semesters I knocked out my two writing-composition classes. I used the writing center for almost every single paper. I'm going to use all student services. I'm going to get my money's worth ... to get my grade up.

Convenient location. The location of a community college was a factor for some community-college students. The location often was close to where they lived, where they worked, or their day care. Some student-parents selected the college because it was conveniently located in the town where they grew up, had gone to high school, or had family and friends.

Both Ben and Lynne expressed that location was a significant factor for them in choosing their respective community colleges. Ben used "convenient location" for one of his reasons for attending a community college. He said, "Being able to take it [courses in a program] at home and not have to move the family again [was a positive for convenience]." Ben had multiple reasons to attend the community college: convenient location to home, to the local VA for work

to support his family, and to his sons' grandparents. Lynne and her husband both claimed "convenient location," among other reasons for attending the nearby community college. Lynne said, "This just seemed like the right place to start to get the first 2 years done. It's one of the closest ones; I live to the south, [named town], and so it's closer to my house."

Theme 2: Support Relationships

The community-college student-parents identified supportive relationships as a major theme that attributed to their persistence. Every student-parent indicated a need for some form of support in their efforts to persist. Christy summed this up by saying, "None of us got to where we are by pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Somebody came along and helped. Help is out there." The common support relationships participants mentioned were financial, academic, social/emotional/psychological, and child-care related.

Financial Support

Paying for a community-college education was often a first concern or challenge for most of the student-parents in this study. Financial support for the participants came from government aid, scholarships and grants, student loans, and private family assistance. The majority of participants in the study received Pell Grants, GI Bill funding, and other federal and state subsidies. Only two student-parents relied on family savings to finance their education. All worked part-time, up to 12 hours a week, with the exception of two male students who worked full-time, a minimum of 40 hours per week. The student-parents who worked full-time used their employment wages for family budget expenses and grant money for education expenses.

Other participants relied on private savings for financial support. Lynne said that her parents had saved money to send her to college:

> I am not receiving any financial aid because my parents set aside some money for me for when I did decide to go to college. I have that for a couple years to pay for my

> community-college education. And my husband has the army paying for his education through the GI Bill.

The application process and wait for funding was a challenge for some student-parents who depended on federal aid. Tricia recounted,

> The whole having to buy your books at the bookstore and the length of time you have to wait for your grants. That's the hardest thing. If I could have had the money 2 weeks earlier, I could and would have signed up for more classes and in the long run saved money. But I had to pay rent, then the car breaking down. It was $1,300.

Christy said that the community-college financial-service representative helped her by calling her former employer. The financial-service representative explained in the telephone call that the employer had delayed payments of child subsidies Christy was entitled to receive, and asked the former employer to have the funds mailed as soon as possible. Christy needed the money to pay her bills. She said,

> When we first came [to the college town] I applied for SNAP. Although, I knew it was just a clip of a file in [the other town where she worked], it took 2 months. I left a job that didn't pay that much, but it [SNAP] was something. When it came after a whole 2 months, they said, "Let's catch you up." Then the new level was almost more than we could use in a month. A teary day at the mailbox. It seems like some days, you wonder how I'm I going to put the next foot in front of the other. It will just pop up, "Well here you go; we're sorry we forgot."

Christy also related another financial frustration that she experienced. She explained that she considered herself a planner and usually paid her bills on time. She was held up on meeting her own expenses [bill payments] because "someone either miscalculate[d] or delay[ed] payment owed." Christy explained the miscalculation:

> You're waiting for this one person to do their one thing, the way the state pays, they bill and it matches up and then, if it was just an hour off it would be an extra $100.00 a month to have 3 hours a week times 4 weeks for $100. My gosh. It all depended upon I'm number 2 on the waiting list. It's hard with my personality, because I want to do what I can, and have things in place, but there's so much out in the world that's the unknown.

Ben experienced an adjustment—his income was reduced considerably—when he left active duty in Iraq to attend the community college. Changing from active duty and going into the reserves lowered his income by about $40,000:

> Leaving the army, coming off that active status, I left a job where we were on a single income where around $65,000 to $68,000 a year. Living in this state, that is an extremely comfortable income. We went from living on that, back to almost a third of it. Working as a VA employee at a bottom of the ladder, a GS 5 employee, at 40 hours a week, we altered our finances, what we could do, and then it changed even further going into school. I had to cut my hours back to 12 hours a week at work.

Ben eventually had to apply for and secure a private bank loan because the VA did not repay him in time for him to purchase supplies and equipment the VA required. This situation was doubly frustrating for him. At the time of the interview, Ben explained,

> I think things are a little screwed up at the national level. To be quite honest, I'm still waiting for payment, back payment, on supplies that I needed, that I had to put on a credit card three semesters ago that I'm having to pay. It's altered and influenced decisions I've made, the supplies that I had to put on the credit card and that I'm so far behind on. And here I am having to pay for what they said I had to have; my uniforms, my scrubs, my supplies, my books, these things they say they'll cover. I put it on the personal credit card and [am] still carrying that debt.

Some students found it very difficult to live off of very limited resources. Tricia explained her situation as "tight." She had one child and no family nearby. Her husband partially supported her, but he lived far away, working as an offshore delivery captain. Many student-parents, like Tricia, lived on their own, existing "hand to mouth." Tricia needed the supplement from government Pell Grants and low-income subsidies, including a day-care subsidy. She said,

> I think I'm pretty lucky that I qualify for grants and a couple scholarships. I make it work. I cook from scratch and we eat healthy foods. Yeah, there're frustrations ... like driving an older car. I'm not going to spend money on a babysitter unless I'm going to work. I don't have a washer and dryer in my apartment. The first year, I was paying out-of-state tuition. Now, I have SCAP—it's a subsidy to have my day care paid for, so I pay a certain percentage, and the way I've arranged my schedule I only have part-time day care for work. I don't have any day care to do homework or for class. Extra day care would cost $20, and that's what I make at work. It's a balance-the-budget thing.

Tricia indicated that, although she qualified for financial aid and was grateful, at times it felt like it became an additional challenge to go through the paperwork, often having to talk to rude people, to secure the aid. She said that dependency on financial aid often came with frustration with the wait time. Classes begin and books are needed before the government money comes into the student's account at the community college. Tricia told me that the books at the bookstore were almost double the online cost, yet another challenge. The financial-aid office attendant said that Tricia had to purchase the books at the college bookstore because she was on financial aid. For Tricia, the personnel in the financial-aid office were part of her challenges. She claimed they were rude because she was an older student and had her child with her. Further, she wanted to buy her books from Amazon.com She recounted, "For nontraditional, community-college students attending for a first time, the hurdles related to financial management can be stressful." Information about planning a budget and, for Tricia, planning with regard for the timing of the financial-aid distribution into the student's account were critical.

In Christy's scenario, academic support in the form of a full 2-year scholarship supported her entire education. The recognition and the accompanying scholarship meant a lot to her. Christy was required to give two presentations explaining what the college foundation scholarship meant to her. She said,

> I was accepted for the Transformation Scholarship. That's such a great ... It's a new scholarship that [named] College created, and I am the first recipient, the first person that applied and was accepted. It's 2 years and they cover your schooling. It covers education costs, books, and if there's some left over, your living expenses. So with the Pell Grant, Montana scholarships that are open to everybody, on top of that, it's an amount that pays for school and the leftover pays for 5 months of rent. So I could, with working, keep my hours less than part-time. It covers groceries, gasoline ... so it comes down to, at the end of the month, every dollar is used and I'm not falling behind.

Academic Support

For the participants, academic support came from college instructors, advisors, mentors and coaches, peer groups, college study groups, service learning associates, spouses, and combinations of these. Student-parents also characterized academic support as encompassing a variety of resources. These resources included formal tutoring, online supplements to instruction such as the ShowMe math problems and solutions, and at-home studying strategies with their children.

Two participants in particular received substantial academic support from their teachers and instructors. LeAnn spoke of teachers as academic support. At first, just having had her child, she thought that online classes were the only route to take. But she learned that face-to-face classes suited her because she could get a little more help with her questions. LeAnn explained,

> I did a lot of online classes. But those are really hard because you're the teacher and the student. You have to teach yourself the material and then you have to do the work, the assignments; so it was really difficult. So I had a really hard time with the online classes, but I felt it was my only option. The next semester I was able to take him [her son] to the child care on campus and go to the classes, which I like better. There's some teachers who've really been helpful, who are so supportive and encouraging; you can ask them questions. They're right there to help you. To have a contact person that I can call what I am thinking ... just having that one contact person…

Likewise, Kim spoke of instructors who inspired and provided academic support. She credited an instructor for moving her forward into a career that proved to be a passionate interest. Kim said,

> I changed my direction from history to anthropology because of the way he [her instructor] taught. I signed up for two more classes. He told us our final project at the beginning of the semester. Our final project was going to be to explain what we believe the human spark is. For months we researched, probed our minds, and used every resource of book to computer to think of what the human spark is—what makes us human? It was such a fascinating class. I enjoyed it so much. I enjoyed his teaching so much. He pushed me in a completely different direction, just giving me a good inspiration for wanting to continue my studies past a 2-year degree ... and move forward.

Participants described academic support both as formal classroom instruction and informal instruction, such as casual study groups or learning from nonclassroom experiences.

One student-parent, Maria, acknowledged she never needed or had the time for academic support, but she liked reinforcing class content by sharing concepts from her classes at her children's level of comprehension. She said,

> Sometimes my son gets homework from the preschool. Which is really great, so then we do homework together. Sometimes I can tell them [her children] a little bit about what I am doing. Having to explain it to them in simpler terms, I can better master what it is I am supposed to be learning. So that's helpful.

Other participants often used versions of formal community-college support. For an example of formal tutoring, Gina, who had missed much academic preparation in high school, took advantage of the TRiO services on campus. She confirmed that TRiO was the best place for her to begin: "Dan is the guy I talk to about TRiO and tutoring"; and "another person there with a master's degree was a major player in helping me in getting my scholarship essays together."

Some student-parents needed more individual help in a one-on-one situation. Other student-parents sought tutoring on their own, using the Internet and online supplements. For example, Jacob often explored the Internet. He admitted to being an avid reader but a poor test taker who remedied his academic situation with the online ShowMe problem-solving options for math:

> The thing I like about the math I'm doing since I got into college is the online part of it. It has an example, ShowMe example. Those are all really, really helpful. It breaks it down the way it's asking, shows you how it's asking, and then it goes "Now you do it." It lets you figure it out and get the right answer and get through the problem.

The most commonly used academic support services for study participants were their academic advisors and the math and writing labs. LeAnn conveyed the helpfulness of an advisor who provided overall guidance and accurate information. This advisor saved her time and offered social and emotional support, as well:

> I have an academic advisor who ... checks in three times during a semester, checks with your grades. And you go in and have a meeting, and you just get to go in and sit down and talk to them about any questions you have about anything in the school. I think that's

> helped out a lot. A lot of the questions that she has been able to answer you can't just find online. You may call somebody and you get the exact opposite [answer] of the same question you just asked somebody else. To have a contact person that I can call helped. Before, when I was just in online classes, I felt like I had to do it on my own.

Academic support the participants used varied according to the specificity they needed. Jacob needed specific math-problem tutoring, LeAnn needed career advisement along with course assistance, and Lynne needed assurance that her work met a high standard. Lynne wanted to maintain a high grade-point average, so she used advising and labs:

> I use the student services, like advising. The first two semesters I knocked out my two writing-composition classes. I used the writing center for almost every single paper. I have used the Math Flex Lab. I'm going to use all student services. I'm going to get my money's worth to get my grade up.

Emotional/Social/Psychological Support

Emotional, social, and psychological support was another form of support that participants indicated they needed to help them with some aspect of their life. This form of support often came from immediate family members; peers; workplace associates; social media; literature; or college counselors, instructors, or advisors.

Family. Family members frequently provided emotional, social, and psychological support when those relationships were accessible, respectful, and encouraging. Michael leaned on his father for support rather than his siblings. Their sharing relationship built trust and respect, which was a core of support that propelled Michael to investigate a service career and a college program related to mortuary science. Part of providing emotional and psychological support is validating the other person's ideas and plans. Michael explained,

> I have a lot of respect for my father. My dad would say generally, "Go to school," but my brother said, like, "You don't have to go to school." And my dad pushes me. The reason he pushes me and not my other siblings is that I listen to him. The reason I have success is because I didn't make the fatal mistake he did.

At times, the children of the participants offered emotional uplift, so in that sense they also provided support. Sandi said,

> I love my kids. They make me laugh. They're a riot. They are so much fun. They do the funniest things. I say, "How did you come up with that?" Every time they look at you with those big eyes ... they love you and it makes all that other stuff go away.

Peers. A few students formed study groups that also served as emotional and social support. Darcy, for example, was clear that the peers in her class and program were there to help and encourage each other. She remarked,

> So the girls in my medical assistant class; they are like my backbone. We constantly encourage each other to keep going as far as, like, "Sorry you didn't get a good grade on that; I'll study with you next time." It's been a huge deal for me.

The need for a study group was not met in Jacob's daily experience at the community college. Jacob would have benefited from talking through some of the course content with his peers or classmates. To him, being "on the same page" meant having a combination of social, emotional, and psychological support to accompany the academic support. Jacob said,

> What I would have benefitted from but I never had, was a study group. Have a partner that would be on the same page as me. When I say I need tranquility, I don't really mean I have to be alone. I just mean I need people that are on the same page as me. We're doing the same thing. You have to have the speaking and hearing, I need to be in a conversation with somebody.

Workplace. Certain participants received emotional, social, and psychological support from previous or current employers. Christy recalled coworkers who encouraged her by writing letters of recommendation for her when they knew she had an opportunity to transition to a new program in another community. The effort to compose and write the letter took one coworker most of the morning. It was an act of giving, which Christy appreciated. She recalled,

> The person that replaced the older, negative boss was astounding. She put on her calendar, "Write a letter of recommendation," then later said, "Wasn't there something I was supposed to write for you? A letter of recommendation?" So having her push me toward something ... she said she was writing that morning, and by afternoon she said, "Here you go. Here's a sealed one and a copy for you."

> The other director … wrote the second letter of recommendation. Both of them, having such strong educational backgrounds, were great role models for me. Both were moms. One was a nontraditional student and went to get her master's when her kids were in junior high. She gave me some tips on writing.

Social media. A student-parent who had no family near used social media to provide support. Darcy joined a website for grieving parents who felt the need to share their stories. Darcy related to their stories, realizing she had progressed with positive steps in her life by going to college and assuming responsibilities as a parent after her daughter's death. Darcy said,

> When I lost my daughter I was in this horrible hole. I found solace in reading other people's stories about how they lost their children. I joined this website. I still go back to that website, even though I'm healing very well, I read the stories of their children. It helps motivate me, knowing I'm doing what I need to be doing. Being where I need to be and doing what I need to be doing. I don't know if I would have gotten through it if it hadn't been for those inspirational memorials that I was reading.

Instructors. A few students expressed that they felt encouraged by instructors who made comments that showed students were important to them. Darcy found emotional support from several instructors. Some supportive comments came from her regular course instructors, and some came from the instructors in her work-study program. Darcy described the motivation she received from her instructors:

> Their comments keep me going ... "You're going to get there." And my nursing instructors are amazing, they're an amazing support. They're okay that I don't want to go to nursing school and that I want to be a med tech. They just want me to do good in whatever I choose to do.

When he was on active duty, Ben found emotional support for his learning and for his overall goal of becoming a nurse practitioner. He said that the paramedic instructor

> …looked at me and said, "Now look, sergeant, why in the heck are you not a nurse, a PA, or a doctor? Why you are still enlisted? Why don't you have your commission?" I was guided, after that conversation, into looking at the nursing profession.

Counselors. Several student-parents used the free counseling or psychological services their community college provided. Maria began her community-college program still unhappy

about home issues: a father who told her she probably wouldn't make it, and a husband who would not support her financially. Maria believed in herself. She thought, however, that a few sessions with the counselor at the community college would help:

> I started having trouble that spring 2013, with my husband. I was really unhappy and started having a lot of home issues. They started a counselor program. They just had started it. Talking to someone has helped me get perspective and try to find some answers to what it was I needed and what it was I was going through. Ultimately, I decided to get a divorce, partially from having someone listen and have them tell me what they were hearing, back to me. It was really important having someone impartial.

Ben also realized he would benefit from counseling support. He was transitioning from active military duty in Iraq to being a student and a father. He understood he could not treat his classmates like teammates in combat, and he realized he was gruff, abrasive, and impatient. To better make the transition and improve his approach with people in civilian life, Ben chose to evaluate his personality:

> Following the second deployment, I [was] working through some of the coping with experiences of combat and transitioning into an academic student again. I can't treat my fellow students the way I would a teammate in a combat situation. It's a different personality they just [don't] understand. Occasionally, I will look at them, get gruff, and abrasive, and they don't like it. There was about a week or two where I was obviously "checked out." I just had no focus. It required being in a counselor's office.
> I [also] utilized the counselor office [to] work out the adjustment going from a split family to a unified family again ... having to help my wife, her shift from being a single parent, and helping her know what it was like going from soldier mentality to coming back to a father mentality and adding that to this nursing-school mix.

Ben had adjustments to make in two new settings: one with academic classmates, and another in reuniting with his family. These two settings and relationships required focus. Counseling nudged him into a positive, forward-looking effort. Ben said to his wife, "And in the end we've got this. We can hack it. Let's keep going forward ... it takes that combined effort."

Variations and combinations. Several student-parents sought support from groups, clubs, and community organizations related to their specific needs. For example, a student-parent who needed help with course content used a peer study group, an instructor, or an academic

tutorial. Other student-parents sought support from the community. For example, Gina was a participant who had recently left rehabilitation for substance abuse and needed encouragement. She actively sought a minimum of two AA meetings a week to keep her commitment to sobriety. In the interview, Gina confirmed her effort to connect with AA:

> Having my daily medicine, which is an AA meeting [keeps me focused on sobriety]. Talking with my [AA] sponsor and other people in the program, or other people [in the AA program] that are in school [helps] ... trying to make connections here [on campus with AA friends' help]. The newfound relationship with AA has been extremely supportive and helpful.

Many student-parents demonstrated their resourcefulness by the way they combined different forms of support. They often linked social and academic support, or parenting and studying. The resourcefulness of the support each student garnered illustrated the unique attributes each had to address individual needs. Most students needed a solitary environment for the majority of their study efforts. Jennifer, however, combined social time and study time to obtain social support. She said,

> I take my school work with me everywhere I go. I always have my backpack. I always have my flash cards with me. Every Wednesday I go play board games with my friends—actually, about two nights a week, but I'll sit there and do my homework, while I'm playing board games with my friends. I try to lump it altogether and make it work.

Child-Care Support Options

Many student-parents described their experiences with child care as an assistance or service that allowed them to attend a community college. Community day care and the community-college child-care centers provided their child care. Child-care support, assistance with physical care, nurturing, and teaching of the student-parents' children allowed the student-parents to attend classes, go to work, and sometimes study. Their parents, the spouse, a friend, an off-campus day care, the college child-care center, or a combination of these furnished child-care support for the student-parents. Several factors influenced their decision of where to leave their

child or children. These factors included the quality of day care, the cost, and the proximity to the participant's place of work or the college. Generally, the student-parent was grateful for a nearby center or family members who could offer education as well as physical care. Generally, campus child-care centers required that the child be at least 2-1/2 years old; but the age, hours of service, and type of care varied from campus to campus. Sometimes a student-parent had to leave one child at a day-care provider and then leave another child with the campus preschool. Regardless, both options provided child-care support to the community-college student-parents while they were in class, working, or studying on campus.

Grandparents. For participants with children, child care was a necessity. For Donna, it was both a necessity and a "blessing." Donna had two children and used family for day care: "My mom helped out quite a bit, my sister babysat for free, and my husband helped on the weekend." Similarly, Gina was grateful for her parents, who would babysit sometimes; but the late nights and weekends were not compatible with their schedules. Gina said, "My mom and dad have been extremely supportive ... to the point of smothering me. My parents, God bless them, [do child care] but they don't take him over night."

Kim had a unique conundrum because of her husband's recent death. The financial resources for the more expensive Lutheran day care were now no longer available. Kim's mother could take the children sometimes; however, her own occupation as a writer made caring for children difficult. The youngest child did not yet qualify for the community-college day care, but at least the oldest one was finally in elementary school. At the time of the interview, Kim was still making arrangements to find good substitute day care for the times when her mom was unavailable. Kim felt caught between her need to be in class and the fact that she did not yet have reliable and affordable day care. The idea of imposing on her mother did not feel right. Kim was

in transition and was relying on the community-college advisor for suggestions about how to take more online courses and find supplemental child care. She stated,

> My mom has babysat the kids [a lot in the past]. Today, my mom is sicker than a dog and I've been sick. I had to let [*sic*] one of my math professors and let him know I can't make it up for my math test today. I could push myself even knowing I'm not feeling good; but knowing my mom is sick and on her own deadline, it's just not fair to ask her to watch the 1-year-old while I go up and take a test. It ends up being a couple of hours of travel time. Child care is really expensive, and it's not something I can afford. My entire life schedule revolves around when I'm able to have help with the kids. Support like that would be hugely beneficial.

Spouse. Ben appreciated his wife doing the child care. Ben worked full-time and his wife stayed home with the children. That way, Ben did not need to watch the children when he worked or studied; he was free to go to work and to study. He said, "Study time and prepping for tests was a huge support." Ben and his wife did not want to have a day care or school raising their children. He said, "We want to be the parents. We don't want someone else to. We discussed this before we had our kids."

Off-campus day care. For younger children not old enough for the community-college day care, off campus day care met the need for some student-parents. One student-parent made cautionary remarks about day care for her now 6-year-old and for the 1-year-old, remarks that might also reflect the feelings of apprehension other parents have leaving their children at noncollege preschools or day-care centers:

> You hear about day cares that are not good places ... or have good people. One thing my mom and I decided when my 6-year-old was born, she's not going to go to an outside source until she's old enough to talk. She needed to be able to say, "Something wasn't right, mommy." That's the same thing with the 1-year-old. I've got the same thing, another couple years until I'll feel safe leaving her somewhere ... just because things aren't always what they seem [they put on a good show]. I got very lucky with my 6-year old. I had her at Trinity Lutheran Child Care Center when she was 2. They were just fantastic people. I got very lucky with that, but that costs an arm and leg, too ... to have that private child care. This particular school is Trinity Lutheran Church and School ... it's a grade school and child care. I know personally, a long story, but one of the people I took care of in the group home was the son of one of the people who were major influences in that particular church. I felt comfortable knowing that these [were] good

people, who were major influences in the group home and the church. They would not allow not-good things in their church or school. They would not allow those things to happen.

College preschools and day-care centers. Many student-parents in the study used on-campus preschools and day-care centers. Of those who used the day-care center on campus, most found them to be accommodating to their scheduling needs. Maria noted, "The scholarship for my son is something from the school (community college). The school provides that preschool. They have been very accommodating. At times they will let you do extra hours for finals." She noted that her time with her children was when they had outings to a museum, a zoo, or just took walks; but being able to see the child between classes on campus was a plus. That convenience helped Maria manage her time and also stay connected.

Theme 3: Addressing Stress

Stressful situations occurred within the daily lives of each student-parent in this study. Stress, often defined as tension, pressure, or anxiety-producing events, emerges in the community-college student-parents' lives largely from the abundant responsibilities they have for their families, their coursework, and their jobs. The student-parents described how they coped with stress and finally how they organized to mitigate stress in various situations.

Stressors Identified Through Experiences

Stress appears in various degrees of intensity, so it may not be distinguishable at the onset of a situation or experience (Pierceall & Keim, 2007). The student-parents viewed stress using a variety of descriptions and experiences. Pointing to a long list of things to do, many participants indicated that stress meant conflicting demands for time, or too many responsibilities. Others had not completely identified or analyzed stress factors in their lives.

LeAnn identified family demands for her time as a main stressor for her. Many of the family demands pertained to the health-related issues of her mother and son. LeAnn was at times

overextended, needing to take her mom to appointments and her son to speech therapy. Her mother had been through “several heart-related surgeries.” The surgeries were serious, taking both an emotional and physical toll, consuming hours with the hospital waits followed by home care for recovery. LeAnn recounted, “My son had preeclampsia when he was born 3 weeks early, eventually affecting his speech and cognitive delays.” Other family responsibilities for LeAnn included taking her younger siblings to school because of her mother’s driving restriction. Once she was at the community college, LeAnn used the library between classes for focused study. “It was a location where I could concentrate,” she commented. “It’s just trying to stay organized and focused [that’s an ongoing challenge].”

Maria succinctly explained how she defined stressors: “I define stress as things that are outside of the scope for my goal. I don’t define schoolwork as a stress ... because it’s [college is] kind of a necessity for me. I made it a priority.” Maria explained how she felt stressed by the excessive talking of others and the drama in her life. Drama distracted her from a focus on school. She offered the example of workplace drama that created distractions for her. “I define the drama that goes on currently at the jobs. Whenever there are more than two people, there’s going to be drama.” At work she had to put up with drama or try to ignore it. However, when given a choice, she used caution, avoiding attention-getting people and their drama.

Sandi commented on the initial stress she experienced at the beginning of a program when she was “learning how to manage time” and “trying to remain flexible for unexpected events.” She explained,

> When I first went back, the first semester, it was really stressful because I was still learning how to manage my time between that and everything else. I would get really stressed out, especially when I knew I had work due and I was still trying to find time to do the work. It would be really stressful because I want to get good grades because I want to do it right this time.

> Like if my kids get sick. My son got sick a couple weeks' ago and that was really pretty hard. We were in the hospital most [of] the night one night. So I brought my laptop, and while he slept I sat there and did homework. I didn't know what else to do.

Lynne liked order in her life and worked to keep on top of her daily schedule. In the mornings, she often felt stress as the day began to unfold. As she began to move through her responsibilities, stress appeared to subside, and she found that a positive mindset helped. Lynne recalled,

> Definitely I'm most stressed in the mornings, like getting up, like ... "another long day." I deal with stress differently, but I just take one minute at a time, I guess ... take it one day at a time. I try to focus on the positive things that happen during the day ... not dwell on the negatives.

Lynne, like many of the other students, felt emotionally sad at times because of the reality that her own mother and father saw more of her child than she did as the student-parent. Lynne knew she needed to be a responsible student, which meant going to the college campus and studying; but at times the reality of not being there for her son was hard on her emotionally. As she explained,

> I think parenting as a nontraditional student is the hardest thing. They [the children] spend most of their week with their babysitter, which is really hard to think about. You don't even spend as much time with them as the babysitter. You really start to realize that you can't take any moment with your child for granted, especially like on the weekends and stuff.

Lynne admitted this challenge took an emotional toll on her. For that reason, the more significant challenge of separating parenting from the focused study of her academic course work began to make sense. It made sense, in fact, for most of the single female parents.

Stress also came when instructors were not always clear in their explanations of classroom expectations or expectations for assignments, or when they did not provide reasons that justified the methods they used. For example, Gina was frustrated with an adjunct

developmental psychology instructor who added layers of online supplemental work to already-demanding textbook readings. Gina explained,

> Sometimes I am overwhelmed by it, especially; my developmental psychology class is ... They give you the syllabus. She gives you a questionnaire with the syllabus that as a group we are supposed to go over the syllabus, answer these ridiculous questions. There's the book, there's my psych lab, and there's … then there's my desire to learn online. There's these two online sites and the book and they're all over the place. Quite frankly, I want to grab her and say, "What the hell are you thinking? You're from my generation; you're a little bit older than I am. Seriously. this is stupid." Even the youngsters [traditional students] are seeing it, saying, "We don't even know what to do." The orientation had briefed us that this wasn't the right thing, and she's twenty-something years old. So I'm overwhelmed by the whole computer thing; but if these guys are too, then I don't feel so bad. It's just a lot of bullshit busywork. It's frustrating. It's definitely frustrating going back to school 20 to 23 years after high school.

Coping Techniques and Tools

Kim and her husband, when he was alive, used chores as stress relievers. Kim said, "Horses have always been my stress release my whole life. Grooming is very therapeutic. It's like brushing your cat or dog. You get into that rhythm." She told me about that rhythm in relieving stress while getting things done:

> My husband would mow the lawn to relieve stress. It was his relax time. He'd work 50 to 60 hours a week and still mow the lawn to relieve the stress. We moved around doing random house chores to relieve stress.

Kim also found the children's rituals of bath time and reading stories a stress reliever. However, when evening came, she said,

> I'll stay up a couple hours longer studying ... when I know I can sit and relax and focus without worrying about all the other stuff I needed to get done during the day. I can sit and focus on my school work.

Jacob was a juggler by profession. Since juggling came easy to him, it was his tool to get his mind of the other stressful things in his life. He also liked to be with friends as other student-parents mentioned. "I hang out with friends and juggle… I had a job, and I would do that [juggle] for 8 hours a day."

Finally, the knowledge and expertise of counselors become tools some student-parents used to minimize stress. Many of them claimed that change and transitions were stressors. A vivid example of this was Ben's transition from being in Iraq to being husband, father, and student. He admitted "being gruff and abrasive" with fellow classmates who delayed and "whined":

> People need to get going on things or ... stop screwing around with things. You're interrupting the class, or you're interrupting my learning; knock it off, and then other times, just stretch it.

Ben worked through his stress and anxiety with the help of the VA counselor.

Priorities for Use of Time

Student-parents facilitated their time management, or how they structured their time in terms of the responsibilities to be met, with planners and calendars. Often they would use the course syllabus and other information about appointments and activities to develop a structured plan for their time. Some students would estimate the amount of time it would take to complete an activity, such as a writing assignment, and then block off this time in their planner.

In addition to a day planner or calendar, students used other strategies to help them make the best use of their time, including journaling, posting sticky notes to themselves, using active listening in class, taking double notes, and recording class sessions. These strategies served as a reminder of tasks they needed to complete by a specific time. Sandi said, "I feel better if I can do all the stuff done that I can do rather quickly and that I'm good at. Then what I am not good at, I can give that all my attention."

Another student-parent, Lynne, was a "power-through" person who described herself saying, "Unfortunately, I like to overwork myself." Lynne used speed and squeezing out time in between demands to accomplish more in less time. She explained her system of time management this way:

> [I use] a lot of late nights. Sometimes I'll get some study time during work if it's not too busy. Other than that, it's just kind of just squeeze it in when everyone else is sleeping, My phone calendar I rely on 100%. I put everything in it ... my tests and my homework assignments are in it. A physical planner I may not write in, but I know I'll always have my phone on me ... like my calendar I can check everything. That's what I use mostly. Gotta do the dishes, gotta vacuum, gotta clean bathrooms, all that kind of stuff, and quiz yourself in your head while you're doing it.

For Jennifer, the mindset of studying, "getting started," or avoiding "the lazies" was a subtheme to prevent procrastination. She admitted,

> Managing time is the hardest part about going to school. There's a lot of times I would much rather do anything else but study. I just make sure I work on something all the time. Every day, something ... if I find myself sitting there doing nothing, I make myself get up and grab a textbook or something.

Jacob's father coached him on persistence. "It doesn't matter if you don't feel like doing some things. You have to do them. You even get the "lazies" about the things you want to do. You have to stay on top of that."

All the community-college student-parents described their commitment to studies and to persisting to a degree. An equal priority was their children or their family. The participants described these priorities in different ways. The single female parents who were students said they were trying to improve their lives and the lives of their children.

Social life for LeAnn was not in the schedule, with two family members who had health issues: I say "No" a lot. I have to say, "No, that's not going to happen." Her classes meant a lot to her. "I want to see an *A* on my paper. I know a *B* is okay, but even when I see a *B* I get upset."

Although many student-parents might think of college, classes, studies, and having to have everything done according to the timeline of the syllabus as stress, Maria did not. She saw college as her hope, opportunity, and a necessity. Calling school a necessity made it a priority to her, and other life events were outside that most important effort. She said,

> I try not to define school as a stress because it's kind of a necessity for me. I made it a priority. I'm kind of careful the way I think about that. I like to think of things that are already outside of what you've allotted [in your plan as an extra use of your time].

Michael said, "I kind of found this job to be my calling. School will get me better pay, but this degree will help me move on with this passion." Michael reflected his priorities in his schedule as he described it:

> I get up pretty early, about 5:30 every morning ... do some exercising ... then about 6:30 I'm on the Internet studying ... getting all the notes and getting as much as I can before work starts at 8:00. Then when I get home from work about 5:00, I am pretty much exhausted, but it's a time for my family ... be with my wife and play with my son a little bit. So that's how I try to juggle things.

Many of the single mothers prioritized their daytime hours for class and then their evenings for when they could be with their children. Several other single student mothers had to prioritize their daytimes for their children, campus time for studying, weekends for children, and evenings for studying. In this vein of prioritizing of time, Kim said,

> I dedicate my evenings to my family after I pick up my daughter at 3:00. I spend time with her and her homework, dinner, bath time, and then I get them to bed. Then that's when I have "me" time. I usually study until midnight or so, do my homework and stuff.

Similarly, LeAnn used her daytime for family and house duties. Late evenings were usually for studying. She explained,

> I prioritize what is the biggest and what needs to be done first. I guess my son's needs come before everything else. Then [I] look at the assignments and see "Well, how long do I have to do this one? How long I think it is going to take?" There's been some nights where I'm up 'til 3 in the morning, because I kind of underestimated how long that one assignment was going to take. I'm trying to give myself enough time just to get it all done.

Theme 4: Study Strategies and Parenting

To the participants in this study, sound parenting, the act of being a good mother or a father, meant nurturing and spending time with their children. So their student role of attending a community college—going to class, studying the course content, and doing assignments—added

complexity to their parenting role. These two roles competed for their time; thus prioritizing, and shifting back and forth between, and combining the two roles and responsibilities became essential to accomplish their goals.

Community-college student-parents acknowledged the dual priorities of studying and child-care responsibilities. They explained that they understood their children and wanted to have time with them, even though the children might be an age at which they could be somewhat self-sufficient. Self-sufficiency to the student-parents usually meant that another adult could meet the needs of their child. They described desirable child care as including physical, emotional, social, and educational aspects of their child's development.

Similarly, student-parents described that their own interactions with their children needed to be emotionally supportive and needed to include sharing educational experiences with them. One student-parent realized that it was difficult to study by herself with the child in the same room. When Maria attempted to focus on her text, her child felt ignored. Maria said,

> I can't get homework done until the children are in bed, because they are very demanding, needing attention. They are not able to let me just sit there and read something quietly. That seems to be a cue to "let's go jump on mom." They just need more interaction.

Similarly, Sandi conveyed how she was emotionally torn when she tried to study with her son nearby. She said,

> My son wants me to play with him, but I have to do this. He's asking me to play with him, and it makes me sad because he may be thinking "Why doesn't mommy want to play with me?" It can be frustrating trying to get work done and making sure you're taking care of their needs, not just physical needs, but their emotional needs, too.

Some student-parents were able to take turns with child care because there were two parents. The two parents or two-adult household lessened the students' frustration with competing role responsibilities. Sandi and her husband planned the shared parenting role in such

a way that gave Sandi time for her academic responsibilities. She revealed that she was able to study when her husband took the children for a portion of the day:

> He takes an extra day off a week, to take our kids and watch them so I can study or catch up on my own work, whatever that may be. He's crazy but says, "We can sacrifice one day of my pay for the greater good of the future."

If homework remained at the end of the day, Sandi studied at night. "When all [else] fails I stay up late. I don't go to bed until I know I'm done [with my studying]."

Darcy realized that studying at home with three boys was not working. She decided to use all available time while she was on campus to attend class and a few study groups, do a few college-related activities, and study. Darcy explained that she arrived early to campus to carve out a little time for studying. She also used in-between-class time to study. She took her backpack, with her books tucked inside, almost everywhere. When necessary, Darcy used the time at the end of the day before her evening class to study. In her words,

> Well, as for my study habits, I've given up studying at home. I've given up. I can't study at home with three boys. So I take every available opportunity between classes. I'll stay at school an extra hour before I go get the little one from day care. Because that's my only time to focus. My first 2 years in school, I drove myself insane trying to study at home. My focus was everywhere else. I'm studying while we drive. You find places. It's funny. You go get your hair done, not that I ever get mine done, but if I did do that I would study there. Where people are reading a magazine, I would be reading a textbook.

It was inevitably a long day on the college campus, but Darcy almost always came home with her studying done.

Not all student-parents were fortunate to have a campus child-care center. Donna explained that she had a 4-year old who went to preschool 2 days a week. Donna scheduled her time for studying when the 4-year old child was at preschool and the baby was napping. The naptime period was short, so often she would finish a chapter that she had started during naptime later, with the baby in the highchair. Donna provided a bowl of cheerios for a snack to keep him occupied while she tried to finish the chapter. She needed to use the evening and bedtime for

most of her studying. Her husband would help some with child care and house chores while she studied. Donna said,

> When I really need to study I can sit one down to watch cartoons; sometimes I put the baby in the highchair and he can eat some cheerios; with a mouthful of cheerios, I can get something done. It's hard especially with a 10-month old because he's trying to walk; he is still breastfeeding. It's demanding. He has the best big brother, but he needs some one-on-one attention, too.

Similarly, Kim was able to do some studying while spending time with her daughters. She felt it reinforced what she was learning while it excited them about learning more advanced concepts. This arrangement was not easy, and it was inappropriate for dull curriculum. Kim said,

> I try to make what I'm doing interesting to my 6-year-old. It's tougher with the 1-year-old because she doesn't understand. As long as she is sitting in Mommy's lap if we're doing homework ... like I said, I try to keep most of my homework time to when they are
>
> sleeping or at school or something. If I have a video to watch, or if I'm doing research, like I allowed my 6-year-old to research Neanderthals with me. The old photos were fascinating. She thought researching that stuff was great.
>
> It's a little hard with the 1-year-old, but the 6-year-old had fun watching a show on astronomy about how the world was made. Now she is fascinated with the stars and the moon. She talks about Saturn, Mars, and the sun. I try to have my school work, if it touches their lives, be a fun thing. I try to keep the less fun parts of it separate, so I can be a mommy ... so I can have my mommy time and that my school time is not interfering. It's not always easy, but it is what I strive for.

That said, Kim needed to accomplish much of the quality work and in-depth concentration when there were few distractions. She shared,

> If I get a chance to sit down and read a textbook, I will sit down and start reading. I try to do as much studying during the day as I can, but it's usually around my other duties. But primarily my main study time is in the evenings once the house is nice and quiet. I turn on some music and I go to work. I get up at 6 AM and get us going for the day. My husband would go to bed when the kids did and I [would] have my study time. We traded off with each other a lot, allowing each other the time the things we needed to do.

Gina explained that some study time with her son was pretend homework for him and real homework for her. "Sometimes I kind of tell him, 'Homework time; this is mommy's homework time.' We got him a little journal [for his homework]."

Theme 5: Self-Awareness and Persistence

For study participants, life experiences often heightened their self-awareness in the time between high school and college. The meaning of persistence emerged as a theme for most of the student-parents as they described why and how they assumed responsibilities for their studies, their family, and their work. It became evident that these student-parents had many life experiences during the time between high school and college. They spoke of acquiring new attitudes, abilities, and knowledge. During the time lapse between the end of high school and the beginning of community college, the student-parents acquired parenting responsibilities and seemed to develop a positive mindset. Both traits enhanced their resolve to persist.

Impact of Experience on Responsibility

Community-college student-parents described what it meant for them to persist to the associate degree. Many of them revealed the experiences between the end of high school and beginning of college that had helped them become more responsible. Some of the experiences were adverse. Those too, however, often helped the student-parents mature and see the world through a new lens, and the challenges prepared them to engage successfully in the college experience.

One student-parent waited purposefully to begin college until she had done some traveling and had worked in a couple different jobs. Tricia had watched her friends go straight to college after high school, use a lot of money in the process, and still not know what they wanted as a career. She remarked, “I had so many friends go to school in their twenties and waste a lot of money. I traveled and all that stuff first. I’m pretty confident in what I’m doing, excited about it, and feel good about it.” She summarized the benefit of the lapsed time with the comment, “I’m

going to get a management degree, use my experience, and get an arts certificate to kind of supplement that."

LeAnn explained that she let her peers persuade her into going to college right out of high school. Unlike Tricia, she didn't realize at that point that her decision was unwise. Later she commented that, in retrospect, going to college just because "everyone in her high school was going" had not been a good enough reason. She had neglected studying and often did not attend class. The time lapse helped her see that college was important. LeAnn realized that knowing what program suited her interests was also important. She spoke to her first attempt at college and how she now viewed her attitude:

> You didn't have to be there, go to class; nobody's going to call your parents. I just felt immature and too young, not knowing what I really wanted. Now, I do know what I want. My goal is early childhood education. I want to do good. I want to get a good grade. I want to listen to all the information they have to tell me.

A particular event that occurred late in that time between high school and college helped one student-parent almost abruptly begin to live according to a new level of responsibility. During the 11 years after high school, Jacob had only himself to take care of until his girlfriend had his baby. He had been somewhat carefree although he had worked. When he became a father, he wanted to be a present father. He took the advice of his parents to get more education as a part of the plan to support the child and better himself. And he was willing to share custody and help support the child while he attended college. Jacob said,

> Eleven years [after] my GED I found out that my ex-girlfriend had had my baby, it made me decide that I had to do something. That was the big thing. I found out that my daughter had been born. Yeah, I was a father and I had another person that I needed to think about. My daughter is the top priority in my mind. I have to get into the legal-system part of it. She needs her father. Infants need to be comfortable, to be warm, and then love and attention. Later they need teaching them understanding. My mom and my dad have been encouraging of the school and things like that.

For Jennifer, responsibilities during the time between high school and college came in the form of adding more work into her day and being accountable for that work. Her military experience changed her attitude toward work. Jennifer recounted,

> The first time ... I went to college right out of high school. And I didn't go to classes. I didn't care about the homework. I didn't study and I failed out of school. It's because I didn't have the motivation and I didn't care. I wasn't paying for it.
>
> I joined the military after that. Coming out of the military ... now it's the motivation that I make it my job to go to school. I have the motivation to work now. It probably does come with age and life experience. It's a lot of responsibility day to day. The military changed my whole work ethic. I didn't have a great work ethic before. I don't know how it changed, but it definitely gave me [a] work ethic by the expectations they put on you. You have no choice because you're military.

Impact of Parent Role on Priorities

Student-parents described how having a child helped determine their priorities. The children often were a catalyst for them to organize their daily responsibilities. The child or children often inspired the parents to be role models for achieving and for loving behaviors.

For example, LeAnn was inspired just because she was a parent and felt responsibility for her child. She said,

> I honestly think my son and my family... I want to be able to show them that I did it. You know, all this hard work is going to pay off. I'm gonna keep looking towards the future. My life is going to be better, but also my son's life is going to be better. I'll keep looking towards the big goal and make it day by day.

As a student-parent, Kim noticed how loving and helpful her older daughter was to her sibling, a baby sister. The older daughter had helped bathe and then put the younger child in her pajamas while we completed the telephone interview. Kim said to me,

> I wish you could see how adorable they are right now. They are sitting together in the rocking chair, and the older one has her arm around the baby. These are the scenes that make it all worthwhile, being a parent.

In her behavior, Kim modeled attentiveness, a trait mentioned in the discussion of other themes. The regard she showed for what her children did and said was actually helping them feel secure

and valued in their identities; likewise, Kim felt validated as a mother. She was doing the nurturing and passing that behavior on to her children.

One father also recognized that being available to his child was part of his role and identity. His responsibility to help his wife with child care as a weekend task was becoming a routine practice. He was growing into being a father as his child grew. Michael revealed that, although his parenting time was usually more on the weekends, it was still important to model being a present, engaging father for the children. Michael recounted,

> On the weekends when I'm off, I steal [I steal him away to play], I take him out, and play and watch TV, changing his diaper, showering him, trying to be a good dad for him. We wrestle. He likes to push me around. I try to make him happy, that's all. So I try to show him I'm a good father.

Michael also conveyed that a father could provide enjoyment and routine physical care for his child while offering his wife some time for herself.

As various family members share and take turns with child care, the benefits may be breaks or alone time for the caregiver that alternate with time for relationship building. For example, grandparents or other family members took turns watching Kim's children. A grandmother shared daytime and weekend support. Kim said,

> My mom and my husband played a huge part in that. If I needed to take a test or take time to go to class, they'd watch the kids ... everything we've done with the kids is to allow them to ... have some normalcy in life.

Normalcy to Kim meant giving her children experiences that many children enjoyed. Her children were not confined to home just because Mom was going to college. Kim spoke of her husband and the grandparents taking the girls out just for fun: "I get to go out and have fun with Gammy" and

> They'd watch the kids, take them to McDonalds or get them ice cream; do something with them so that it wasn't "Oh, Mommy is not paying attention to me" ... it was "I get to go out and have fun with Daddy or Gammy."

Positive Mindset As Motivation for Persistence

When challenges appeared, most student-parents accepted and faced them. Often the student-parents viewed the challenges as turning points, opportunities, reasons for persistence, or means of continuing a course of action despite difficulty. The community-college student-parent often used difficulty as an opportunity to inquire—for example, to use the math tutorial or to form a class study-group. Many student-parents described their interest in studying, learning, and being responsible to improve their lives and the lives of their children. For them, a positive mindset became a habit of thinking that likely added persistence to their skill set. Amy was adamant about finishing her education:

> My goal is to really make college a priority.... I plan on finishing as soon as I am able ... so I take a full course load, 16 credits at least each semester ... to get that done. Once I finish college I plan on getting my bachelor's degree.

Lynne was a positive force in her family and seemed to turn early-morning anxiety into a packed-full day because of her positive mindset. She said,

> It's mostly psychological. You just have to tell yourself that whether it's a good day or a bad day, the end result is the same. I try to focus on the positive things that happen during the day ... not dwell on the negatives. You're doing this for a good cause.... I want to make my life better by getting a degree.

Sandi had an internal motivation and mindset for positive thinking. As a child she had experienced some traumatic times (e.g., poverty, which led to eviction), but she realized she had some control over her life now. She recounted,

> We were pretty poor. We had to move around a lot because we got evicted a lot. You can't make a commitment for your future in that frame of mind. Now instead of looking at all the negative things in my life that were bad, that brought me down ... I say, "You know what? ... that's the past." I have to let all that stuff go because I can't do anything about that. All I can do is what I can do right now to break this chain of being like that with my family. The key motivator is my family. I don't want to let them down. Not like I *could* let them down ... but to me it's as important for me to succeed at this for myself but for them, too. They're excited, like they're proud of me.

LeAnn was empowered by knowing she was not alone in this challenge to overcome difficulties. Although she found that fact consoling, it was her positive mindset and her resolve that helped her persist:

> I think it's cool because you think you're alone, but you're not the only one going through it. There are so many people going through it; it's different for them, but it's still sort of the same struggle where you have to balance your life, and you have your school life, your work life, your family, and everything else. I just get what I get and don't worry about anything else. Maybe I am naïve but I have what I need ... [just need to] "Get 'er done."

These nontraditional community-college students shared varied experiences and accounts of their lives and what it meant to persist to degree. Many factors, intrinsic and extrinsic, motivated the student-parents to persist to degree. Sometimes participants encounter situations that created stress or anxiety. A positive mindset, remembering the goal—and sometimes the past, served to motivate the student-parents to persist.

Darcy described two "tugs" on her that possibly would return her to an unproductive life. One was alcohol and the other was a life dependent on government welfare. She refused both negative forces because she believed that being educated, skilled, and a contributing member of society was a good model for her three boys. Darcy acknowledge that not seeing her children when she was in school all day wasn't easy. She found reprieve in the summer when she worked outdoors with her boys and as she maintained her goal to become a medical assistant. She described her motivation:

> A lot of it was finding out who I am as a person. And being able to prove to myself that there was more out there for me. Being able to be a good influence on my children [was important]. There is life after school, college; there's so much to the career, but we don't know. I wanted to help; I wanted to help people like me in that kind of situation. I just wanted to do something amazing. I wanted to show my kids and my family that it wasn't going to give up.

The Essence

Finally, when all the participants had voiced their views and I allowed my reflections as researcher to simmer, the essence of student-parent persistence as a commonly shared construct in this study became apparent. The essence may be described as an internal *resolve* of a student-parent to persist to an associate degree. Resolve is a firm determination to do something, and it was at the core of every nontraditional community-college student participant in this study, all of whom were nearing the end of their associate-degree journey. On the surface, statements such as "Get 'er done," "I will do it!" and "It's a necessity" were anchored in the foundation of a positive mindset, and an internal strength, present even when the student was exhausted. Each day, that essence was present as the student set in motion dressing a child for day care and drove to campus in an old car for class and to study.

Most student-parents viewed sacrifices as a temporary part of the process, a necessity. Encouragement from trustworthy friends and mentors sustained their resolve. And their pride in self-reliance and knowing where to get support fortified that resolve. Most student-parents of this study expressed how they continued to grow into who they aspired to become while they moved toward their goal. The light at the end of the tunnel likely appeared bigger and brighter as student-parents came closer to of completing their degree. They were moving closer to their goal, and they exemplified persistence.

Student-parents expressed how they had faced and overcome challenges. Although, as Donna expressed, the morning may present itself as another day full of responsibility, it also was one day moving in the direction of their goal. Often this internal motivation or resolve was reinforced by the external influence, as Kim saw "the light in their child's eyes," and as Christy and Ben told of the belief others had in them. The student-parents had met their many challenges

and honored their responsibilities; with the hope of a more promising future just ahead, their resolve was strengthened.

Findings and Research Questions

This section first summarizes the findings and then describes more specifically how the findings address each research subquestion. The purpose of the study was to reveal the lived experiences of nontraditional community-college student-parents as they persisted to an associate degree. The study participants, 15 student-parents from three Mountain West community colleges, reported the following in response to the research subquestions. These research subquestions explored the phenomena related to persistence through the unique voice of each student-parent.

Subquestion (a): How do nontraditional students with children describe their experience of being a nontraditional student in a community college? Specifically, question 4 of the interview questions asked, "How have you addressed the day-to-day challenges of being a nontraditional student?" The students redefined *nontraditional* first to fit their subgroup profile and the criteria of the study: community-college student-parents with a part-time job, full class load, and family responsibilities. *Nontraditional* had little meaning until the student-parents explained their perspectives. In some instances the meaning also included more than the study criteria. For example, several participants were well-read, first-generation students grateful to be in a program they thought could provide knowledge for the work world. Most described their experiences of being in a community college as both interesting and stressful.

Most of the students in this study identified with other nontraditional students with similar majors and family structures. Many began to know other nontraditional students through their classes, study groups, on-site day care, and student activities. A common practice was to

talk to other students in the associate-degree program, especially, those in the same classes, to find other students who had children. Interestingly, the student-parents of this study described their nontraditional status mostly by their role as parents. Interestingly, although the youngest parent felt she might have the same interests and energy of her peer group, she believed her multiple responsibilities matured her. She took her academic and family responsibilities very seriously as she “over-worked herself.” Older nontraditional student-parents were similarly responsible, some at a slower pace and with guarded decisions about overloading the already-busy schedule.

All the student-parents agreed that there was not enough time in their day for all they needed to do. All of the participants reported stress as a factor in their lives. Some incorporated what they were learning into their parenting and everything they did. Some students kept their backpack close to them throughout the day just in case they had time to study.

Nontraditional was a term students defined differently. Nontraditional student-parents in this study expressed pride in their efforts to attend college. They did not admit to being embarrassed to be older. Several students acknowledged that they found other students, who for example were single, were parenting, and were balancing it all. Amy said, “There are a lot of us here,” and Darcy said there was a large community like her in the valley. Student-parents described having courage and also agreed that they learned from failures and disappointments. Some of the nontraditional community-college student-parents described themselves as problem-solvers and strong-willed people who wanted to improve their lives.

Subquestion (b): Why did nontraditional students with children return to college at this time in their lives? This question, more specific in nature than the previous one, relates to timing of events in the lives of nontraditional student-parents. From the youngest student, age 21,

to the oldest student, age 43, the student-parents described the "necessity" to attend college. The reasons the student-parents gave for deciding to attend college included wanting to enter a field that interested them, having the desire to develop their knowledge base and use their minds at a higher level, wanting to improve the family standard of living, facing a brief window of time that would work for their age, and finally, feeling that their maturity would afford them the persistence they needed to complete their education.

Students offered a variety of specific responses to the question about why the returned to college. Many responses were similar to the collection that follows: (a) They had funding that would make it possible: "use my GI Bill"; (b) they wanted to turn their life around: "better than tending bar"; (c) they wanted to get away from minimum-wage jobs: "get some skills in accounting"; (d) they wanted to enter the competitive job market: "medical field needs nursing RNs with bachelor degrees"; and (e) their children were more reliant on other people: "I felt it was the right time to start." Other student-parents offered a more general answer: "I needed be able to support my family." Often participants expressed more than one reason. For example, Sandi added that she needed to stimulate her brain in school and later in a career she liked; Kim wanted a job she loved instead of her emotionally draining occupation, her husband was willing to pay for her education, and further, the local community college offered a course of study in the field she desired.

Subquestion (c): What do nontraditional students with children describe as their goals for attending college? Student-parent goals for attending college were to have a better life for their children and themselves. They described their goals more succinctly by the career that would follow the associate degree. For example, as Amy entered community college, she had a general notion of the type of work she liked, but her internship at the accounting firm confirmed

a career that would provide income security and that matched her mindset for detail. Similarly, Michael had a specific goal in mortuary science; already in the job, he wanted the licensure that accompanied the associate degree. While all the student-parents had the broad goal to have a better life, to develop their minds, and to increase their skills and knowledge, each had a specific career interest.

Subquestion (d): How do nontraditional students with children describe their daily challenges of persisting toward an associate degree? These student-parents described their daily challenges often as stressful, demanding, tiring, and complex while also having elements of satisfaction, reward, and accomplishment. Once the student-parents navigated the first application process, found housing, located child care, and settled into a community if that was necessary, they began to develop the organization and structure for their lives that mitigated their initial anxiety.

Some student-parents experienced more challenges than others. For the student-parents with heavier responsibilities and challenges, such as LeAnn, it made sense to take one day at a time and, in essence, one goal at a time. These student-parents identified their goals, displayed judgment in making decisions, demonstrated self-control, and attempted not to over schedule their days. Some student-parents demonstrated the ability to balance their lives. They described balance as simultaneously accomplishing their academic responsibilities, enjoying family, being satisfied with the moment, and working steadily to secure the associate degree.

Specifically, student-parents structured their lives with time-management and stress-coping mechanisms. Several students who found others in their classes with common struggles or challenges gravitated to each other for support. Often a student-parent would volunteer time in

study groups. One student-parent explained that the social contacts with classmates in study groups resulted in their having emotional and academic support with those classmates.

Subquestion (e): How do nontraditional students with children set their priorities and manage their obligations? These student-parents designed structured schedules and planned their time and responsibilities around their goal to complete their degree program. Most student-parents met their daily challenges with focus and developed habits of tenacity for priorities they listed in their planners. Students reported that sometimes the unexpected would delay their academic progress, but they also described their mindset of doing what they felt was humanly possible to get through. Most avoided excess emotional drama, extra social life and entertainment, and asked the tough questions: "How is this helping me?" Most student-parents felt the need to provide quality time with their children. Some student-parents indicated that they needed to be flexible for family needs. For example, Nicole, Christy, and Maria described situations in which their younger children demanded their attention, and they understood that the children did not want to be ignored.

All the participating student-parents used calendars and planners. They noted course due dates, deadlines of their own, appointments, work schedules, and the activities of their children in their planners. Some used whiteboards or electronic devices to keep the overarching picture of future responsibilities handy, and most students looked at this organizational plan frequently throughout the day. Despite their determination as student-parents, in some instances, such as the emergency with LeAnn's mother and son, family pressures would pull a student from school to home, to parents or sick children.

In contrast, completing and filing forms were the norm for many student-parents. These processes meant opportunities for scholarships, and subsidies for tuition or child care. Most

student-parents demonstrated that finding time for studying, retrieving their children from day care, being punctual to class and appointments, and asking necessary questions became part of their routine behavior as they persisted.

Many of the student-parents who relied on day care used the community-college day care or preschool. They reported that they did so largely because, for example, college child-care centers were convenient while the student-parents were on campus studying or in class, and they were safe. In other situations, nontraditional students left their child or children with a spouse, a grandparent, or at a community day care. All the student-parents determined quickly that child-care arrangements had to be reliable. Some student-parents qualified for state assistance for child care based on their income level. In a few situations, student-parents used family to watch children who were under preschool age because of the trusting environment and financial feasibility.

The following paragraphs further elaborate the student-parent responses to the first two questions under subquestion (e). The third question under subquestion (e) required no further elaboration.

Secondary subquestion (i): How do nontraditional students manage academic requirements along with work? Student-parents managed their academic requirements with determination, planning, and commitment to follow through. Participants described their academic requirements as studying, taking tests, writing papers, attending class and labs, and occasionally meeting with a tutor or study group. Most student-parents were responsible for their course work, including reading, learning, and memorizing from note cards or class notes to help them pass exams. Fulfilling major academic requirements for courses helped them see that they were making progress toward their goal of completion. Most students planned and scheduled

work to avoid conflict with their classes. As examples, Maria worked her two jobs on the weekend, and Christy worked only in the afternoon after her morning classes were done. Christy was one of the few student-parents who secured an on-campus job for convenience.

Using spare minutes and starting assignments in advance were two common approaches participants described to keep up with academic requirements. Student-parents used spare minutes for studying. LeAnn and Sandi's backpacks, for instance, went most places with them as a part of their time management. Studying was in the minds of student-parents throughout the day—while they were in the library, waiting for appointments, at a function with friends, sharing course knowledge with their older children, and even during early mornings or late nights. And several student-parents began working on assignments early in the day. For example, Maria was ready for a test the day of her interview. She showed me her notes that she was allowed to take with her to the test following the interview. She needed only a half page because she claimed the bulk of the information was in her long-term memory. Maria said, "When you have a lot to do, you just start earlier [so the information goes to your long-term memory]."

Most student-parents acknowledged their tendency toward procrastination and the anxiety that accompanied it; through their awareness, most became self-motivated starters and usually finishers. Occasionally, students were allowed to study at work after they had completed their job duties. Many students avoided procrastination by starting to study early in the day, to use time on campus in the library for study between classes, or occasionally to use the wait time for an appointment as opportunity to study.

Several students obtained scholarships based upon input from outside observers who noticed their work ethic, their ability to raise their own academic expectations of themselves, and

their responsiveness to the possibility of reward. Their desired reward was typically a letter of recommendation or a scholarship, but the end reward was an associate degree and a career.

Secondary subquestion (ii): How do nontraditional students manage academic requirements along with family issues? The nontraditional community-college student-parents of this study managed academic requirements by making them a high priority. They viewed academic success as essential to having a better life for themselves and their children. So they could focus on their studies, these student-parents left their children with quality care providers. At other times, they used a variety of activities to incorporate studying with parenting.

For moments in time, the parents and their children experienced separation anxiety, sadness, or resentment. These emotions reflected a real challenge. All the student-parents mentioned the emotional tug of leaving their children in day care or with family members. The participants explained that both parenting and academics were priorities. They often scheduled parenting time for the evening and most of the weekends. Most student-parents explained that, as much as possible, they wanted to share in their lives of their children.

Still, these student-parents tended to parenting and family issues in most instances during the day, around classes and studying. A few parents left their children the full day in order to attend class, study, or work part-time while on campus. Sometimes older siblings babysat after school and into the evening. A sad tone accompanied Darcy’s comment about a middle child: “He was asleep when I got home from my evening class. I didn’t get to hear about his day.”

Importantly, many of the nontraditional student-parents provided outdoor activities on the weekends and in the summer so they could reconnect with their children. Sometimes these experiences visiting museums, rafting, or going to the park represented the balance that brought pleasure and fun to the family. One of the most restricted student-parents still found time to have

a little holiday at the nearby motel that had a swimming pool. Many student-parents offered examples of combining light studying with positive family interaction to cope and reduce stress while they accomplished their academic goals. Enrichment activities around parenting restored their parent-child relationships.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This chapter is a discussion of the research findings and the literature, organized around the themes of the study. The discussion focuses on the meaning of the findings, with support from the literature that relates to student-parent experiences in a community college. The chapter concludes with a summary of how the findings and literature addressed the research questions, implications for educational practice, and recommendations for further research.

Themes

The five themes that emerged from this research focused on nontraditional community-college student-parents were reasons for attending college, support relationships, strategies for addressing stress, study strategies and parenting, and self-awareness and persistence. Their perceptions as expressed by the student-parents within this study suggest that their highest priority was to achieve good grades for the purpose of obtaining a degree. They considered their challenges and struggles part of their journey to degree. The five main themes are (a) Theme l: Reasons for attending college; (b) Theme 2: Support relationships and programs; (c) Theme 3: Addressing stress; (d) Theme 4: Study strategies and parenting; (e) Self-awareness and persistence (see Appendix G).

Theme 1: Reasons for Attending College

The research findings of the current study supported the notion that nontraditional community-college student-parents attended college and specifically a community college for many reasons. A predominant reason they offered for attending college was to better their lives by obtaining an associate degree. Part of bettering their lives was expanding their worldview through the college experience while acquiring knowledge and skills for a career. Kasworm

(2003) studied adults living in multiple worlds who sought meaningful learning from their undergraduate educational experience. Kasworm interviewed 90 students and found a highly diverse population of adults more than 25 years of age who returned to college with a variety of expectations. These expectations ranged generally from wanting an inclusive education to expanding metacognitive understandings, while some adults wanted only information that applied to their trade. Similar to what Kasworm (2003) found, many participants of the current study disclosed that they wanted to expand their knowledge base, and they also wanted more fulfilling work, new skills, and increased income when they completed their degree program. For some student-parents, those with a GED in particular, college was a new frontier. For other student-parents, the associate degree was a culminating degree, completing their expertise with additional knowledge and specific skills to combine with their present work. For still other student-parents, the associate degree was a step toward another degree. The literature surveyed by Richardson (1994) indicated that mature students in college are likely to have a combination of intrinsic and vocational motives for higher education. For a few of the student-parents in the current study, the community-college experience would lead to a second degree, and they had intentions of a third before they would be finished with college. Some individuals in the Kasworm (2003) study said the knowledge and understanding they gained through their academic efforts helped them in all their adult roles. When student-parents of the current study said they wanted to better their lives they implied a similar expansion of their general knowledge and understanding within their diverse realities.

Why go to college? Participants' reasons for attending college, as mentioned above, varied. Multiple reasons student-parents gave were to achieve a career goal, attain a higher income level, develop many types of skills and competencies, develop themselves, and model

perseverance in the education arena for their children. These reasons became encompassing goals and were, in part, fulfilled as the student-parents moved closer to obtaining their associate degrees.

The student-parents of the current study believed they needed a career goal rather than a job. Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, and Hengstler (1992) drew from selected goal-related statements extracted from Tinto, Bean, and Pascarella, and Terenzini models using portions of their scales as they studied 466 traditional-age students to determine their goal commitment. The Cabrera et al. study merged five items from the previously mentioned models to examine the construct of goal commitment. The students in that study checked the following items related to the construct: (a) "It is important for me to get a college degree" and (b) "It is important for me to finish my program of study." The researchers began probing into why the students chose to attend college, but their study did not answer the question of why the students valued having a career above just having a job. The student-parents of the Cabrera et al. study answered with direct responses that included "more responsibility for decision-making," "financial security," and "provide more for me and my daughter."

Sandler (2000), who studied career decision-making self-efficacy, provided supportive data related to the current study. That data suggested that, in nontraditional student completers, attitudes of determination to accomplish career goals were prevalent. Similarly, student-parents of the current study believed they could accomplish their goals to obtain a fulfilling career despite their complex and often stressful lives. Sandler's (2000) study also revealed attitudes of persistence in participating students. And like the current study, Sandler investigated students' financial attitudes, background variables, and perceived stress. Student-parents of the current strongly agreed that they needed a higher income to be financially independent, to acquire skills

for a career, and to better provide for their families. Finally, student-parents of both the current study and the 937 students in the Sandler study demonstrated positive attitudes toward their career goals. These attitudes were strong influences on persistence, which often mitigated the students' perceived stress from their multiple-roles.

Griffrida, Lynch, Wall, and Abel (2013) analyzed motivation in their approach to the topic of why students chose to attend college. They found that, regardless of socioeconomic level, students had intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors based on family and cultural values, ethnicity, race, marital status, numbers of dependents, and personal ambition. These researchers surveyed a large population from an urban community college and a small liberal-arts college. The survey response rate averaged 19 percent (n = 2,520). Most interestingly, the population was heterogeneous. Participants who took the Web-based survey had slightly higher GPAs than those who did not respond. Results showed that motivations were varied and became internalized, but they surfaced as common themes: (a) to obtain a prestigious, high-paying job after graduation, (b) to find fulfillment and develop competencies, and (c) to give back to a cultural base or society. The student-parents in the present study stated similar notions of why they were attending college, realizing increased income; experiencing personal development, fulfillment, and cognitive growth; helping others in society; providing for family; offering family a model for education; and acquiring new skills.

Securing a high-paying job and increased social mobility were common reasons for attending college for the student-parents of this study as also discussed in the study of Haveman and Smeeding (2006). The researchers noted the disparities of educational opportunities and knowledge base among high- and low-income families. "High-income parents make enormous efforts to ensure their children's academic success while poor and minority" parents are less well prepared to navigate higher education (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006, p. 125). Semantics

illustrated how these two opposite quartiles expressed the value of education, revealing both the similarity and the differences in the realities of their goals. For example, high-income students stated the desire for a *prestigious*, high-paying job and the low-income students stated the desire for a *higher-paying job* to provide for family as their motivations. Haveman and Smeeding (2006) cite the policy and trends which burden the lower-income students' financial situation already burdened with less discretionary income. However, most of the student-parents of this study were committed to improvement their future financial security.

The results of the Haveman and Smeeding (2006) study bring to the forefront the need to increase opportunities in social and economic mobility for the lower quartile of the population. The significance of increased social and economic mobility is central to the main question about why these students decided to go to college, and specifically to community college.

Braxton, Vesper, and Hossler (1995) reaffirmed that nontraditional commuter students come with high expectations for academic and career development, forging their commitment to select colleges and universities according to their academic and career goals. A specific example of academic effort to facilitate students wanting to improve their career options resides in the study of Leger (2005). Leger (2005) studied the success of nontraditional students who worked full-time while they attended an interdisciplinary academy that was part of McHenry County College in Illinois. A difference from the current study, related to enrollment, is that the students were in a modular schedule with start times designed to work with the schedules of both employers and students. More than 25 organizations in the community sent employees to the Academy for High Performance at McHenry County College; here the employees sought to improve their soft skills—problem solving, communication, and critical thinking—as students built academic competencies necessary for many careers. This example was lauded as meeting

students career needs and providing them the skills necessary for advancement in management and positions that otherwise would not be open to them. Following certification and receipt of their associate degrees, many students in the study continued to a bachelor degree.

Likewise, many of the student-parents of the current study wanted to develop their minds, talents, and skills to a higher cognitive level. Regardless of the distant future, student-parents were willing to sacrifice some material comforts and surmount challenges in order to raise their standard of living. These reasons for going to college and learning are supported in the literature as motivations to learn, including the need to know relevant content. Clark (2012) found similar evidence that, as students shared experiences of struggle, albeit they were balancing family life, financial hardship, and feeling marginalized, they bonded. Clark found that students shared a mutual understanding or agreement that their disadvantages became motivators for persistence. Clark observed that the students found encouragement from all supportive relationships with faculty, staff, and peers, and grew their self-confidence and sense of belonging as they learned from each other.

Why attend a community college? The students who enrolled in community colleges had two primary reasons for seeking a degree beyond high school. The first reason, as previously mentioned, was to further their education, which would lead them to a better job or career path. This outcome supports the findings of Haveman and Smeeding (2006), also mentioned earlier. The community college affords student-parents the option of social mobility and costs less than the 4-year institution, thus maximizing their education investment. This finding is further substantiated by Bergerson (2009), who described institutions and individuals as having a sense of fit. Although student-parents, most from lower socioeconomic levels, strive to raise their future standard of living, they find the cost, proximity, support, and financial aid of community

colleges a good fit for them as they begin college. A scenario focused on proximity suggests that community colleges "attract students who cannot cut ties to community, family, or work" (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006, p. 53).

In the current study, student-parents lived on a tight budget and often decided to attend a community college because it would provide an associate degree or certificate for a career and also offer the option to transfer to a four-year institution. Murray (2011) stated that it appears more useful for to students to develop competencies rather than to attend a prestigious, high-priced university when financial resources are limited. Murray also suggested that specific professional education may be more useful than a bachelor degree. If living within one's means was considered a goal, Murray concurred that it made sense for students to select a college for a meaningful experience and advancement. For the students of the current study, these criteria also needed to include convenience, proximity to where they lived and worked, and to day care. Students attended a community college with the motivation to begin the education that could raise their standard of living and help them achieve their career goal. In part, attending an affordable college nearby was a necessity for reasons of time efficiency, lower transportation costs, and support-service availability. The student-parents at times selected the community college as the best available option considering their situation.

Many of the student-parents of this study were unmarried. Similarly, Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2010) studied the unmarried population with children and found that single mothers in community college claimed success largely because they had good support services. Single student-parents of the current study also found support services, financial aid, and subsidies were initially among their reasons for attending and persisting in the community college. Most student-parents found that counseling, academic advising, developmental programs, and

financial services made the college experience less intimidating than they had anticipated, which furthered their positive reasons for attending.

Qualitative studies in the literature that related to community-college advising and counseling were sparse; therefore, the research in this study depends largely on the integrity of the student-parent responses. Metzner (1989) studied academic advising with regard to its impact on attrition at a large 4-year institution with commuter freshmen. However, contained within the study was a statement that little has been studied related to attrition or persistence using undergraduates with more advanced class standing. Metzner recommended studies that focused on the frequency of student-advisor contact, topics discussed in advising sessions, and quality of advising. Metzner also was unable to ascertain why freshmen failed to receive advising, whether initiated institutionally or by the student, and she recommended research on early communications about advising services. At the time of her study, it appears that larger colleges were often lacking in early communications about advising services, had high student-advisor ratios, or had scant scheduling availability, whereas the smaller colleges may have had slightly better communications directed toward their students (Metzner, 1989). Somewhat contrary to the Metzner study, when they were considering their respective community colleges, most of the student-parents of this study revealed that they were encouraged to use the resources of advising, counseling, developmental programs, student-success programs, labs, and tutoring, which were readily available.

The student-parents in this study selected a community college for the reasons of convenient location, a degree that interested them, lower cost than leaving and going to a four year college, friends recommended the college, reputation for support services and quality education, and prospect of future employment earnings and benefits. The literature confirmed

similar reasons for students choosing to attend college. Many of the student-parents of this study used the reasons of open-access, proximity, reputation for career preparation, and available college support programs to attend college. These factors are also cited in the literature of Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Leinbach, and Kienzl (2006); Cabrera et al. (1992); and Torraco (2013).

Several student-parents in the current study were motivated by various reasons to attend college. Christy, for example, knew "the odds were stacked against her" according to the attrition statistics. She wanted to be a nurse, so she entered the associate program in nursing, and she used the attrition statistics as her motivation: Her aim was to prove she could overcome the odds and have a better life. McGivney (2004) summarized data on retention and noncompletion for adults in the United Kingdom who had a gap in their education similar to participants in the current study. The adults in the McGivney study reported contributing factors to their persistence as long-awaited goals, sacrifices made to achieve an education, desire to prove themselves, and possibility for job promotion. Research by Van Stone et al. (1994) revealed the additional factors, including the determination of poor single-mothers in college who sought many sources of support and developed relationships that could sustain them through the college experience. And Mortenson (2008) noted that supportive family, peers, coworkers, faculty, and tutors supply social and emotional capital, which in turn makes the educational investment financially worthwhile for the long term when nontraditional students are considering their future earning potential.

In addition to retention, support services, and program reputation, the literature illustrated factors that contribute to the challenges and success of nontraditional students, including educational background of parents, adultness, maturity, quality and rigor of K–12 education, and motivation (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006; Sorey & Duggan, 2008, Lopez, 2013; Guiffrida, Lynch,

Wall, & Abel, 2013). Many students within the current study experienced both supportive and negative attitudes from their parents related to the value of attending college and whether they were college material. One student who was making high grades, studying, and working two jobs needed to seek counseling support because her father made negative comments to her related to her not being able to finish college. Maria was determined to keep her focus on her ultimate career despite those negative comments. A few students mentioned being underprepared from their K–12 education; however, one student attended a small school where she felt she had a good education. An interesting contrast was the determination of some parents of the student-parents to provide them with emotional support, encouragement for studying, and some child care; but perhaps the most helpful was they had read to the student-parents when they were children. Several student-parents said their confidence came from knowing literature as children.

Guiffrida et al. (2013) discussed the intrinsic motivation of lower and higher supplemental-education-services (SES) students. The most valued motivators for many students in the present study were faculty interest in individual students, academic understanding of the material, and pedagogy related to instructional delivery, which the study of Strauss and Volkwein (2004) also found. Their research found that faculty commitment and faculty-team collaborations facilitated student persistence. This result was evidenced in the community colleges of the student-parents in the current study, particularly in the internship portion of such programs as nursing, accounting, and paralegal. In particular, classroom experiences, faculty-student interaction, and intellectual-growth experiences have been found to be predictors of student commitment, and thus persistence (Strauss & Volkwein, 2004). McGivney (2004) also expressed similar findings, saying that “adults are easily discouraged when teaching staff do not get to know them, show little interest in their work, or make disparaging comments on

assignments" (p. 42). Several of the student-parents in this study commented on how they valued faculty who explained their expectations, demonstrated knowledge, and showed interest in their students. Darcy appreciated the "keep up the good work" comments. The findings of this study indicated that many student-parents sought academic and emotional, social, or psychological support, which worked to reduce their stress to some degree.

Recent literature on college completion substantiates the importance of community-college students selecting the college and programs that meet their individual learning style as well as their career goals (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; McGivney, 2004). Many students in the present study found online learning more difficult, more time consuming, and less helpful than learning in the classroom, with the exception of two students who claimed that an online program was mandatory because of their remote location. It seems evident from the research that student-parents need to design their program of study to accommodate their goals and work schedule, and to fill gaps in their prior education.

Realistically, student-parents must select a program that fits their career interests and academic ability. Based on the research results, they needed to consider the support most beneficial for their academic success, child care requirements, and part-time work schedule. The tight student-parent schedules dictated efficiency in planning. Efficiency meant they needed to have child care on the campus site, near home, or near their workplace. Efficiency and proximity then became critical in their choice of college and where they lived, worked, and shopped. Gerrard and Roberts (2006) similarly shared the stories of hardship as students reflected on challenges related to the need for backup baby-sitters, financial sacrifices, and the little time available for social activities. In the current study, LeAnn had a 1-hour drive to her campus. Travel used 2 hours of valuable time, which meant the elimination of something else in her

schedule. Further, her gas costs were huge over time. LeAnn was an example of how student-parents in this study identified their hardship and sometime realized that, if possible, they needed to make changes. Thoughtful decisions about where to attend college, the best-suited programs, and the proximity of businesses and day care, seemed crucial as they considered the external factors that influenced their persistence.

The student-parents of the study selected an associate-degree program that kept their interest, that reflected their passion for a field of study, and that developed them as a person. They determined priorities related to their goal to secure the degree. For example, several student-parents found an academic fit in nursing, business, or science. Their sacrifices and the challenges they overcame were worthwhile because of the relevancy to their interests and future applicability to their careers. This outcome is supported in the literature about adult learning (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Knowles, 1970; Knowles et al., 2005; Philibert et al., 2008; Senter & Senter, 1998; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). For example, Kim, determined to have a career in anthropology and archeology, decided on the community college with course offerings related to her career interest and the jobs available in the valley where she lived. Each participant in the current study could trace their choice of college to a preferred career, proximity, and lower cost of education.

Cost of education, a strong factor in college choice, related to a larger list of financial factors. Student-parents factored the cost of transportation, the cost of day care, the cost of tuition, the cost of housing, and other expenses of basic living into their decision to attend a community college. Student-parents investigated support from the college financial-aid office, available scholarships for low-income students, and state subsidies for food and day care, and

they made the mathematical calculations. Financial aid meant an education was feasible, as many examples in the literature support (Jenkins & Cho, 2012; Rosenbaum et al., 2006).

Social contacts were another reason some students attended community college. Student-parents felt encouraged by friends or peers from high school or work as they selected a college program. The encouragement of their peer group and friend support, documented in the literature, influenced students' choice of a community college and later their persistence in the program (Pascarella, 2006). Participation in learning communities and having a holistic view affords students increased support as they begin their academic programs (Pascarella, 2006; Rendon, 2000; Tinto, 1993; Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2011).

The combination of a reputation for quality education and the provisions of support services were reasons students in general gave for attending a particular college. Many student-parents acknowledged anxiety about their academic background or ability to handle all the responsibilities involved without some support. The literature documents that first-generation students and other nontraditional subgroups with disadvantage may have difficulties entering college (Kim, 2002; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). *Disadvantaged* often meant *underprepared* in some form. These students, many whom were parents, needed diagnostic services and support as they transitioned into college. The community college has programs such as student-success services with counselors and advisors to help students bridge the gaps and make the transition more effectively (Kim, 2002). Kim (2002) outlined the variables and unique characteristics from several peer-reviewed studies, which highlight how colleges address individual community-college students. Kim pointed to Rendon (1995), who stated that many nontraditional students will not become involved on their own, and therefore need the support readily available and to be encouraged. Rendon (1995) and Tinto (2000) recommended building campus climates that

promote active learning that is receptive and responsive to culturally sensitive student populations. However, in the current study, the student-parents demonstrated boldness as they sought academic assistance, financial aid, and counseling from the college. The majority of the students in the current study had life or literacy experiences that may have raised their confidence relative to college success. Rendon (1995) based many of his findings on ethnically disadvantaged students, which therefore were not congruent with the nontraditional student-parents of the study at hand.

Several student-parents in the current study who were attending the suburban community college chose the community college specifically because of its reputation for a degree program. Several of them recommended to others the importance of “knowing what you wanted to do,” “knowing you were ready to study,” and therefore “not wasting money” when they were making the decision to attend college. The specific associate-degree program and support that the college provided were important considerations for these student-parents. They investigated online community colleges to make comparisons before they decided on their college.

Both the literature and the findings indicated that nontraditional students identify their needs according to their unique background, acquired skills and knowledge base, and situation. Since student-parents need child care, day care or preschool is also a primary consideration as they begin college. The literature confirms the difficulty of finding affordable quality child care (Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2002; Horton-Parker, 1998). Quality licensed child care is generally more expensive than care by a relative. The definition of quality varies with each parent perspective; however, safety and well-being are foundational to any day-care arrangement.

Theme 2: Support Relationships

Once students of the current study were settled into a program at the community college, the structure and daily routine allowed them to persist. When they needed assistance, most were able to locate the support they needed. The current study established that the main areas in which they needed assistance were (a) financial support and management, (b) academic support, (c) emotional/social/psychological support, and (d) child care support. The findings of this study support the literature, which also suggests the importance of support relationships and programs for students through a variety of sources for students to attain completion (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010). Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen noted that enhanced college-completion rates resulted from students having a strong safety net, including robust academic, financial, and emotional support.

Financial support and management. One of the first considerations for college attendance, financial support and management, pertains to students investigating all the possible financial-aid-service programs available through the community-college. Different from the national statistics, most of the student-parents of the current study acknowledged the importance of financial aid and completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form. McKinney and Novak (2012) reported in their study of the FAFSA filing that many first-year students found the forms daunting, and that colleges need to ensure that every student who is eligible for financial aid completes the FAFSA. They found that 42 % of the students eligible nationally do not complete the FAFSA form required for the Pell Grant. One student-parent in the current study confirmed the frustration of encountering unpleasant personnel in a financial-aid office. The perception of being treated as a “lesser citizen” did not help to support her. In contrast, knowledgeable and helpful personnel are important. Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2010)

elaborate on the complexity of obtaining financial aid for students because of adhering to federal restrictions, learning how to complete forms, adjusting for work requirements, and calculating lost income while attending college. Student-parents need to know procedures and deadlines. The literature indicated that navigation through enrollment, registration, and financial-aid processes is difficult when students are entering college for the first time (McKinney & Novak, 2012; Torraco & Dirkx, 2008). The literature suggested that printed materials need to be clearly worded and not overly loaded with text because many students give up before they get through the first hurdle of securing aid for their first semester (McPhail, 2011).

Academic support. Several student-parents in the current study used specific resources, such as the writing lab, repeatedly. One student said she did so not particularly because she had difficulty writing, but rather that she wanted the best grade possible. Those who did not use the academic support on campus would use online or Internet tutorials. Academic support, both on campus and through the Internet, provided targeted help and conceptual understanding for the student-parents. Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, and Jenkins (2007) studied remediation with older adults who had no previous college experience. The researchers found that those adults may be "rusty" rather than seriously deficient in their skills. Academic support may, as previously mentioned, need to be only targeted intervention. For example, one student-parent of the current study was out of practice in algebra. Pre-algebra was a requirement for the nursing program, so she designed her own targeted intervention strategy to understand the course content combining instructor assistance, math lab, online study modules, and extra time in the course materials.

Laird, Chen, and Kuh (2008) studied classroom practices that promoted student engagement and persistence. They examined practices of institutions that lead to higher persistence rates, particularly institutions that had higher-than-expected persistence rates and had

participated in NSSE at least once from 2003 to 2007. Institutions with the higher-than-expected persistence rates promote student engagement with the following: active and collaborative learning, high levels of student-faculty interaction, academic challenge and rigor, and support that is linked to the challenge and rigor. These areas need to be present to build students' intellectual skills, practical skills, and individual and social responsibility across curriculums. Most of the student-parents in this current study were developing these skills over time, securing academic tutoring as time allowed. For them, both the social and academic engagement they experienced in learning communities and study groups fostered support.

A few student-parents in the study found the Internet and technology challenging, particularly if their high school or home environment did not provide them with technological skills and knowledge. In terms of skill deficiency, Torraco and Dirkx (2008) substantiated that a lapse in time between high school and college was common among of underprepared adult students. And in a study of persistence. Simmons (1995) addressed the importance of new technology training for adult displaced workers. Simons indicated that remediation should not exceed workers' needs because their time was limited.

A few students in this study expressed feelings of intimidation and frustration when they could not successfully use technology required for their coursework. Park and Choi (2009) studied factors that influenced adult-learner dropout or persistence rates in online learning. These researchers found that adult students were less likely to drop out if they had internal course support, if the content had relevancy, and if the adult students had background knowledge or experience related to the course.

One student-parent in the current study, Kim, first encouraged by her husband, began attending with a general interest area in mind, and then found her career interest of anthropology

and archaeology as a direct influence of an enthusiastic and knowledgeable instructor. A selection of varied curriculum and degree programs lured and often inspired these student-parents to continue. They benefited from instructor competency, becoming more confident and informed during the process of learning. Capps (2012) documented that students in her study also credited themselves, their families, and also teachers and advisors who had deeply affected their decisions. The American Association of Community Colleges increasingly promotes its completion agenda to the community with data, anecdotal success stories, and the information about the responsibilities they assume to be transparent and supportive of students through diagnostic tools, employment data, study-success tools, and counselor availability (McPhail, 2011).

Two male students in the current study described a keen interest in understanding concepts. Michael and Ben acknowledged that knowledge and skill competency mattered more to them, even though high grades were important. Most of the female student-parents of the study were interested in both grades and learning the material. In general, the student-parents were motivated to do well academically as a step toward a better future. They wanted and needed to pass their classes; but more importantly, they knew they would be using this information in their respective careers. Howell and Buck (2012) determined from their study that what matters most to adult students was first, the relevancy of subject matter and second, faculty subject-matter competency. Howell and Buck stated that the third factor of classroom management was almost a nonissue, as was also true with the student-parents in the current study, because of the reported high student interest in the course content and the instructor competency. Knowles (1970) and Knowles et al. (2005) revealed through their studies that relevancy and application of knowledge were high motivational factors for adult learners.

Only a few student-parents in the current study found that some instructors lacked credibility. while others described the opposite. For example, one student who was considerably older than her instructor was amazed by the volumes of busy work the instructor piled on the students in her class. Gina became resentful. thinking of it as duplication. She did not have time for busy work, but other factors likely contributed to her frustration. Counter to Gina's experience, another student-parent, Kim, was impressed by the knowledge base of a seasoned instructor in anthropology. She enjoyed learning and doing all the assignments. In the literature, realistic expectations, relevancy, and rigor were noted as useful to help students grasp concepts (Knowles, 1970; Knowles et al. 2005). Nakajima, Dembo, and Mossler (2012) indicated that students who were engaged in the classroom, were learning, and had student-faculty interactions were likely to have higher GPAs, which is the highest predictor of persistence.

Two college marketing professors, Howell and Buck (2012), researched adult-student course satisfaction. Their data supported outcomes similar to that of the student-parents in the current study, of students wanting teachers who had competency in subject-matter but also had the ability to make concepts understood. The Howell and Buck survey participants and the student-parents in this study expected relevancy of subject matter, faculty subject-matter competency, good classroom management, and faculty respect for student workload (Howell & Buck, 2012). Student engagement, motivation, and goals for increased future earning potential were all factors of persistence in the literature and in the findings of this study.

When relationships for academic support were in place, student-parents appeared to use those sources of support according to time and need. One issue that occasionally challenged students was academic procrastination. Academic procrastination had a high correlation with GPA for nontraditional students, according to Prohaska, Morrrill, Atiles, and Perez (2000). One

student-parent in the current study, Jacob, was procrastinating with a foreign language; but more than likely it was a wrong course for him and at a level of instruction beyond his abilities. Many student-parents understood the anxiety related to procrastination based on their experience. Most student-parents in the study structured their study time, planned, and used academic assistance when needed to deal with procrastination; some also started early on assignments to avoid scenarios in which procrastination was the issue.

Emotional/social/psychological support. Emotional, social, and psychological support intersected with all the other areas of support—financial, academic, and child care—in this study. In a broad sense, Zepke et al. (2011) examined support for academic efforts through more than one lens: multiple case studies and self-reporting surveys focused on student success with contrasting institutions and cultural groups. Their goal was to determine common noninstitutional sources of support. They found that the most pronounced influence was family support and the second main influence was the institutional effort to assist learning. Most student-parents in the current study relied on a parent, a spouse, or an older child to give them daily encouragement. Although families reflect diverse membership, their closeness and understanding appeared the main impetus for students to persist in college.

Individually, student-parents of the study were largely aware of their needs and did contact appropriate support personnel for their emotional, social, and psychological challenges. The participants described the importance of addressing emotional challenges and using a variety of social experiences, usually with their children or at work, to relax, have fun, and relieve tension. Several students used free counseling available on campus and expressed that the help was important to their physical and emotional well-being. Two students needed their "family in the community" (meaning other friends who were recovering from addiction) for emotional and

social support. Goal achievement requires a variety of support services; however, the student-parents must develop motivation, positive attitudes, believe in their capabilities, and actively start the effort to achieve (Pascarella, Seifert, & Whitt, 2008).

The student-parents of the current study generally addressed major problems on this level with a professional, but occasionally talked with a family member who would listen and perhaps help provide solutions. Many student-parents did not feel that negative emotions were useful. They wanted to demonstrate a positive attitude and emotions that reflected the positive attitude. Mather (2010) concurs with the importance of positive attitudes and emotions as a means to accomplish goals. Mather (2010) offered practical suggestions to promote positive attitudes: developing a positive mindset, practicing gratitude, and performing services for others. Several participants in the current study included the importance of understanding emotions and acting on them appropriately. The literature confirmed that self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and a positive mindset contributed to student's success at accomplishing goals inside and outside of the classroom (Allen, 1999; Bandura, 1997, 2000; Deci, 1975; Locke & Latham, 1990; Stage, 1989; Kuh et al., 2005).

The results of research on the meaning and role of emotion in adults have indicated that adults gain insights and better understand themselves when they reflect on the circumstances that trigger their emotions (Dirkx, 2008). Several of the student-parents had emotions of stress due to pressures they encountered during the day. Most reflected on what triggered their frustration or outbursts of emotion. Several students, Sandi, Darcy, Ben, and Lynne, expressed that they tried to manage their time and situations so they did not feel so much stress and could avoid taking it out on their children or families. Several student-parents in the present study appeared to grasp the reasons and usefulness of their emotions, and usually that of their children. Outbursts of

frustration were infrequent, a few student-parents explained, but if a display of emotion was pending or out of control, the students separated themselves, and then communication usually brought the family back into a positive state. Student-parents who understood both their own emotions and the emotions of their children could then choose to be empathetic and possibly work through their own emotions and offer similar support to their children.

Accompanying their emotional understanding was the student-parents' level of self-efficacy and self-regulation. Shell and Husman (2008) suggested that self-efficacy was a strong factor in self-regulation and maintaining a positive outlook, a trait the student-parents of the current study so often demonstrated. Knowing their limits of time and energy, the student-parents set their boundaries and began with the highest priorities first; and they said "No" to many activities.

Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2010) validated the practice of the parents in the current study who chose to focus on the social, emotional, and cognitive aspects of their children's development. Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2010) suggested that cultivation of knowledge and social skills was an indication that students wanted to develop not only their own potential but also that of their children. As Maslow (1970) suggested, the gradual development of an individual over time reflects more than the intake of food and having comfort and shelter, as one progresses to the development of skills, talent, and intellect. These considerations were a part of family stability and enrichment for the student-parents in this study, although often the time for such development was on the weekends. According to both Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen and data from the current study, juggling studying and parenting is the reality of the student-parent scenario. The need to juggle is less with two parents, but it still is a reality because the student-parent must work, study, and manage home and family.

Child-care support. Integral to the persistence of the participating student-parents was arranging reliable and safe child care. As one parent phrased it, “You have to trust the day care in order to do school.” Most student-parents felt some degree of comfort knowing their child was in a safe, happy, and healthy environment. It appeared that the student-parents’ level of trust in the provider aligned with their reassurance of quality care, which gave them comfort (Hynes & Habasevic-Brooks, 2008). One student-parent appreciated the reassurance of having her child safe, but she hoped the educational levels of preschool learning options would eventually be integrated into the actual college experience. Donna wanted the campus preschool to occasionally bring the preschool children to the college itself occasionally, so the children could see what their parents were doing and learning.

Sandi, Kim, Amy, and Donna felt that parents were responsible for both their own learning and the learning of their children, a view supported by the study of Harris and Goodall (2008). Harris and Goodall (2008) stated that parents’ positive engagements in the home were foundational to a child’s well-being, healthy development, and learning. They also stated that parents’ expectations set the context within which young people develop. Student-parents in the current study also believed that quality time with their children was important; therefore, they devoted their weekends and evenings before the children went to bed largely to family engagements.

Theme 3: Strategies for Addressing Stress

The main findings of this study include descriptions of stressful situations, coping techniques, and strategies for addressing stress. However, it was also necessary to first describe the situations that triggered the stress or anxiety. The student-parents often described and explained stressful situations among family members, friends, and college personnel. The ability

to identify situations that lead to stress at times helped student-parents plan and organize for the future, and thus minimize situational stress. Interestingly, one student-parent realized that discussing the stressful situation with her own children only passed the stress on to them. So she learned to guard against “dumping on her children.” Her learned approach was in line with the suggestion from Harris and Goodall (2008) that parents set the context and the tone for their children by example.

Transitions and change usually involve the unknown and creating some anxiety that can cause one to block feelings or not to perform well (Willis, 2006). Similarly, transitions and other changes in the lives of the participating student-parents and their children often had the potential to be stressful and produce feelings of anxiety (Willis, 2006). Student -parents in the study chose a variety of strategies to cope with stress. Their strategies included communication, seeking advice, reading on the topic of stress, analyzing the situation, using denial or avoidance, or a combination of these. Student-parents developed many approaches or strategies themselves to lessen or avoid stress—for example, the student-parent who groomed her horse; the single mother who would just charge out of the house for a walk; or the youngest student-parent, who just tried sleep. In essence, all figured out what worked to minimize stress for them. Participants used many measures, both positive and negative, to alleviate stress, which concurs with the variety of responses reported in an earlier study about how college students deal with stress (Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009).

Two student-parents in the present study indicated that they actually preferred to sleep or take a nap when stressed. That approach probably served to rejuvenate their minds in addition to acting as a coping technique, as the literature suggests (Willis, 2006). Two other participants had used chemical substances in the past, and one person who was experiencing stress was currently

using marijuana to escape anxiety and depression. The problem with substance use is its negative effect on motivation, to minimize the productivity and efficiency of the student-parent using it (Dvorak & Day, 2014; Stavro et al., 2012). Student-parents may need sleep or some healthy relaxation to cope with stress. Also, speaking honestly about the issues with a professional who could help may be a desirable long-term solution to stress for them.

Student-parents of the current study described time-management skills, most importantly the ability to determine urgent and important priorities, as essential to staying on target to their goal. The APES for college student measures stress. Nontraditional students who have taken this stress measure have indicated that time and the demands of many roles were their sources of anxiety and tension. They simply did not have the time to spend with friends and peers because of other obligations (Dill & Henley, 1998). The findings of this current study also reveal that most student-parents relied on family and classmates for their main social experiences. And one student-parent who enjoyed board games still took her homework with her to her those social events.

Structure and routine with some flexible time were described in the literature as critical for stress reduction (Allen, 2006; Giancola et al., 2009). Combining, minimizing, delaying, or deleting some nonessential activities helped students stay focused on priorities (Allen, 2006). Finally, student-parents who prepared for priority events, including academic, work, and home tasks, and took control of their responsibilities in a methodical, paced fashion kept their health and relaxation time in balance with concentrated study (Pauk & Owens, 2014). Prohaska et al. (2000) noted that, for nontraditional students, procrastination, or delay in beginning a task was greater with reading assignments and less with term papers and attendance tasks. The student-parents of the current study were often shifting priorities to meet due dates and deadlines. As

mentioned, most of the student-parents in this study started early on assignments because they had so many responsibilities.

Theme 4: Study Strategies and Parenting

The current study findings related to student-parent descriptions of studying and parenting revealed a variety of strategies based on the situation, difficulty of the material, timeline priorities, and the emotional, social, psychological, and physiological needs of the parents and their children. Many student-parents of the current study developed their own strategies to combine studying and parenting. If children were toddlers, the toddlers and student-parents sat near each other. The toddlers could entertain themselves for short periods of time. If the children were older, between 2 and four years, they could remain busy a little longer and sometimes listen to the parent's course videos. Activities that were the student's requirement for a class, such as going to a zoo or museum, provided a useful opportunity to combine information gathering and parenting. Harris and Goodall (2008) recommended parental engagement in their children's learning whenever possible to support the children's emotional and intellectual growth.

Some student-parents of the current study were aware that quality time with their children included engagement in the children's learning in the home. Children learning in the home makes the greatest difference to their later student achievement (Harris & Goodall, 2008). Parent involvement includes emotional and intellectual engagement in early literacy lessons to lower the risk of the children becoming future drop-outs (Albritton, Klotz, & Roberson, 2003). That said, many of the student-parents in this study read to their children, explained concepts to them, and sometimes did so as a combined study strategy for themselves, as well. Their reasons for doing this were efficiency, keeping relationships alive, and encouraging learning.

When focused study was necessary, most student-parents of the current study sought locations without distractions; therefore they made use of child care. Many student-parents, especially single mothers, used children's bedtime hours to complete their studying. Married couples structured studying and parenting, often by taking turns with child care to enable the other parent to work or study. Interestingly, better time-management and coping skills evolved as a result of students attending college (Hammer et al., 1998). Their coping included a structured framework for studying and parenting. This structure enabled the student-parents efficient use of time for their high-demand roles (Allen, 2006).

Theme 5: Self-Awareness and Persistence

The findings of this study revealed that the time between high school and college, otherwise known as lapse time, allowed student-parents to reflect on life experiences and the lessons learned. Whether the experiences were traumatic, discouraging, pleasant, exciting, or routine, they held meaning. Student-parents often used their previously lived experiences to prepare themselves for the challenges of attending college with their children. As varied as the student-parents in this study appeared, all were able to describe more about who they were, what motivated them, what their goals were, and why they had certain aspirations. This self-awareness also included knowing more about their strengths and deficiencies, self-efficacy, and self-authorship, which the research results of Bandura (1997, 2000) and Baxter-Magolda (2008), respectively, supported.

Parenting had a profound effect on the decisions student-parents in the study made. Most of them wanted their children to have a better life. They wanted their children to be cared for with high standards of health and safety, but also within an engaging educational environment. Student-parents revealed in their descriptions the desire to be role models of positive behavior.

The positive behavior often included a strong work ethic and enthusiasm for learning. Similarly, the student-parents were serious about living each day with the resolve to accomplish their goals. Sometimes the literature refers to this phenomenon of human accomplishment as engaging in aspirational capital (Cox & Ebbers, 2010). Hoping their children would also want to strive for a better life that included education, the student-parents also wanted to model a positive mindset by structuring their schedules to allow them to persist to their degree.

Also related to self-awareness, persistence, and a positive mindset is the self-authorship theory of Baxter-Magolda (2008). The participants of her studies had developed, usually in their thirties, to a level at which they trusted their internal voices. They were able to integrate their internal foundations with the realities of their external worlds. The community-college student-parents had reviewed the consequences of their life experiences and appeared more able than younger adults to establish goals and boundaries for their lives. Baxter-Magolda profoundly states,

> Students do not learn to behave in mature ways without practice. This process requires identifying situations that are safe and doable for students who are at varying points along the journey to self-authorship. Support is critical as students assume meaningful responsibility.

The children of the student-parents in the Baxter-Magolda study (2008) reflect, at times, part of the student-parents' reasons for attending college, but also their courage and strength to persist. Student-parents tried to model with their children their positive mindset and goal-directed behavior as an important life lesson for their children.

Following a series of courses and settling into a daily routine, the student-parents viewed college more as a necessary reality. In particular, those who had graduated or served in the military had insight into the reality of college and what college could provide for them.

Conversely, a few students less familiar with academic rigor needed to adapt to a new, faster pace dictated by their tight schedules.

When we consider the findings of this study relative to the themes it revealed, some findings are supported by the literature and others are not. For example, in the study persistence is reflected the student-parents' monitored attention to academic, work, and family responsibilities. The relationships student-parents had within the community college with advisors, counselors, faculty, peers, learning communities, and study groups were important to the students' persistence. At the same time, having children complicated their lives with additional elements of responsibility, which also complicated persistence. The literature also identifies some of these challenges of community-college student-parents in the models of Bean and Metzner (1985) and Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2010). Bean and Metzner described the influences of external elements on student attrition or persistence. Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen suggested reforms to simplify application forms for assistance programs, dual enrollment, on-campus child care, reduction of work hours, and intervention counseling for students.

The findings of the current study reveal strategies student-parents can use to manage time and stress. These strategies parallel the two models just described, Bean and Metzner (1985), and Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2010). A first recommendation from the current study would be more child care for the purpose of more focused study time for student-parents. Some student-parents disclosed academic-support needs in specific areas, and several recommended that instructors make their expectations clear and explain content when it is above the comprehension level of the students. A few student-parents, such as Gina, who was overwhelmed because instructors knew their content area but were not always familiar with effective teaching methods for a diverse group of students, revealed the pedagogical issues.

Similarly, Howell and Buck (2012) noted variables related to student satisfaction of instruction. They found that students valued subject-matter competency and management as a part of faculty effectiveness. The research of Laird et al. (2008) also supported the current study findings. These researchers indicated that engaging relationships between the instructors and students facilitated persistence rates. Also, Pascarella et al. (2008) documented effective instruction and college persistence. And students in the current study who asked for tutoring, organized work-study groups, used information from student-success courses, or were a part of learning communities had greater opportunity to reinforce their learning, as Tinto (2000) and Bean and Metzner Models (1985) encouraged in their literature.

Several student-parents in the present study had specific gaps and difficulties, for example, in technology. College personnel ready to address difficulties aided in the academic success of these individuals. The literature concurs with the notion of finding gaps left by prior education and using targeted intervention; an example of this was with adult females, as with Gina in the present study, who were not familiar with technology or needed tutoring in content areas (Cox & Ebbers, 2010; Van Stone et al., 1994).

Further, the literature suggests that mature students tended to be more motivated than younger students for a number of reasons: The program was something they had long wanted to do, they made sacrifices to participate, they wanted to prove to themselves and others they were capable of learning, and they were able to study for a new career. Bergerson (2009) recorded the findings of several studies suggesting that lower socioeconomic or first-generation students need to feel they are worthy of respect, particularly because they are making the effort and sacrifices for future social mobility. McGivney (2004) notes the positive motivation of a supportive spouse, which was also in the findings related to four student-parents in the current study. Clark

(2012) notes the importance of support from a diverse group of peers and classmates; the acknowledgement of belonging, and that students are not alone in their sacrifice is uplifting. In the present study, the essence of resolve was apparent in married and single student-parents as they developed their self-awareness, self-efficacy, and self-authorship as they persisted (Bandura, 1997, 2000; Baxter-Magolda, 2008).

Finally, the students-parents offered many specific strategies as suggestions for handling stress in their lives. Similar strategies were supported in the literature, but there were not many for a parent to work alongside the child (Pierceall & Keim, 2007). Participating student-parents expressed the importance of developing habits of responsibility. They described their study strategies, which included focused time and combining studying with parenting. The student-parents developed creative ways to share their academic content or to include their children as the parents did their assignments. These strategies did not work with content that required absolute focus.

Further, study participants described habits that modeled responsibility such as starting assignments and the workday early, planning for events and emergencies as much as possible, providing for the social-emotional and physical needs of their children, and maintaining a positive mindset to create balance and a sense of moving toward the goal. This unique population, diverse as it was with married and single parents, some with GEDs and some with a 4-year baccalaureate education before they entered the community college, had one commonality: the *resolve* to be proactive, to plan for success, to face challenges and turn them into opportunities, and to daily renew their commitment to the goal of completion. The goal of completion meant persistence so that they and their families would have a better life.

Summary Reflections

Many studies supported the current research findings, confirming that, although student-parents had challenges and stress, they also developed a heightened sense of identity, their character, their commitment to responsibility, and their resolve to persist. Student-parents had different decision-making opportunities according to the structure of their daily lives. Many of the students described the process of reflection as necessary for them to make decisions and meet challenges. The student-parents needed to consider consequences for their decisions, large or small. Their increased self-awareness, which involved steps similar to those toward self-authorship, was enhanced as they came to college and found mutual support from like-minded peers. This development was validated by the studies of Baxter-Magolda (2008). Baxter-Magolda focused on the development of self-authorship and emphasized the importance both of students practicing decision-making in safe situations on campus, and of students receiving support as they assumed responsibility. The student-parents of the current study developed their sense of identity in varying degrees from the beginning of and throughout their college attendance.

Implications for Practice

The literature in this field and the findings of the current study illustrate several implications for practice in common. Among these are the importance of selecting positive support systems and campus experiences. Both the literature and the findings also reflect the importance of stability in the home and family for student-parents to find time for focused study and for their children.

Another shared emphasis was the importance of individual communications among each unique students and various institution representatives. Students are more likely to understand

their responsibilities and sources of information when their initial contacts at the college, and later with registration, financial-aid staff, and orientation leaders are succinct but provide essential detail pertinent to the individual's need. Similarly, students-parents need to encourage clear communications both at home with family, and outside the home with advisors, employers, and other support-services personnel about the demands for their time and how schedules need to accommodate their situations.

Additionally, student-parents may need to articulate clearly and explicitly the questions they have about course content, assignments, and other course expectations. Student-parents can improve academic assistance by providing faculty and support staff with enough detail about their needs, questions, and struggles to enhance the support they receive. Venues for this articulation could be adult student-parent orientations, seminars, and workshops. Logical timing would be before classes start, possibly in conjunction with college orientation. Student-parent completion of preassessments, inventories, and diagnostic measures might point to content or skill weaknesses and strengths. As a result, the student-parents together with advisors or counselors of student-success programs would be able to determine targeted interventions and the most appropriate sequence of courses for the student-parents. They also could discuss nonacademic issues related to financial stability, financial services, day care, and social, emotional, or psychological needs in advance of the semester coursework.

Preparations for optimum physical surroundings and positive mindset may help offset some of the increased daily challenges related to being student-parents. The literature recommended early formation of learning communities for student-parents. The student-parents could participate in the orientation programs for their unique student-parent group, offering suggestions and recommendations based on their perceived needs. Having an opportunity to

discuss private nonacademic issues might help resolve unanswered questions in those areas. Information about nonacademic finances such as rent, car repairs, supplemental child care, exercise opportunities, and community resources of an affordable nature could be made available to help student-parents.

Community-college counselors, advisors, and staff may value knowing the primary challenges student-parents of this study expressed. Although most community colleges have student-success courses, it is possible that early intervention and coordination might proactively address the greatest challenges for student-parents. Most student-parents listed child-care needs and not enough time for studying as their main challenges. Consequently, many of them said that exercise was the first activity to be omitted when they were stretched for study time. An implication for practice could be a facility on campus for exercise for students with crowded time schedules.

Conversations with student-parents and their advisors, counselors, and other support persons need to include realistic solutions and establish steps to accomplish the goal. Most of the student-parents in this study demonstrated their beliefs in a work ethic, willingness to prioritize academics and their children, and willingness to sacrifice monetarily and in terms of their social life for the 2- to 3-year period. Acquiring their degree and the education and skills they needed for a career was “nonnegotiable.” The student-parents of this study set the bar quite high for themselves, and may serve as a role model for other community-college students.

Student-parents of the study clearly had knowledge and experiences to share. In fact, this campus subgroup wanted to help others in college by sharing their recommendations for study strategies and finding assistance with difficult courses, and their suggestions of how to remain positive despite adversity. In fact, several student-parents admitted that adversity had become

their fuel for determination. As a result, they developed creative solutions in their decision making. Student-parents in study groups knew they were not alone. The collegiality afforded them a sense of belonging and mutual support, often moving them closer to their goal of an attaining an associate degree.

Specific findings in the literature provide support to inform practice. Nora, Crisp, and Matthews (2011) agreed that a holistic view of student engagement and student success in college indicates the importance of curriculum and activities that are relevant to the students' lives, including their careers. Student-parents viewed the pursuit of a degree as an opportunity to learn as much as possible while they were a part of the college community. Their varied backgrounds, experiences, and multiple roles uniquely defined their lives. Many student-parents indicated they were taking advantage of a wide variety of curriculum and resources to further their development. It makes sense for community-college faculty to approach these student-parents with a holistic view.

Student-parents expected that their instructors would respect the multiple-demands on their time by making classroom time count and the content relevant to their lives and career goals. Doing this meant they must establish clear assignment objectives and course expectations (Howell & Buck, 2012). Educators who prepared with the student-parents in mind included explanations about applications in the real world and opportunities for career research and internships, helped students establish information networks, and provided workplace scenarios and real-life stories that connected the classroom to their future careers.

In addition, many student-parents indicated their appreciation for instructors who expressed an interest in them, their career goals, and their class performance. Most students valued one-on-one time with an instructor, which enabled them to ask questions they otherwise

may have avoided (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008). Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2010) revealed that many students with children felt the "chilly climate" of the classroom. A few of the single parents expressed the feeling of being marginalized at times by a few staff or faculty. The climate of marginalization undermines self-efficacy and contributes to negative emotions. The opposite instructor response of encouragement and active interest in students fostered a climate of engagement.

Instructors who reached out to student-parents and made themselves available often created a trust and made a difference in student success. Faculty who provided opportunity for future discussion about the gaps in the knowledge base of students and the resources that were available for assistance, numerous possibilities for targeted interventions, tutoring, or labs could help student-parents develop confidence in an area once problematic for them.

Student-parents would benefit from the following specific community-college practices:

(a) Early establishment of learning communities to connect the student-parents with other student-parents. As registration and orientation begin, scheduling of student-student, faculty-student, and student-counselor sessions creates relationships early for a cohesive college culture that cares.

(b) Early organization of information networks to discuss common issues of stress, time management, parenting-while-studying strategies, community resources, child-care and child-enrichment activities, and professional preparations for new careers. Venues and format might vary, with workshops, breakout groups, and speakers, using time restrictions compatible with the busy student-parent schedule.

(c) Student-parents, as adults, likely will suggest their own topics for expert selection for academic and nonacademic seminars. Student-parents can share strategies for

organization, study habits, time and priority management, relaxation techniques, positive communications, literacy and writing skills, child development, health maintenance, stress and emotional well-being, motivation and goal attainment, and respectful behavior. Student-parents mentioned these topics as important, although many of them already appeared to understand what worked for them, knew some of the information, and had developed solutions. Some student-parents might not need or want the seminars; however, many expressed interest in having more resources to help them succeed in college.

Suggestions for Future Research

Student-parents form a large portion of nontraditional students in colleges and community colleges. Their increasing numbers but low completion rates of 23% for the associate degree (IPEDS, 2010) give impetus for future research about nontraditional subgroups. Much of the literature drew from one characteristic of student-parents—for example, single student-mothers, or first-generation students. This was the first study of community-college student-parents enrolled in an associate-degree program who had at least one child not yet in a K–12 educational setting. Research could be done on the same subpopulation with a narrower focus: for example, first-generation students, reverse-transfer student-parents, or student-parents who attended a 4-year institution before they came to a community college. This study included both these criteria and did not isolate them for examination.

Other examples of narrower focused research could include a population of ethnic specificity, gender specificity, or student-parents whose children used only the community-college preschool. Variations of methodology, such as mixed-method design, used in future studies might provide greater insight into additional student-parent demographics. Stress

instruments could be used or new measures tested in areas of stress specifically noted for this subpopulation of student-parents. Student-parents suggested the situations that attributed to their stress, but from an individual perspective. Aggregate data might provide helpful statistics and further the insights into stressful situations, coping mechanisms, or proactive ways to prevent stress.

Research could be conducted on student perceptions of the effectiveness of study groups for student-parents. Similarly, orientations conducted for student-parents could be measured for effectiveness using assessments and observations. Exploring the issue of needed child care, a commonly mentioned challenge, might provide helpful information for auxiliary, on-campus child-care operations.

Closing Remarks

The student-parents of this study added insight through their experiences about the many ways that education is a collaborative commitment. As determined, nontraditional student-parents returned to community college to better their lives and the lives of their children, they shared their efforts for success. These student-parents, armed with a firm resolve, found peers, college programs, federal assistance, community support, and family to help and encourage them in their persistence. The student-parents committed fully as they worked, managed a family, and met their academic requirements and expectations. They turned challenge into inspiration.

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APPENDIX A

Sample Letter to a Mountain West-Region Community College

School of Education
1588 Campus Delivery
Fort Collins, Colorado 80523-1588
(970) 491-1963
FAX: (970) 491-1317
www.soe.chhs.colostate.edu

Date [November 2013]

Dear Student Affairs Director,

I was a teacher in the secondary schools and an instructor at two universities. I currently hold teacher/principal licensure for the State of Montana. My dissertation from Colorado State University and the School of Education is aimed at studying a specific group of nontraditional students enrolled in community colleges. I would like to interview up to five students who qualify according to the criteria for the study.

The qualifying criteria for this group of highly nontraditional community college students are (a) entrance to the community college delayed by more than two years, (b) ongoing full-time student status, (c) employed part-time with a minimum of 20 hours per week, and (d) parent, with one child not yet in kindergarten. I hope to use an email or a postcard for recruitment. This email is a flyer with a hyperlink to the demographic questionnaire. The postcard allows the student to go to the Student Affairs Gatekeeper for the qualifying demographic questionnaire.

I would like to begin interviews early in the semester, August and September, before students get too busy. I would interview each participant for 90 minutes in a quiet location. When the interview and transcription check is completed, the participant will receive a $25 gift card for the bookstore or cafeteria. Importantly, I will use pseudonyms for the participants and ensure complete confidentiality of any identifying information for the college and student.

I hope you will be willing to help me complete this study. If you need more information, please respond to this email with the best number to reach you. I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you!

Sally Peterson
Doctoral Candidate
School of Education
Colorado State University

APPENDIX B

Letter of Cooperation

[Letterhead for Each Institution]

August 15, 2013
Colorado State University
Institutional Review Board
321 General Services Building
Campus Delivery 2011
Fort Collins, CO 80523-2011

Attention: Janell Barker, Senior IRB Coordinator

Dear Ms. Barker:

I am aware that Sally Peterson, a graduate student in the School of Education at Colorado State University, is conducting a research study entitled *Nontraditional Community College Students With Children: What It Means to Persist to Degree,* and she has shared with me the details of the study. I feel comfortable that the participants in this study will be adequately protected, and I give Sally Peterson permission to conduct this study at our institution.

Our student affairs gatekeeper [or Institutional Revenue Board director], [name here], will provide Sally Peterson with the email listing of the students who qualify by credit hours, in order for her to send them an email of recruitment for the study using an accompanying flyer. The flyer includes criteria and gift card for completion of interview.

Three Mountain West-region community colleges request(s) that the [name of college] Community College students' identity and the identifying institutions be kept confidential in the research results. Sally Peterson has agreed to provide my office a copy of the CSU IRB approval document before beginning recruitment.

If there are any questions, please contact my office.

Sincerely,

[qualified individual signature]
[institutional position title]
[contact information]

APPENDIX C

Recruitment Flyer

Are you returning to college to complete a degree?

Are you a parent juggling it all—work, family, and homework?

Research Participants Needed Fall 2013

My name is Sally Peterson. I am a doctoral student at Colorado State University. I am conducting a study on **what it means to be a nontraditional student with children enrolled in a community college beginning two or more years after graduating from high school or getting a GED.**

I hope you can help me complete this study. Please reply using the link to the right if you feel you qualify. If it is easier, please complete the postcard at the Student Affairs Office.

To volunteer, please call
Sally Peterson at
406-543-6789
or email dspeterson@bresnan.net
by Monday February 10.

Interviews Scheduled for
the week of February 17–21.
Thank you.

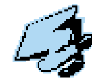
Qualifications:

1. Two years or more have lapsed since high school.
2. You are a parent with at least one child not yet in K–12 school.
3. You are full-time student.
4. You work part-time, up to about 14 hours a week.
5. You have 15 or more credits toward your degree

Sally Peterson
Doctoral Student
CSU School of Education
dspeterson@bresnan.net

Linda Kuk, PhD
Associate Professor
CSU School of Education
Linda.Kuk@colostate.edu

Participation in this study is voluntary.
You will receive a $25 Follett Gift Card at the end of the interview if you are chosen to participate.



APPENDIX D

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Colorado State University

TITLE OF STUDY: ***Nontraditional Community College Students With Children: What It Means to Persist to Degree***

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: ***Linda Kuk, PhD, School of Education, kuk@colostate.edu, 970-491-7243***

CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: ***Sally Peterson, SOE PhD Program, dspeterson@bresnan.net, 406-543-6789***

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH? ***If you are returning to college after a delay of 2 years or more, have full-time-student status, are employed 20 hours per week or more, and have a child not yet in kindergarten, you quality as a nontraditional community college student for this meaningful study.***

WHO IS DOING THE STUDY? ***The research team consists of doctoral candidate Sally Peterson and CSU School of Education Committee members Linda Kuk, Dawn Mallette, Donald Quick, and Malcolm Scott.***

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY? ***The purpose of the study is to examine the experiences of nontraditional community-college students with children and to reveal what it means daily to persist to degree.***

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST? ***The study will take place on campus in a quiet library or conference room and will use a total of approximately 3 hours for completion of initial forms, a 90-minute interview, and a possible follow-up phone call to clarify the correctness of information.***

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO? ***The participant will be asked the following:***

- ***Complete this consent form***
- ***Complete the demographic questionnaire***
- ***Respond with honesty and thoughtfulness to the interview questions***
- ***Confirm the accuracy of the transcription of what it means to the participant to persist to degree***

ARE THERE REASONS WHY I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY**? *You would not with to take part in this study if you find you do not quality or cannot answer the questions honestly.***

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?
It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher has taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY? *There may be no direct benefits other than the contribution to the body of knowledge about nontraditional students as they persist within the context of the community college, and the value to others who read the study.*

*Your participation in this research is **voluntary.** If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.*

***Information for this study is confidential and we will assign a pseudonym to your data** (the first participant would be Abe, the second, Ben, etc.) so that the only place your name will appear in our records is on the consent form. **Compensation** of a $25 gift card for a campus cafeteria or bookstore is awarded after the transcription is shown to be accurate.*

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?
Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Linda Kuk, at 970-491-7243. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator, at 970-491-1655. I will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

This consent form was approved by the CSU Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects in research on [Approval Date].

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 2 pages.

____ ______________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study Date

____
Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

____
Email address of person agreeing to take part in the study

____
Phone number of person agreeing to take part in the study

____ ______________________
Name of person providing information to participant Date

____
Signature of researcher

____
Email of researcher

____
Phone number of researcher

APPENDIX E

Demographic Questions

1. Age _____
2. Gender _____
3. Number of children _____
4. What are the ages of all your children? _____
5. Have you attended college before? ______ How many years ago? _______
6. What associate-degree program are you enrolled in? ________________________
7. How many course credits have you completed? ______
8. How many credits will you earn this semester? ______
9. How many classes are you taking this semester? ______
10. List your courses, type, and time of day in the box below.

Course Name	Face-to-Face	Online	Combination	Time of Day

APPENDIX F

Interview Questions

1. Why did you decide to attend college at this time in your life?
2. What are your overall goals related to your college attendance?
3. How would you describe the relationships that have helped you reach your goals?
4. How have you addressed the day-to-day challenges of being a nontraditional student?
5. How do you deal with the stress of being a nontraditional student?
6. How would you describe your financial situation while enrolled as a student?
7. How would you describe your experiences related to parenting while being a student?
8. How do you engage in the academic expectations of being a nontraditional student?
9. How do you manage time for study and still attend to your other responsibilities?
10. To what extent have you sought out assistance from the college related to being a nontraditional student?
11. What support would better help you complete your educational program?

APPENDIX G

Themes and Subthemes

Themes and Subthemes for Community College Student-Parents

Theme	Subtheme
Reasons for attending college	Why go to college?
	Why attend a community college?
Support relationships and programs	Financial management and support
	Academic support
	Emotional/social/psychological support
	Child care support
Addressing stress	Stressors identified through experiences
	Coping techniques and tools
	Priorities for time use
Study strategies and parenting	—
Self-awareness and persistence	Impact of experience on responsibility
	Impact of parent role on priorities
	A positive mindset was motivation for persistence