How Single Mothers Experience Hope and Resilience on their Journey through the Community College

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Elizabeth A. Kline
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This dissertation titled
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by
ELIZABETH A. KLINE

has been approved for
the Department of Counseling and Higher Education
and The Patton College of Education by

Peter C. Mather
Professor of Counseling and Higher Education

Renée A. Middleton
Dean, The Patton College of Education
Abstract

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How Single Mothers Experience Hope and Resilience on their Journey through the Community College

Director of Dissertation: Peter C. Mather

Respect and economics are the two reasons single mothers say they attend college. Single mothers have a strong motivation to earn a degree, but why are some of them able to finish and others not? This study explored the motivational systems single mothers use to persevere as they journey through the community college. Hope in the form of waypower (the ability to navigate obstacles) and willpower (the sense of purpose or agency) and resilience proved to be key factors.

Utilizing Seidman’s (2006) three-interview sequence with questions focused through the appreciative lens, I created the narrative profiles for five single mother students. I explored the profiles for common themes and emerging theory and identified four themes. The first theme discusses the shared early childhood and high school experiences as well as the experiences of becoming a mom, and the chance to begin again in college. The second theme explores the motivation of the women to attend college in terms of economic power, breaking the cycle, and achieving self-fulfillment. The third theme explores how the women navigate obstacles by employing effective strategies such as support systems, goal setting, time and money management techniques, and stress management techniques; and key attitudes including resilience, willingness to sacrifice,
independence, and self-acceptance. Finally, the final theme delves into the way the women perceive their experiences as a mother and student integrating the roles.

The study concludes with implications for current practice and future research including utilizing the Adult Hope Scale as part of intrusive advising with incoming students, providing workshops geared towards the findings from the Hope Scale college-wide, a mentorship network, professional development for faculty and advisors, and revisiting college policies and procedures.
Dedication

To every student mom, who despite the fear and doubt, closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, and steps forward with hope and determination

To my husband and my six beautiful children - the source of my sanity and insanity
Acknowledgments

Thank you to my committee including Dr. Mather, Dr. Harrison, Dr. Hasan, and Dr. Harter. Specifically, thank you Dr. Mather for never giving up on me and providing gentle encouragement. Your empathy and understanding helped me weather this crazy academic storm. In addition, I sincerely appreciate the feedback and guidance from Dr. Harrison and Dr. Harter, which helped me embrace the qualitative approach and a new way of thinking. You forced me to constantly step outside my box. It helped me grow as a student, as a writer, as a teacher, and most importantly, as a wife and mom. I promise I will never write another long paragraph, and I will work on my overuse of the passive voice. Finally, Dr. Hasan, thank you for your guidance on how to manage life while writing a dissertation to how to show my students I truly care. Thank you for the hours at Panera talking about my research, and the gems of wisdom from your class that I use with my students.

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I cannot even begin to list the numerous family members, friends, colleagues, and students that made this document possible. Even if I could, words would never be
enough. I simply say, “Thank you. Thank you for touching my life, even if it was for the briefest of moments.”

To my parents, who left this world too early, I see you every day in my brother and sister, my children, and my nieces and nephews. Your love of education continues to burn in each of us. You made me promise to never give up, put it behind me, and move forward. I renew that promise every morning when I rise, every night before I sleep, and sometimes numerous times in the middle of the day when everything is just too much.

For my grandmother, my great aunts, my mother, and all the strong women in our family that blazed the trail before me, your sacrifices made this day possible. When you refused to be the quiet women that society said you must be, when you sacrificed your lives for your children, and when you stood firmly on your own feet free of dependency on a man, you reached down through the generations to make this possible - the first doctorate in our family. Because of you, that doctorate belongs to a woman.

Finally, I want to acknowledge those that are with me today and provide inspiration. Thank you to my brother and sister for the strength and resilience that comes from sibling rivalry doused in love - may our children be as fortunate. To my husband, I do not even know where to begin, and I certainly would not want to end, so I will stick with forever in time and leave it at that. Finally, to my children, of all the practical things I say to you – “It is what it is; develop your frontal lobe; just because you don’t believe it, doesn’t mean it’s not true; and our teeth are for food, not people” – I want you to remember the one thing that I do not say enough: I love you. Thank you for letting me be your mom.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Respect and economics: These are the two reasons most cited by single mothers regarding their motivations to attend college (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Haleman, 2004; Mottarella, Fritzsche, Whitten, & Bedsole, 2009). Searching for a better tomorrow for themselves and their children, single mothers are willing to juggle numerous roles including the role of mother caring for their children, the role of sole provider, and the role of student to earn the coveted college degree.

In their pursuit of higher education, research indicates that these students face barriers to college achievement common to all students such as time management issues and class attendance as well as unique challenges such as role conflicts, financial instability, and childcare issues (Dill & Henley, 1998; Duquaine-Watson, 2007). In addition, there are indications that trying to balance the role of mother and student, termed maternal-student role stress, can negatively impact a mother’s well-being and decrease her chances of completing her degree (Gerson, 1985; Gigliotti, 2004a, 2004b). The negative aspects of juggling the roles of mother and student are well documented.

Therefore, the goal of this study was to explore the positive aspects of how single mother students at a community college utilize hope and resilience to work towards achieving their degree. The study explored how they make meaning of the roles of mother and student and how they utilized hope in terms of willpower and waypower and resilience to overcome roadblocks along the way.
Single Mother Students

What do we know about single mother students with respect to their numbers in higher education, their socioeconomic status, and their college experience? According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2009, approximately 57 percent of the students at all degree-granting institutions were female (NCES, 2011). In addition, many female students at institutions of higher education are non-traditional students with a median age of 24 and attend college part-time because of work or family responsibilities (Townsend & Twombly, 2007). With regards to women specifically in the community colleges, according to Townsend and Twombly (2007), “Women students have dominated community college enrollments for almost three decades… [and] have received the majority of associate degrees for the past few decades” (p. 210). In a report on non-traditional students compiled by Choy (2002) on behalf of the NCES, approximately 16.4 percent of undergraduates in 1999 at two-year public institutions were single parents. Even with these data, it is still unclear how many single mother students enroll at community colleges, although the data suggest a high percentage of students may fall in this category.

In addition to their unknown numbers, we know little about their socioeconomic status. With regards to income, the majority of single-parent families (not necessarily students) are more likely to live in poverty than the traditional two-parent family with 25 percent of families reported as female-headed households living in poverty in 2000 (Zhan & Pandey, 2004). Schobert (2000) found that single mother students were not as likely to receive help from their parents or earn as much income from work as their childless
counterparts. Furthermore, single mother students are more likely to live in poverty and utilize student loans to augment their limited income. A college education can lift a person out of poverty, and the research indicates that this access to higher education may help lift approximately half of female-headed families out of poverty (Duquaine-Watson, 2007).

Finally, not only are their numbers and socioeconomic status uncertain, we know little about the experience of these mothers on campus. Numerous studies address the attitudes of society towards single mothers in general, which is illustrated with a quote from Haleman (2004), “Negative images of single motherhood abound and single mothers are blamed for social ills ranging from growing inner-city crime rates and drug use to nothing less than the demise of the American family” (p. 769).

Research suggests that this attitude may also be present on the college campus towards single mother students. Some women reported lack of acceptance by other students on the campus or viewed as incapable students. This may affect the experience of student mothers. In other words, a “chilly climate” exists in the views of some single mothers on the college campus with respect to other students, faculty, and even the institution itself (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Mottarella, Fritzsche, Whitten, & Bedsole, 2009). In the words of a student mother as she recounts an experience in one of her classes, “They were saying some pretty awful things about single mothers. How they’re all lazy. Calling them sluts. Saying they all just keep having babies to get more money” (Duquaine-Watson, 2007, p. 236). Researchers and single mother students refute the
stereotypes with the argument that students who are low-income single parents are not necessarily more likely to be low in integrity or ability (Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998).

Another part of the college experience centers on how these women balance the roles of mother and student. Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1998) found no significant difference in motivation between mothers completing college and mothers that started but did not complete their degree. The significant difference related to life circumstances, such as personal problems at home that followed them into the classroom (Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998). The biggest challenge for mothers was balancing multiple roles stressed by numerous responsibilities (Haleman, 2004; Van Stone, Nelson, & Niemann, 1994).

In order to quantify this role balancing, several quantitative studies sought to predict load strain from multiple roles and the resulting student success or failure. Home (1998) found that the lower the income of the mothers, the greater the role strain. All single mothers in Home’s (1998) study were low income and were at the most risk for overload strain because of multiple roles. Gerson’s (1985) quantitative study found that although student mothers faced greater role strain, there was also more gratification with the roles. However, these quantitative studies are limited because they lack the words of the women themselves and distill their feelings and thoughts to numbers on a survey.

Other studies found that the keys to balancing these roles were sociological factors (external factors) defined as support systems derived from family, children, peers, faculty, and academic services such as support groups and basic academic skill building courses (Van Stone, Nelson, & Niemann, 1994). The students interviewed in the Van
Stone, Nelson, and Niemann (1994) study spoke very little of important psychological factors other than the personal ambition to get a job for the sake of their children. These students viewed college as their last chance and believed that although they lacked prior knowledge and skills, their personal experience was a benefit. Although the aforementioned studies explored motivation and the impact of role strain as well as support systems, none of the studies defined the act of balancing the roles of mother and student by exploring the positive aspects of the simultaneous roles or the internal strengths/internal factors, such as hope and resilience, needed to succeed and complete their degree.

In summary, single mother students likely make up an appreciable part of the student population. In addition, it is likely that some of these mothers live in poverty or just above the poverty level. Some of these mothers described their experience as discouraging or unwelcoming at best and fraught with roadblocks. The literature documents the challenges faced by these mothers during their college experience, but the literature does not illuminate the positive attributes of the college experience for these women or the meaning and relationship of integrating the parent and student roles. The positive perspective is important to gaining an understanding of the single mother student experience.

**Statement of the Problem**

Research on the single mother student population indicates the key to retention and academic success is the support of peers (sociological support) and personal psychological beliefs, such as ambition (Van Stone, Nelson, & Niemann, 1994).
Unfortunately, we know little about the personal, internal beliefs of these students outside of the societal stereotypes and the limited research. For example, Van Stone, Nelson, and Niemann’s (1994) study was limited to single mothers that were welfare recipients at a four-year university. The students did not choose the psychological beliefs on the research instrument. The researchers determined the categories determined in advance.

We know little about the relationship of the positive psychological beliefs such as hope and resilience and the balancing of the mother and student roles among the single mother students in the community college.

Therein presents the problem. Psychological beliefs are a key to academic success, but the research falls short in evaluating/characterizing the beliefs or explaining how student mothers balance roles and make meaning of the experience. Specifically, few if any studies focus on psychological constructs in terms of motivational systems with this particular student population. According to Snyder et al. (2002), the key to academic success is the motivational system known as hope. The definition of hope is “the process of thinking about one’s goals, along with the motivation to move toward those goals (agency) and the ways to achieve those goals (pathways)” (Snyder, 1995, p. 355).

Therefore, this study explored the aspect of hope, resilience, and the experience of the single mother student with an appreciative orientation. The goal was to provide institutions with an understanding of the way single mothers add student to their existing roles as well as illuminate how they make meaning of their experience with the goal of
using this information to devise targeted, successful retention programs to help single mother students complete their degrees.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the lived experience of single mother students on a community college campus through narrative inquiry with semi-structured interviews and the Adult Hope Scale assessment (Snyder et al., 1991). The interviews gave a voice to single mother students. Based on the interviews, I created profiles for each participant and supplemented them with the Hope Scale. I conducted the interviews utilizing an appreciative approach. The appreciative approach focuses on appreciating and building on lived experiences from the positive standpoint. It gave the participants a chance to explain their story through a retelling and reflection on their successes as well as verbalize their dreams and aspirations for the future (Shultze & Avital, 2011). The appreciative approach allowed the students a chance to elaborate on the role of waypower, willpower, and resilience in their journeys.

Using these methods, the research explored the following questions from the viewpoint of these students: 1) How does the single mother student experience hope in her college journey? 2) What background, symbolic and environmental factors contribute to single mother students’ resilience? 3) How do they utilize hope and resiliency to overcome roadblocks? 4) What attitudes, strategies, and support systems help them succeed? 5) How do they view their roles as mothers and students?
Significance of Problem

Single mothers hardly fit the definition of a traditional college student. In fact, the large body of student development research does not even seek to define a place for the single mother (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). The literature is on a deficit model. However, the single mother community college student population is alive and attending class balancing numerous roles at once including mother, homemaker, provider, employee, and student. This research study was significant because there is little research about single mothers in the community college and even less regarding the role of hope and resilience as single mothers balance the roles of student and mother. Furthermore, the published research does not deal with the positive aspects of the single mother’s college experience or the hope and resilience needed to complete a degree. By focusing on what has worked for these students utilizing an appreciative orientation, colleges may gain an insight into the supports needed. Given the great pay-off of earning a degree, it is incumbent upon the higher education community, especially the community colleges with their open access policies, to address the needs of these students and improve their chances at academic success.

Limitations and Delimitations

This qualitative study included interviewing single mother students at community colleges in suburban Ohio utilizing a narrative inquiry approach with an appreciative orientation. The Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1991) administered to the students helped inform the profiles created after the data analysis. With regards to limitations of the design of the study, inasmuch as the study was qualitative with a limited number of
participants, it is not generalizable. The Hope Scale supplemented the qualitative data and the profile of the participants. Conducted in a community college in suburban Ohio, many of the mothers were of low socioeconomic status. They self-identified as single at the time of the study. Also of importance, all of the mothers interviewed were in the last year of their education. As such, their experiences may not speak for students just beginning their journey as the study participants benefited from reflection and possibly looked at past experiences in a new light.

In addition to the limitations of the study design, personal limitations included my preconceived notions as a researcher. I am a married mother of six children and while attending graduate school, worked two full-time jobs. My everyday lived experience affected the lens through which I view the world. However, my experiences also potentially opened me up to understanding the experiences of other student mothers.

Furthermore, I am a full-time faculty member and chair of the science department in a small community college in Ohio. In addition to teaching, I actively advise and advocate for single mother students. In order to deal with biases based on my years of experience with students and my own life story, especially during the interview process and analysis/interpretation, I kept a researcher’s journal. According to Janesick (1999), a researcher’s journal is important to address the researcher’s Self, as the “researcher is the research instrument” (p. 506). The journal included my reflections on my role as the researcher, and the meaning that I made from the experience. Janesick (1999) states it is a way to get feedback from one’s self.
In addition, the study started at my home college. Because it is small, approximately 3,000 students, I took great care to make sure I did not have the students that participated in the study in my technology classes. My position as a faculty member potentially intimidated the students or put me in a compromising situation with information learned concerning colleagues or my institution. Although this was a consideration, I did not identify comprising situations during the study.

Delimitations help to frame and bound the study’s size and scope. The study included single mother students at the chosen community college. Purposeful sampling in the form of snowball sampling chose study participants that met the following criteria: 1) Students self-identified as a single mother. This reflects how the student perceives herself in terms of support from a significant other. 2) Students were mothers with at least partial custody of their children. The children did not have to be biological children; however, the student had to be the primary caregiver. The primary caregiver role is the critical component, which implies that the student has the maximum amount of burden for the care of the child/children. 3) Students were at the community college at least part-time and had completed at least two semesters, although not necessarily consecutive, to allow for reflection on their college experience.

Definitions of Terms

The following terms defined below help explore and describe the lived experience of single mother students as they transition to higher education.

Non-traditional Student: According to Choy (2002), the definition for non-traditional student is any student that meets one or more of the following criteria: 1)
delays enrollment after high school, 2) works more than 35 hours per week while enrolled in college, 3) financially independent as defined by financial aid documents, 4) has dependents other than a spouse, which often means children but may be others, 5) a single parent, 6) does not have a high school diploma. For the purposes of this study, all participants were non-traditional based on their single parent status. However, students might meet more than one of the criteria.

Single Mother: A woman with sole provider and caregiver responsibilities for her children, although not necessarily her biological children. For instance, a woman may be the sole provider and caregiver for her relative’s children or adopted children. As an example, students may also be grandparents that are caring for their grandchildren. A recent study by Hayslip et al. (2013) stated that one in ten children live with a grandparent and in 40 percent of the cases, the grandparent is the main caregiver.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to describe the lived experiences of single mother students at a community college on the pathway to obtaining their college degree. In order to frame the study, it is essential to review relevant research as it pertains to student mothers. This literature review is broken into three categories: theoretical orientation, literature on student mothers, and literature on hope and resilience.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the theoretical orientation and the value of focusing the study through an appreciative lens. A detailed discussion of the method, narrative inquiry, is contained within Chapter 3. After a discussion of the theoretical orientation, there is a review of literature on student mothers. The section begins with an overview of the studies and the limitations of the research and then proceeds to discuss each selected piece of research in detail weighing its merits and shortfalls as it pertains to the subject of this dissertation. I divide the research on single mothers into three sections: the motivations of student mothers for seeking higher education, the stressors and barriers they face carrying multiple roles, and the external support systems they utilize. The final section of this chapter focuses on the literature on hope and resilience with the role that they play in student success in college and how they are important to the single mother student population and their degree attainment goals. The chapter concludes with a summary synthesizing the literature.

Appreciative Orientation

Single mother students add the role of college student to their already hectic lives. The single mother student may face a tough journey as she balances her roles, and she
must be equipped with the tools to deal with roadblocks along the way. Before diving into the research surrounding single mother students and the possible roles that hope and resilience play in their academic achievements, it is important to explain the framing of this study and the use of the appreciative lens. In short, I chose the appreciative orientation because it focuses on the positive aspects of the participants’ experiences; it focuses on the participant as a co-researcher through inclusivity and the ability of the participant to shape the definitions in the project.

The appreciative orientation stems from Appreciative Inquiry (AI), originally framed as a tool for organizational change. It focuses on the positive aspects of a person’s experience or story as reflected on by that individual instead of focusing on what went wrong (Cooperrider, 1990; Patton, 2002). As a research technique in its simplest form, the appreciative orientation provides emphasis on “appreciating the activities and responses of people, rather than concentrating on their problems” (Reed, 2007, p. 2). The researcher gears the interview questions towards successes, what went right in achieving those successes, and what helped achieve the successes. A focus on the positive creates a non-threatening environment. The participant decides the definition of success as a co-researcher. The participants think critically about their experiences and explain why they did what they did in each situation (Reed, 2007).

Another one of the keys to the appreciative orientation is inclusivity drawing from the experiences of and getting the buy-in of as many people as possible (Reed, 2007). It uses a collaborative, group sampling method, where the group of researchers, which includes the participants, chooses the other participants based on a set of common
experiences (Reed, 2007). For the purposes of this study, snowball sampling helped achieve this group sampling dynamic (Patton, 2002). This is important, because the study asked the participants to self-identify as single mother students and identify others that the participants believe share in a similar experience as defined by the participant.

Finally, I chose the appreciative orientation as a theoretical orientation because it focuses on positive change. The goal of this research study was to find out what worked for these single mother students, putting their experiences down on paper, and searching for common threads. Institutions can begin to build on the experiences of these women, treating this body of work as part of a larger body of scholarship on the topic and starting discussions in their institutions about what works for their student populations.

**Single Mother Students**

In addition to exploring the theoretical orientation, the literature review includes a presentation of literature related to single mother students and the balancing of the roles of student and mother. Single mother students must juggle multiple roles at once. This study seeks to explore the positive experience of acquiring the role of student for single mothers in a community college. Often referred to as Maternal-Student Role Stress (MSRS), it is defined as “the feeling that meeting the demands of either role conflicts with meeting the demands of the other role, and not being clear how the demands of both roles should be met” (Gigliotti, 2004b, p. 416). The current body of research surrounding student mothers and their college experience can be broken into three main categories: their motivations for seeking higher education, the stressors and barriers they face carrying multiple roles, and the external support systems they utilize.
Although there are very few studies focused on single mother students in community colleges and the positive aspects of their experiences, the research summarized in this section provides a starting point to frame this study. Each study addressed the situation of mothers in higher education. However, before embarking upon a journey through the literature, it is important to understand the limitations regarding the current body of research, which also speaks to the importance of this study. In general, there is a lack of published research in this particular area of interest. Much of the literature published dates from the 1990s and early 2000s. Of the limited research that discussed single mother students at community colleges, much of it pertained to the impact of welfare reform on those students and did not necessarily address the internal, personal characteristics and beliefs of these women or how they persevere.

In addition to the paucity of research and the historical nature of the work, two major limitations that warrant further explanation are the quantitative nature of the current research and the characteristics of the majority of the study participants. The majority of the current literature is quantitative. Scaled surveys and instruments can only tell part of the story and are inherently limited in the depth of information that they can provide. Without personal stories to provide an explanation for the “numbers” generated in the surveys, the meanings, perspectives, and shades of grey of the experience are lost. With regards to the study participants, most, although not all, were married mothers at universities with school-age children. In addition, the majority of the women were in later stages of life focusing on self-definition, which allowed them to attach more meaning to the student role, and they were near the end of their college career.
Therefore, it is not possible to state that the experiences of these women would be the same as the single mother student with young children attending a community college. However, despite these limitations, the literature provides a glimpse into the general situation of mothers in higher education with respect to their motivations, external support systems, and barriers/stressors they face.

**Motivation.**

A key to understanding the college experience of student mothers is to understand their motivations for attending college, which means the acquisition of a new role. Ebaugh (1988) states that internal and external transitions occurring in one’s life lead to the ending of one role and the beginning of another. These transitions are the impetus to seek higher education.

A mixed methods study completed by Breese and O’Toole (1995) sought to discover the internal and external transitions motivating women to seek higher education. Although Breese and O’Toole’s (1995) study targeted 221 nontraditional female students in general, most of the participants were mothers, which speak to the relevance of the research in terms of this study. All of the women were aged 28 or older with junior status and enrolled full-time at a four-year university. Of these women, 148 stated that their motivation to attend college was solely from external transitions caused by financial instability, such as the loss of a job or a divorce. These women chose to earn degrees in practical fields that would help them achieve higher incomes, such as nursing. Interestingly, these women felt that they did not have freedom of choice in academic majors as they needed something pragmatic. They based their major selections on prior
experiences, such as the choice of nursing because of the similarity between the caregiver role as a nurse and nurturer role as a wife and mother. Of the remaining women, 15 women stated that their sole motivation for attending college stemmed from an internal transition, such as personal growth, and 58 women reported a mix of internal and external transitions that led them to seek higher education. The women who reported that the choice to enter college was from an internal transition chose majors not classically considered practical, such as English or political science.

With regards to the present research study, Breese and O’Toole’s (1995) study is significant because it suggests that most women attend college as the result of an external transition impacting their financial stability. However, although the study suggests what transitions might have spurred the students to enroll in college, it does not explain how the women balance multiple roles while enrolled in higher education, especially those female students that are also mothers.

The findings of Breese and O’Toole (1995) concurred with the findings of an ethnographic study conducted by Haleman (2004), which explored the experiences of ten single mothers attending a research institution. According to Haleman (2004), these single mothers viewed college as instrumental in terms of providing financial stability. In other words, college was a means to an end, a way out of their current situation. Their motivation for attending college was to improve their current economic situation. Haleman (2004) also found that these women desired a better life and wanted to provide a model for their children. Similar to Breese and O’Toole’s (1995) study, the key
motivational force for attending college for many mothers, single or married, appeared to be external forces centered on financial concerns.

Once students have embraced their motivation for attending college and have enrolled, the next goal is to retain them through graduation. Prior research indicated that student mothers have grades higher than other non-traditional students, which in turn are generally higher than traditional students. This line of reasoning would lead one to believe that their retention and completion rates would be higher than other groups of students. However, even though their grades are higher, their college completion rate is lower (Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998).

Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1998) sought to explore this phenomenon and focused on the motivation of student mothers to return to school and how well that motivation predicted completion of the degree. As part of the quantitative study, Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1998) gathered a group of 235 student mothers. The published research did not indicate the marital status of the women, although the article inferred that some of the women were married and some were single. The women were over the age of 32 and had children at the time they attended college. They were broken into two groups — completers and interrupters. The completers included 117 mothers that had completed a four-year degree. The interrupters included 118 mothers that had started college but did not finish. Each group was administered various scaled questionnaires designed to measure motivation.

Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1998) found that both the college completers and interrupters were equally motivated indicating that motivation by itself was a poor
predictor of graduation. Therefore, differences in motivation could not explain why some mothers finished college and some mothers did not. Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1998) found that the difference between the two groups of women and degree completion appeared to be life circumstances. The interrupters had high levels of motivation but personal problems made it difficult to complete their degrees. Some women in the interrupter group attended college to escape difficulties at home. Unfortunately, the difficulties followed them into the classroom, and they never finished. Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1998) found that life circumstances were a better predictor of college completion than motivation.

In summary, student mothers’ motivations for attending college are primarily from external transitions related to economic factors as well as providing a better life or serving as a role model for their children. However, this motivation does not ensure completion of their course of study. The stress of multiple roles and the demands of responsibilities in addition to the demands of the student role appear to be better predictors of student academic success.

**Stressors and barriers.**

Although dreams of a brighter financial future and a sense of agency for the sake of one’s children are powerful motivators to attend college, Haleman (2004) discovered barriers to college completion include the stress of balancing multiple roles with numerous responsibilities. Role stress has been extensively studied by Gerson (1985), Home (1998), and Gigliotti (2004a, 2004b). The following sections discuss these studies.
When single mothers choose to attend college, they are adding an additional role, the role of student, to their repertoire. Gerson (1985) examined the benefits and disadvantages from having multiple roles for women returning to school. The quantitative study included surveys given to married/formerly married women aged 30 to 50 with children under the age of 19 and enrolled for more than six credit hours at a community college. Gerson (1985) found that there are benefits and disadvantages with regards to role strain and multiple roles although there is a ceiling effect for the gratification that can be attained from shouldering multiple roles. Gerson (1985) discovered freely chosen roles lead to less strain. With the addition of the student role came greater satisfaction but also increased role strain. The mother role produced no strain as this was a legitimate and highly valued role. As such, it appeared that adding the role of student did increase strain, but satisfaction was also increased.

Home (1998) built on Gerson’s (1985) work and tried to predict role strain, conflict, and contagion by examining the influence of life situations, perceived demands, institutional supports and other support systems. An increase in role strain can lead to the student dropping out of college and failing to finish the degree, so it was important to determine the factors that increased strain. In Home’s (1998) study, all of the participants had three roles — student, mother, and employee. Utilizing a quantitative approach, Home (1998) surveyed student mothers aged 23 or older enrolled at a four-year university. All of the women were in their last year of college, attended the university at least part-time, and worked at least nine hours per week. Almost all of the women were married. Home (1998) found that perceived demands from the student role were the most
influential predictor of stress and overload. The study also found that the lower the income of the women, the greater the role conflict. Of the few single women in the study, all were lower income and at the most risk for overload. In addition, mothers of young children had more role conflict and were more at risk of overload. Although the research was in a four-year institution and not a community college, the profile of the single mother participants is very similar to the profiles of the women in this study suggesting a significant risk for overload and role conflict.

Gigliotti (2004a, 2004b) expanded on the prior studies regarding role strain and stress by focusing on 135 married students pursuing their first postsecondary degree, an Associate Degree in Nursing, at eleven different community colleges in New York and New Jersey. In her work, Gigliotti (2004a, 2004b) evaluated the maternal-student role stress (MSRS) in married mothers pursuing their nursing degree. The quantitative study included survey instruments to measure demographics as well as various stress, social support, and involvement scaled questionnaires. It is important to note that although Gigliotti’s studies centered on female students that were mothers at the community college level, all of the women in her study were married and nursing students. These characteristics limit the ability to generalize to the participants of this dissertation research, which included single mothers from a variety of fields/disciplines, but are useful nonetheless to achieve an understanding of the relationship between the mother and student role.

In Gigliotti’s (2004a) study, the research question focused on the relationship between involvement in the roles of mother and student, total network support and the
sum impact on MSRS. The women were divided into two age groups (under age 37 and aged 37 and up), which were linked to developmental transition. The study classified women older than 37 as “mid-life” and seeking self-definition. The results indicated that statistically speaking there were no significant findings in the relationship between the mother and student roles with regards to total network support and MSRS for the younger group of women. Only the older group of women demonstrated findings of statistical significance.

More specifically, in the older group of women, “high student role involvement in the presence of low total network support increased maternal-student role stress” (Gigliotti, 2004a, p. 163). Gigliotti (2004a) hypothesized that because these women were in a mid-life transition seeking self-identity, they attached a meaning to the student role and were highly engaged consistent with the Meleis framework indicating high psychological involvement in the student role. They needed support during this transition, and if they did not get the total network support, it increased their MSRS and decreased their sense of well-being creating a stressor and a barrier to college completion. Again, these findings are limited to married women over 37 and are even more limited because not all women travel the same path to self-identity.

In addition to role stress and multiple responsibilities, student mothers face challenges from peers, faculty and the institution itself. Some of the research addressing these factors is qualitative. A qualitative, ethnographic study of single mothers at community colleges by Duquaine-Watson (2007) explored the climate experienced by 13 single mothers. The study included single mothers enrolled at least part-time with one or
more children aged infancy to eight years old. The women ranged in age from 18 to 26. Approximately half of the participants worked in addition to being a mother. All of the women received some type of financial aid.

While the driving force behind Duquaine-Watson’s (2007) work was a commentary on welfare reforms and the impact on single mother students, the study paints a picture of the environment facing these students. Students reported encountering chilly attitudes from other students, faculty, and the institution itself based on various attitudes, practices, and policies. In the words of one research participant, “They [the institution] care that I’m a mixed race person and are concerned about supporting my needs in that respect, but they don’t care about the single mom part of me, like they can’t see it” (Duquaine-Watson, 2007, p. 234).

When asked why the students chose to attend college and persevere despite the perception of an inhospitable environment, they replied that earning a college degree meant earning respect and financial stability. They also stated that the main barriers they faced were affordable, quality childcare and pedagogical practices. The pedagogical practices referred to policies by some faculty. Examples included classes that required out of class group work, attendance at out of class events (which necessitated finding and paying for child care as well as the event), and attendance/late work policies with no considerations for their outside responsibilities (such as missing class because of a sick child). Therefore, in the eyes of the student mothers, in addition to the challenges of balancing the student-mother roles, their peers, faculty, the institution, and policies/practices erected barriers to college completion (Duquaine-Watson, 2007).
While Duquaine-Watson (2007) looked at the perceptions of student mothers from a universal standpoint, Mottarella, Fritzsche, Whitten, and Bedsole (2008) focused on just the peer views of student mothers and the “good mother” stereotype. The quantitative study included 205 participants from a community college and four-year university. The objective was to evaluate how student peers viewed mothers returning to school. The students reviewed a vignette about a mother returning to school versus a mother that quits school to be with her child. After reading the vignette, they completed scaled questionnaires containing various adjectives describing personality traits of the mothers. Different students reviewed different scenarios. Changes included the age of the child when the woman returned to school from six months to six years and whether or not the woman was satisfied with the choice she had made (regardless of whether she went to school or quit school).

Mottarella, Fritzsche, Whitten, and Bedsole (2008) found there were no differences in the perceptions of femininity or nurturance for mothers who returned to school and those that did not. However, in the eyes of the study participants, mothers returning to school when the child was six months were cold-hearted and more arrogant, calculating and in general, less favorable than mothers that quit school. The participants felt that mothers satisfied with their decision/role regardless of whether or not they went back to school were more favorable. Overall, a student mother’s peers may view her more harshly if she tries to continue her education when her child is young inadvertently sustaining negative stereotypes and withholding much needed social support.
In summary, student mothers face numerous stressors and barriers once they enroll in college. The stressors originate from the juggling of multiple roles termed maternal-student role stress. The barriers include childcare, financial concerns, and the acceptance or disapproval of her peers, faculty, and the institution.

**External support systems.**

In order to address the numerous stressors and barriers, numerous studies sought to determine the support systems student mothers utilize to overcome the hurdles. Although the studies shed little light on the internal mechanisms of strength these women call upon to overcome roadblocks, they have illuminated the various external support systems these women rely on and that institutions should foster.

A qualitative study conducted by Van Stone, Nelson and Niemann (1994) focused on poor single mothers’ views on how various sociological and psychological belief factors had impacted their academic success. Semi-structured interviews included 46 poor single mothers at a four-year university. The students ranged in age from 18 to 52, were primary caregivers of children ranging in age from prenatal to 26, and were divorced. They were at various levels in their academic careers ranging from freshmen to graduate students. Based on the study findings, the women attributed greater importance to the sociological factors in their academic success, such as support from family, peers, and academic services, indicating that social support systems were critical to their survival in college. Furthermore, the researchers concluded that the quality of the experience based on the interactions with others was a key component in learning.
According to the Van Stone, Nelson and Niemann (1994) study, the women did not attribute their academic success to psychological factors other than briefly mentioning personal ambitions. However, because the study did not provide the questions utilized in the interviews, it is not clear how the researchers explored the psychological factors during the interviews. Overall, the study’s findings indicate that social support systems play a considerable role in helping single student mothers navigate higher education and complete their academic programs.

Building on the theme of the importance of social support systems, Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) sought to compare the impact of support systems and psychological functioning (anxiety, depression) on the academic performance of traditional female students versus non-traditional female students at a four-year university. The study defined traditional students as women between the ages of 18 through 22. None of the women had children. All of the women were single. Non-traditional students included female students between the ages of 35 to 44. Approximately half of the non-traditional students were married and the other half were either divorced/separated or single. Of the non-traditional students, only two did not have children. All of the children ranged in age from eight to 22. Although the study did not purposefully seek to explore the world of student mothers, it is significant that almost all of the non-traditional students had children. All students had completed at least three years of college. The study participants completed scaled questionnaires regarding demographics, levels of anxiety and depression, and emotional and instrumental support.
Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) found that there was no difference in levels of depression or anxiety between the groups. The non-traditional students had a higher level of academic performance than the traditional students even though the non-traditional students had fewer support sources. Psychological and academic performance functioning for the non-traditional students was unrelated to the quantity or quality of the support system, which was contradictory to other research findings indicating that academic performance and psychological well-being link to support systems, such as the study by Van Stone, Nelson, and Niemann (1994).

Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) offered several explanations for these findings. First, the children of the student mothers were older indicating that the students waited to return to school, which would likely decrease the role stress. Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) posited that these women likely chose to assume the additional role of student when they could be more committed to the role of student. Furthermore, this study surveyed women near their final years, which was beyond the transitory stage of the first year of college as the women tried to negotiate or redefine their roles. All of these factors combined most likely produced better students.

The Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) study supported the idea that multiple roles do not always have negative impacts on student mothers. However, it was limited to student mothers over the age of 35 with older children. In summary, Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) determined that the non-traditional students in their study were more successful at handling the stressors of the student role even without significant social support systems.
Trying to determine the exact significance of support systems, Gigliotti (2004b) dissected the relationship between MSRS and social support for married nursing students with children. She utilized the Meleis framework as a theoretical basis drawing from the categorization of transitions as situational, developmental, medical, or organizational, and the importance of the social support.

Gigliotti (2004b) determined that the students in her study were experiencing a situational transition from the role of mother to the role of student. Social support included a network structure of everyone in the person’s network and the type of support provided. The total amount of social support in turn impacts the available functional support. Once again, using the same rationale of developmental stages as previously discussed, she divided the women into two groups based on age, those 37 and older and those younger than 37. In addition to the difference in their developmental stages, the women in the aged 37 and older group had more children, and the children tended to be older. She then looked at the social supports for each group of women.

In summary, Gigliotti (2004b) found that in terms of social support, the key was the meaning of the support or who gave it and what kind of support they gave. It did not matter how much support or how many people provided the support. The critical point was the context of the support. Support was measured in three different ways: affect (how much the members of their support group like/love them), affirmation (how much the members of their support group endorse their views), and aid (how much the members of their support group could materially help them). More specifically, the goal was to identify which forms of support increased MSRS and which decreased MSRS.
Key social support systems for older women included their husbands and children, although support from the total network was also statistically significant. All types of support (aid, affirmation, and affect) decreased the MSRS, and none of the sources of support increased the MSRS. In particular, the older group of students received support from their older children, which was a support system not available to the younger students. Gigliotti (2004b) hypothesized that these children were able to communicate respect/admiration and provide affirmation. She postulated that the older children in the home required less support from the mother in terms of time, which allowed the mother to study. Because the developmental state of these women was self-definition, it is likely that they needed support for identity development instead of material support. The older students also had higher family incomes, which would explain why their drive to go to school did not necessarily focus on their ability to earn money as it did for the younger group of women. For the older women, the key support players were their husbands and children.

The younger students received key support in the form of affirmation and aid from their husbands. Other important support sources included aid from their children and affect, affirmation, and aid from the mothers-in-law. Gigliotti (2004b) hypothesized that the importance of support from the mother-in-law likely stemmed from the need for childcare and financial support for these younger women with younger children. In addition, the support in the form of affirmation from the mother-in-law was likely the acknowledgement that the student mother was going back to school to help the family income, and in-turn ease the burden on her husband. The only component statistically
shown to increase MSRS was aid from “others”, which included a nebulous group of people such as hair stylists, godmothers, babysitters, etc., listed by seven women in the study. As such, Gigliotti (2004b) cautioned against attaching significance to this finding without additional research.

Another interesting finding of the study in terms of social support was that other networks sources including but not limited to friends, other relatives, including the student’s parents, employers/work associates, and professors did not influence MSRS for both groups of women. By stratifying the groups, recommendations included treating the groups individually instead of a blanket approach to all married mothers. Gigliotti (2004b) suggested that the younger women needed strategies for juggling school, the demands of young children, and enhancement of marital relationships. The older women needed strategies for self-development and communication of needs to their husbands and children. In summary, Gigliotti (2004b) found that in terms of social support, the key was the meaning of the support, who gave it and what kind of support they gave. It did not matter how much support or how many people provided the support. The critical point was the context of the support.

Finally, Quimby and O’Brien (2006) investigated the balancing of family and academic roles with regards to psychological well-being and social support. Their quantitative study conducted with surveys designed to evaluate psychological well-being included 209 student mothers aged 26 to 53 at a university. All of the students had completed at least one year of school, and 70 percent of the students were married. Through regression analysis, Quimby and O’Brien (2006) found that “secure attachment,
parent and student self-efficacy, and perceived social support” were predictors of well-being (p. 451). The amount of psychological stress correlated with the ability of a nontraditional student to persist; therefore, their research indicated internal and external forces could help predict the amount of psychological stress experienced by the student mothers. They proposed counseling targeted at helping manage psychological stress might be more beneficial than designing interventions that would target academic performance.

**Hope**

In light of the research presented above, how does one measure psychological well-being in terms of hopeful thinking and what role does it play in attaining a college degree? Many students hope to finish a college degree, but is hope enough to propel them to graduation? According to Snyder (1995), hope is not an emotion but a motivational system defined as “the process of thinking about one’s goals, along with the motivation to move toward (agency) and the ways to achieve (pathways) those goals” (p. 355).

With regards to the role of hope in academic success, Snyder et al. (2002) followed a cohort of college students over a six-year period. At the beginning of their freshmen year, 213 students were administered the Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1991). The Hope Scale is a self-report scale where participants rate how true or false a statement is using a scale of one (definitely false) through eight (definitely true). The statements include four agency statements, four pathway statements, and four distracters. The scores are the sum of the numbers for each statement category. Therefore, the student has an
agency subscale score, a pathways subscale score, and a total hope score (addition of the agency score and pathways score). The higher the score is the higher the level of hope, with the highest total score at 64, and the lowest total score at eight (Snyder, 1995).

In addition to the Hope Scale, the study included the students’ GPAs at the end of the first and second semesters as well as the cumulative GPA at the end of their college career and their graduation status by the end of six years. The study grouped the students into high-hope (mean hope score of 58.76), medium-hope (mean hope score of 51.93), and low-hope (mean hope score of 40.76) categories based on their Hope Scale scores. The research team determined that high-hope students were more likely to graduate than low-hope students, and the hope score was a better predictor of graduation than GPA. It should be noted that the students took the Hope Scale only once at the beginning of their college career. The study concluded that hope “enables students to approach problems with a focus on success, thereby increasing the probability that they will attain their goals” (Snyder et al., 2002, p. 820).

How does hope pertain to a specific group of college students, such as single student mothers? For the purposes of this example, assume a single mother student sets a goal of graduating from college. Inevitably, there will be roadblocks along the way, whether they are personal, academic, or of some other nature, such as the strain of balancing the role of mother and student (Gerson, 1985; Gigliotti, 2004a; Gigliotti, 2004b; Home, 1998). How does she surmount those roadblocks and graduate? Snyder et al. (2002) contends that a student high in hope will have high willpower and waypower thoughts, which will move them towards their academic goal. In terms of willpower,
high-hope students have a tremendous sense of agency or purpose in achieving their goal. With single mother students, it is possible that one purpose is financial stability (Breese & O’Toole, 1995; Haleman, 2004). However, purpose is not enough (Snyder et al., 2002). In terms of student mothers, albeit not necessarily single mothers, Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1998) found that motivation was not enough to ensure that the women would finish college.

Consistent with the theory by Snyder et al. (2002), in addition to agency, students must also have more than one pathway or route to achieve their goal. Research by Van Stone, Nelson and Niemann (1994), Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002), Gigliotti (2004b), Quimby and O’Brien (2006) states that external support systems are a critical component in helping student mothers deal with obstacles, which suggests that these systems may help students develop alternative pathways. However, these studies do not address the way the students access these pathways. Therefore, there is a gap in the literature in explaining how the single mother students attain their goal.

There are several general characteristics of a high-hope student that help them to attain their goals. According to Snyder (1994), high-hope students are better at setting goals keeping their specific strengths in mind. They tend to set a goal, achieve it, and then slightly “stretch” the attainment mark for the next goal. The goals are internal standards, broken into chunks with progress markers along the path. In addition, high-hope students learn from past experiences and successes, which build their confidence, and they are adept at finding multiple ways to achieve a goal (Snyder et al., 2002).
With the characteristics of a high-hope student in mind, the question turns to one of application. Can hope be developed in a student? Snyder (1994) posits that goal-oriented behavior is part of the biology of the newborn and suggests numerous ways that parents can help their children grow waypower and willpower throughout the child development years. In addition, Snyder (1994) provides numerous examples of the ways to destroy waypower and willpower in children. Snyder (1994) also provides examples of the ways that willpower and waypower can be developed or destroyed in adults. A general discussion of childhood and adult psychological development is beyond the scope of this study.

However, Snyder et al. (2002) does suggest ways in which an institution of higher education can help low-hope students. First, low-hope students need identified as soon as possible, within the first semester as suggested possible by the findings of the Snyder et al. (2002) study. Second, interventions must teach hopeful thinking to these students, although it appears that these interventions were for the junior high level and not the collegiate level at the time of the study. Therefore, Snyder et al. (2002) called for more research in the development of the intervention techniques for college students. Finally, Snyder et al. (2002) suggested examining the role of the instructor in providing positive feedback and encouragement toward academic goals as previous research suggested that the amount of encouragement they gave their students correlated with the Hope Scale scores of the instructor.
Resilience

Hope is only part of the picture. This research study also seeks to explore the factor of resilience with student mothers. Colloquially, resilience is the ability to bounce back in a tough situation. In scholarly terms, one definition of resilience pertinent to this study is the positive adaptation or outcome in the presence of adversity or risk. Protective factors intervene and help an individual overcome that risk. Protective factors, risks, and desirable outcomes vary with each specific situation (Kaplan, 2002). Also important in a discussion of resiliency is positive psychological capital. Positive psychological capital embraces self-confidence, optimism, hope, and resiliency. It focuses on who the person is and what they can become, which differentiates it from social and human capital (Luthans, Vogelgesang, & Lester, 2006).

In terms of student mothers, the risk is seeking higher education and the numerous roadblocks encountered on the pathway to the academic goal. The positive adaptation is academic success and the required persistence. Therefore, resiliency is the response to risk and the toolbox utilized to overcome the risk characterized by a belief in self and the individual’s ability to overcome adversity, self-confidence, and self-esteem. Resiliency develops in the face of stress. The intervening protective factors, which vary in each situation, are the subject of a study conducted by Howell (2004) that serves to inform this dissertation study.

Howell (2004) created a mixed methods study to explore the protective factors characteristic of women returning to college involving two surveys and interviews. The study focused on 60 women over the age of 25 in a public university who had returned to
higher education. All students were academically successful with a GPA greater than 2.0 and completion of at least two full-time semesters. At least 75 percent of the women were mothers, albeit not necessarily single mothers as over two-thirds of the survey participants were married. After the surveys were completed, the women chosen for interviews were those that demonstrated resilience in the face of significant adversity (Howell, 2004).

The quantitative instruments included the Resilience Scale and the Adult Persistence in Learning Scale. The Resilience Scale measured the protective factors of personal competence and acceptance of self and life. The second instrument was the Adult Persistence in Learning Scale, which measures self-awareness as well as the willingness to delay gratification, goals, and sense of competence. In regards to the quantitative results, higher resilience scores appeared to be associated with higher academic achievements. In the interviews, the selected participants reported their motivations to return to college including getting a degree to create a better life for their children, fulfilling a long-term goal of achieving a degree, or merely needing a change.

In the beginning of their return to classes, various obstacles stood in the way such as relationships with family and significant others and financial burdens. Although some obstacles were expected, some were not including the intense burden of academic work and balancing responsibilities in the arenas of family, work, and school as well as feeling out of place in an environment populated with younger students. However, the women stated that they met the challenges head-on and refused to give up. They took personal responsibility for their success and believed in hard work and self-discipline. Other
personal characteristics included optimism, patience, faith, creativity among others (Howell, 2004).

Essentially, repeatedly encountering roadblocks and surmounting them, one-step at a time shaped the women’s persistence and resilience. They gained confidence with each success and increased the likelihood of overcoming the next roadblock. Howell’s (2004) study closely resembles the goals of this dissertation study by focusing on the positive aspects of resilience and seeking to explore the traits necessary to develop resiliency. However, she does not include a discussion of hope in her study. In addition, although she looks deeper into the resiliency of adult female students in higher education, the study was not about single mothers in a community college setting (Howell, 2004). Although Howell’s (2004) work is an excellent starting point, there needs to be further investigation.

Summary

In conclusion, the research to date indicates that student mothers are motivated to attend college because of economic concerns and the desire to provide a better life for their children. Although these motivators push the mothers to attend college, in light of the current research on hope, motivation alone may not be enough to help them complete their degree. These mothers face numerous barriers from childcare issues to pedagogical practices in institutions. They may have to fight against stereotypes from their peers and faculty. In addition, they may cope with role stress from balancing the role of mother and student. Effectively balancing these roles is crucial for their academic success.
Important external support systems include supports from family, peers, and academic services from the institution.

Although the research has highlighted the motivations, barriers/stressors, and support systems of student mothers, it does not provide the answers to the research questions pertinent to this study. At the beginning of this chapter indicates substantive limitations to the research, such as the fact that most were quantitative studies and did not specifically address single mother students at community colleges. After a discussion of each study in detail, it is clear that the literature falls short in addressing the proposed research questions.

The current literature does not explore the meaning and personal fulfillment that the mothers gain from integrating student and parent roles. The research simply indicates that there is a relationship with role stress and satisfaction. Several of the studies investigated the motivations of a student mother to seek a degree and occurred before the students entered college with very little discussion of the motivations or positive influences after students began their classes and throughout their academic career. Furthermore, the research appears to focus on the negative aspects of balancing the student-mother role including an investigation of the barriers, but it does not address the positive attributes and satisfactions or rewards from pursuing a college degree. Finally, the current research addresses external supports but does very little to find the root of the internal strengths or the elements of hope or resiliency that these women utilize to overcome roadblocks and attain their goals. For these reasons, although the literature provides an excellent backdrop to frame the current study, it does little to provide insight
into how these single mother students are succeeding everyday integration of the role of mother and student and the role of hope and resiliency in that integration.
Chapter 3: Method

The objective of this study was to explore the success factors of single mother students enrolled at a community college in Ohio using an appreciative lens. The study explored five main research questions: 1) How does the single mother student experience hope in her college journey? 2) What background, symbolic and environmental factors contribute to single mother students’ resilience? 3) How do they utilize hope and resiliency to overcome roadblocks? 4) What attitudes, strategies, and support systems help them succeed? 5) How do they view their roles as mothers and students?

The following sections address the research design beginning with a rationale for choosing qualitative research based on phenomenology and narrative analysis with an appreciative orientation approach to interviewing. After a discussion of the method choice is a detailed discussion of the role of the researcher followed by a discussion of the participants and the selection method. The next section includes a detailed, systematic discussion of the specific procedures followed by the data analysis and interpretation methods utilized. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of credibility and trustworthiness and a chapter summary.

Meaning-Making through a Qualitative Interview

Stories contain the very essence and meaning of life, and the impulse to tell a story appears to be universal to the human experience (Riessman, 1993; Seidman, 2006). Riessman (1993) writes, “Nature and the world do not tell stories, individuals do” (p. 2). The purpose of this research study was to seek the meaning that single student mothers make with regards to hope and resilience on their college journey. The best way to
explore meaning-making is through qualitative research by in-depth, phenomenological interviews. In other words, listen to the participants’ stories. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the reasons why I chose qualitative research with interviews inspired by phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and narrative analysis to achieve the goals of this study.

**Qualitative research and phenomenology.**

In commenting on the use of quantitative versus qualitative methods, Riessman (1993) suggested choosing the method with the research problem in mind. In an example, she explained how her use of a survey to investigate the psychological distress experienced by couples during divorce completely missed other forms of distress later found in follow-up interviews. With my research themes in mind, there are two reasons I believe qualitative research is the best way to address my research questions.

First, I wanted to find out what meaning the participants make out of their experiences, and I believe that the best way to generate a picture of the lived experience of the participants is through their own words. One specific qualitative research method, interviewing, “encourages people to reconstruct their experience actively within the context of their lives” (Seidman, 2006, p.14). Kvale (1983) contends that the qualitative research interview allows participants to pick out what is most important in their lives instead of being forced to choose from options on a questionnaire constructed by experts and put those events, details into their own words, in their own structure.

The second reason as stated in Chapter 2 is the paucity of qualitative research on the positive aspects and the influence of hope and resilience on the journey of single
mother students in the community college. Therefore, qualitative research is the best way to ascertain the meaning the single mother students make of their experience and helps to fill the gaps left in the current research.

The theoretical viewpoint for this study is phenomenology. At its core, phenomenology refers to the study of things and experiences as perceived by the five senses. However, sensation is not the only descriptor. Reflection and analysis are also keys to understanding a lived experience (Patton, 2002; Smith, 2011). Patton (2002) best summarizes the foundational question of phenomenology as, “What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience for this person or group of people?” (p. 104). Simply put, a study influenced by phenomenology seeks to discover the meaning that individuals make of everyday experiences, through the eyes of the individual, and the essence of those shared experiences among a group of people (Patton, 2002). This study seeks to understand the meaning that single mother students make, or the essence, as they navigate their college journey, specifically in regards to hope and resilience.

**Symbolic interactionism.**

Another lens through which to view meaning-making is symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1967). It serves as “initial windows through which the researcher can view and think about the phenomena under study, thus expanding the breadth of theoretical codes available” (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012, p. 685). Symbolic interactionism involves the Mind and the Self. The Mind is the internal conversation that occurs within oneself. The Mind, through minded behavior, identifies a problem, evaluates all of the possible choices and outcomes, and makes a decision on how to proceed via an internal dialogue.
(Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979). By exploring this internal dialogue as well as social interactions with the environment, the Self is shaped. The Self represents the ways that humans derive meaning through symbols in response to environmental factors. Symbols are mental abstractions of meaning individuals make as they respond to their environment. Derived from their surroundings, they consist of an interpreted meaning based on those surroundings (Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979).

Symbols are fluid and can change as the definition of Self changes. The Self is divided into two parts termed the “I” and the “Me.” The “I” portion of the Self refers to the parts of a person that are spontaneous and unique, commonly referred to as the subject. The “Me” portion refers to the object portion of the Self that is learned in the social setting. The “Me” portion also includes the roles of the person, such as mother and student, that are learned and defined by social relationships (Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979). The premise is that humans do not just react to the environment; they are an actor in the environment selectively interpreting the environment based on their set of derived meanings, or in other words, their symbols (Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979). Therefore, in order to explore the meaning individuals make, it is also necessary to explore their symbols.

Milliken and Schreiber (2012) posit that a study rooted only in grounded theory may miss hidden meaning in data. As the researcher, I acknowledged symbolic interactionism and looked for the way the participant used language as a symbol to understand the way the participant makes meaning. This is because “language is the only means we have to consider what we see and to communicate our understandings of social
phenomena” (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012, p. 687). In addition, as the researcher, I acknowledged my individual symbols and internal dialogue as this influences meaning. I did this by keeping a researcher’s journal as discussed in the sections below.

Finally, I attended to social context or the interactions of individuals, which comprise a society. Symbolic interactionism considers the relationship of the individual to society. The social constructs of the individual’s environment shapes the way the individual interprets the meaning of symbols. The individual interprets the intentions of other individuals she interacts and interprets these actions/intentions based on the meaning derived from others around her (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012).

**Narrative analysis.**

To help translate the meaning into words, I used narrative analysis. Narrative analysis seeks to interpret the lived experience as told by the participant in the form of a story with a beginning, middle, and end (Patton, 2002; Riessman, 1993). Riessman (1993) suggests a flow to the research process in narrative analysis with five levels of representation: “Attending, Telling, Transcribing, Analyzing, and Reading” (p.10). When an individual lives an experience, the first level of representation is attending to the details. These details help to “fix” the experience in the mind of the person. The mind actively chooses the details of the phenomena it will make memorable based on the values and interests of the person living the experience. Therefore, a different person living the exact same experience may attend to the details differently (Riessman, 1993). This is an important concept, because even though single mother students may have the
same experiences, the experience may carry a completely different meaning and set of memorable details.

The next level of representation is the telling level. In this level, the person relates the experience, or story, to another person. The person relating the story speaks from inside the experience. However, the narrative starts to change form with the retelling of the story. The interviewee chooses which parts of the story to tell, shaped by the questions and interests of the listeners. Pieces of the experience will be lost as the interviewer cannot live the past experience with the interviewee and language has limits in the amount of sensory details it can express. In addition, as indicated in the first level, even if the interviewer was able to re-live the experience with the interviewee, it would not be possible for both individuals to take away the same meaning from the experience (Riessman, 1993). In this study, the single mother students spoke from inside the narrative, and the story changed shape and meaning when told to me as the interviewer.

As the interviewer, I transcribed the interview into the written word, moving into the third level of representation. Transcribing alters another piece of the original experience with the attempt to translate and interpret the spoken language into written word. Riessman (1993) argues that interpretations happen with the transcription of the interviews. The typing of the words and structuring of the sentences shape the interpretation. As the transcribing process flows into the analyzing level, the story now belongs to the interviewer, as she interprets the meaning by piecing together passages that are relevant to the theme of the research study. In addition, the stories of one participant are placed with similar stories of another until a bigger picture is constructed, painting an
overall view of the shared experience of strangers (Riessman, 1993). This study of single mother students is no different. As I transcribed their interviews and began to look for themes in their individual stories that corresponded to the purpose of the study, I watched for similarities in stories across participants as viewed from my vantage point. In addition, I reduced the text, deciding what was important in light of my research goals. Inevitably, pieces of the original experience were lost, replaced with new interpretations.

All of these steps lead into the fifth level of reading. The hope of the research study was that readers would read the work and find a note of similarity in their experience with the experience of the participants, or perhaps provide a different interpretation to the analysis provided by the researcher. In any event, the story changed once again as the perceptions and interpretations of the reader added to the story. According to Riessman (1993):

All forms of representation of experience are limited portraits. Simply stated, we are interpreting and creating texts at every juncture, letting symbols stand for or take the place of the primary experience, to which we have no direct access. Meaning is ambiguous because it arises out of a process of interaction between people: self, teller, listener, recorder, analysts, and reader. Although the goal may be to tell the whole truth, our narratives about others’ narratives are our worldly creations…Meaning is fluid and contextual, not fixed and universal. All we have is talk and texts that represent reality partially, selectively, and imperfectly. (Riessman, 1993, p.15)
In addition to the limitations in recreating and interpreting the experience imposed on the process by the very nature of the narrative, representation is also limited in another key way, which is relevant to this study. Riessman (1993) contended that research never really “gives voice” to those that are often unheard. Although it is possible to record and interpret those voices, they face deafening at each level of representation and giving voice to experience may not be enough.

**Rationale for Interviewing**

An excellent way to access the meaning that single mother students make of their lived experience is through interviewing (Kvale, 1983), and more specifically, narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993; Seidman, 2006). According to Kvale (1983), there are twelve aspects to understanding the function of interviewing in qualitative research. These twelve aspects illustrate why the interview approach is the best method for this study and key considerations of the interview process as it relates to this study. The twelve aspects include: Life-world, Meaning, Qualitative, Descriptive, Specificity, Presuppositionless, Focused, Ambiguity, Change, Sensitivity, Interpersonal Situation, and Positive Experience (Kvale, 1983). Below, I explore each of these twelve aspects in relation to this study.

First and foremost, in phenomenological-based interviewing, the interview centers on the life-world of the interviewees and a specific theme, the first of Kvale’s (1983) aspects. In the case of this research study, the central theme was the experience of hope in the college journey of single mother students. Second, the interview sought the meaning behind the experience, not just the facts. This study explored meaning through a
series of three interviews with the first two interviews focused on developing the context or the “facts” of the experience, and the third interview focused on meaning. A discussion of the three-interview approach follows later in this chapter.

The third aspect focuses on the qualitative nature of the study. This study was suited to qualitative research because the purpose is to seek an understanding of the meaning of hope and resiliency for the student mothers in their own words and not to quantify responses or distill thoughts, emotions, and experiences into numbers. This corresponds with the fourth and fifth elements, the descriptive and specific nature of the interview. This study relied on descriptions of specific experience from the participants as it relates to being a student mother in a community college setting. As the interviewer, I interpreted the descriptions provided by the participants, which flows into the sixth aspect, Presuppositionless. Kvale (1983) purports that the interviewer should be open and sensitive to the experiences being shared and aware of her own suppositions. As the researcher, the phenomenon studied interested me on a personal and professional level, and I brought to the study my own life experiences. I elaborate on this interest, my own lived experience, and how I plan to bracket my experiences, in the next section, entitled The Researcher.

Another key component of the interview method includes Kvale’s (1983) seventh aspect, Focused. The key themes of this study are hope and resilience as they play into the experience of single mother students. Therefore, interview questions were semi-structured around this topic. The semi-structure gives the participant room to elaborate on the key themes as she sees them in the view of her own life and experience. However,
there is one caveat: the questions were in an appreciative approach. The goal of the appreciative approach is not only to help the participant think about the meaning of her experience, but also to help her focus on the positive aspects of that experience. An additional discussion of the value of the appreciative approach is in Chapter 2.

Ambiguity and Change are the eighth and ninth aspects, according to Kvale (1983). Inasmuch as the themes of hope and resilience are hard to put into words, participants sometimes gave ambiguous, contradictory statements or changed their thoughts, descriptions, meanings. The three-interview process proposed by Seidman (2006) helped handle this situation. However, contradictions and changes in the thoughts, feelings, meaning are a part of life and certainly a part of a student experience that involves the balancing of multiple roles and personal and academic growth. Furthermore, Kvale (1983) states that it is likely the interview itself will change the way a participant views a particular experience when given the opportunity for focused reflection.

The tenth aspect is Sensitivity, which seems to contrast with the aspect of Presuppositionless (Kvale, 1983). Each interviewer brings specific sensitivities to the interview process. Instead of eschewing these sensitivities, Kvale (1983) postulates they allow the interviewer to see different nuances and depths that another interviewer might not be able to see or might interpret in a different light. Therefore, Kvale (1983) suggests, “the tension between these two aspects [Presuppositionless and Sensitivity] may be expressed in the requirement of a deliberate conscious naïveté on the part of the interviewer” (p. 178). In The Researcher section below, I discuss how a researcher’s
journal helps identify my suppositions and sensitivities discovered during interviews as well as insights about myself throughout the research process.

Finally, Kvale (1983) discusses the aspects of Interpersonal Situation and Positive Experience. Kvale (1983) contends that the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is a strong point in the interview method. Both parties discuss a topic of interest to the interviewer and the interviewee and influence each other. Kvale (1983) also argues that the experience is likely positive for the interviewee as “it is probably not a very common experience from everyday life that another person in an hour or more is only interested in, sensitive towards, and seeks to understand as well as possible one’s experiences” (p. 179). In the three-interview method, Seidman (2006) contends that a relationship is developed, and the meaning derived from the interview is a function of that relationship. In this study, I explored the experiences of single mother students by developing an interviewer-interviewee relationship as characterized by Kvale (1983) and Seidman (2006). This relationship allowed me to access lived experiences in the way that quantitative methods did not.

In summary, qualitative research in the form of in-depth narratives via interviews provided a method to access the meaning participants make of their experience. By exploring the meaning participants make of hope and resiliency in their college journey as reflected on through the interviews, I discovered the shared essence of the experience. The next section describes my role as a researcher and how my life story contributed to the research process.
The Researcher

The words of the participants in interviews provide a window into the experience; however, the researcher is not independent of this process. Based on Kvale’s (1983) twelve aspects, an analysis of the experience of the researcher is warranted. All researchers are influenced by what they hold near and dear to their heart. As early as kindergarten, when we are learning to write, the teacher tells us to pick something that we know and have experienced. I have young children of my own, and I see them going through this process, choosing to write about their best friend, the dog, or their favorite vacation. As we grow and learn more about the world through formal education and personal experiences, our interests change, but we never cease picking topics that pull on our heartstrings. Given the chance to pick any topic to research for my dissertation, I chose to stick to what I knew the most about — being a mother and a student. As a student of higher education, I see little research about single mother students.

For the better part of my life I have been in school, and for the past 16 years, I have been a mother. As a married student mother working two full-time jobs and raising six children, I have preconceived notions about motherhood in general as well as being a student, and the skills, both academic and psychological, necessary to achieve a college degree. For example, I know there are times I will fall short of society’s definition of a perfect mother, and I have to be ok with it. I also know that there are times I have to put the welfare of my children above my needs or wants. It is sometimes difficult for me to understand when a student mother makes a choice that may provide her with short-term satisfaction but harm her children.
I understand the difficulty of raising children, working, and trying to attend school. Like many other mothers, my hope is to provide a better life for my children. In my family, the key to a better life is education.

As such, I have had to make tough choices along my educational journey such as missing concerts, ballgames, and school conferences and finding babysitters while I attended class, studied, and worked. During my PhD coursework, this has included going out of town and staying at a hotel virtually every other weekend to attend class for two years. My children are young, and as I would leave for the weekend, I would hear their cries and pleas to stay home. I hoped I was providing a model of strength and perseverance. What they did not see was the way I would cry in the car driving to class, questioning my ability to do it all and raise well-adjusted children. I feared I was making a mistake I would regret for the rest of my life, losing moments with them I could never get back. Through it all, I decided that this was the best course of action, and I would finish what I had started.

I realize that I have numerous support systems in place that many students do not and a tremendous amount of privilege as a White, married, educated, upper middle class mother. I also understand that my personal, internal beliefs may make it difficult to understand how another mother might not value education the way that I do or realize the impact of her choices on her children. Parenthood is complex, and there are many ways to parent children. My way is just one. Integrating the role of mother and of student has brought pain and joy as well as a plethora of experiences ripe for writing and research. Juggling the responsibilities of motherhood and being a student many times led me to
question my sanity. In addition, I faced a tremendous amount of guilt and doubt about my choice to leave my children for extended periods of time to pursue degree after degree chasing dreams of a better life and the chance to make a difference while sacrificing the experience of the present.

In addition to the roles of mother and student, I also carry the role of employee. I am currently a full-time faculty member and department chair at a small, public community college in mid-sized city in Ohio. However, my teaching career began at a proprietary institution as an adjunct just outside of New York City. It was at the proprietary institution that I met single mother students for the very first time. I had known other single mother students throughout my life, but it was not until I started teaching that I really “saw” these students. I was a witness to their struggles, trying to integrate the roles of mother and student. I was a witness to parenting styles that I did not agree with or understand. Unfortunately, many of the students failed to complete their degrees lacking much of the support that I was blessed to have.

As my career path led me from institution to institution, the same type of students sat in my classes. However, it was not until I started working as a full-time faculty member that these students really, permanently entered into my life. Full-time faculty members have office hours and are required to advise students, not just teach a class. Suddenly, my office hours were filled with student mothers looking for encouragement and support beyond just the normal classroom topics. As I learned about student development theories in my doctoral program, I began to ask questions and try to apply the theories to my students. I wanted to know how I could help them succeed, what
institutional supports and faculty support could I give them. It was here that the idea for this dissertation was born. I know what it takes to be a mother, and I know what it takes to be a student. However, I do not know what it takes to be a single mother student.

As discussed in Chapter 1, all researchers bring different perspectives to their work based on their life situation and experiences. My lens formed through my own personal experience, which includes being an educated woman and a mother by choice. After completing my bachelor’s degree, I chose to marry and have children. We planned each of our six beautiful children and brought them into this world with hope and love. I started my master’s degree when my oldest child was four months old. I worked full-time during the day and went to school full-time at night. I completed my degree two years later just three months shy of the birth of my second child.

When I enrolled in my doctoral program, my third child was just four years old, and by the time I completed my coursework and dissertation, I had given birth to three more children. During this entire time, I worked full-time, often times working two jobs. In my family, education is paramount, and everyone pitches in to help the student complete the degree regardless of the cost. It is important for me to disclose these things about myself because they shape who I am, and the way I perceive being a mother and a student. Although I could relate to some of the challenges of the students that came into my office, such as classic mother’s guilt, I could not relate to all of them. For many of my students, having a child was not necessarily their choice. Many did not have the support system, role models, and belief in education that I had. Perhaps the biggest difference was that many did not have the “significant other” that provided emotional and
social support to them or their children, and many of the students did not attach an importance to the role of the “significant other” in raising children.

As a researcher, I know that it is impossible to separate my experiences from my work with students. The person that I am colors everything I see and do. As such, my lived experiences influence everything that I see, evaluate or interpret in my research.

During the research process, it is critical that I acknowledge those thoughts and feelings and keep a researcher’s journal. The journal allowed me to reflect on my feelings and the meaning that I derived from the research process. I noted any biases that I realized during the research process, such as my feelings towards student mothers that may not make decisions that I perceived were in the best interest of themselves and their children. However, the journal is more than just a way to note bias. The journal is a chronicle of the research experience through my eyes as a researcher (Janesick, 1999). In addition, the journal helped me deal with being “thoroughly marinated in data, living, breathing, eating, sleeping and showering with it… always present as background noise” (Milliken & Schreiber, 2012, p. 691). In other words, in light of symbolic interactionism, the journal helped to acknowledge and bring forth into words my internal dialogue.

Participants

After establishing the theoretical reasoning for the method and the experiences that I as the researcher bring to the work, the next step is delineating the participants in the study. Seidman (2006) encourages the use of the word “participant” to show the active role and building of the relationship between the interviewee and interviewer. The participants were students at an Ohio community college. The participants were single
mother students juggling the roles of student and mother. The mothers self-identified as single. A single mother is as a mother with the sole provider and caregiver responsibility for a child. It does not necessarily refer to marital status, as one of the mothers in the study was married, but not to the father of her children. As such, the husband did not have a parenting role in the relationship. In addition, he worked out-of-state and was not present much of the time. Furthermore, the child does not have to be a biological child as many women often have responsibility for children that are not biologically theirs, such as a woman who has custody of her relative’s child. In this study, all of the children were the biological children of the mother.

Utilizing the working definition of single mother, I selected prospective participants by purposive sampling using the snowball technique. Participant selection occurred at the my home institution, Zane State College after approval was granted by the Institutional Research Board of Ohio University and Zane State College.

Because the nature of the study sought to explore an extremely sensitive topic, I had difficulty finding willing participants. To identify the first participant, I sought help from faculty at Zane State College. I asked faculty to identify single mother students that exhibited excellence in the classroom and stood out among other students. Zane State College is very small (less than 3,000 students), and many faculty develop lasting relationships with students, following their progress even after graduation and serving as professional mentors. Having a referral by a faculty member and the support of the faculty member with regards to the research project helped convince the students to participate in the study. Faculty initially referred eight participants.
I contacted these students and provided them with an overview of the study. I also asked them to refer other students for the study. The students recommended by the faculty provided two additional possible participants. Research suggests that single mothers tend to form peer support groups, so the snowball technique was the best method.

The goal was to generate a pool of possible participants. The research questions and methodology help select the number of participants (Patton, 2002). Research studies similar to this study such as Haleman (2004) and Duquaine-Watson (2007) utilized approximately 15 participants. However, their studies did not include a series of three interviews one week apart for every participant. The number of participants interviewed depended on the pool of possible participants. The goal was to achieve theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2006). As such, the number of participants was not set in the beginning and proceeded until I believed I reached saturation. As indicated above, in this study, the initial pool of students included eight students referred by faculty and two students referred by participants for a pool of ten possible participants.

I screened the pool of possible participants with several criteria in mind. First, the student had to self-identify as a single mother raising at least one child on her own. Second, the child had to be living at home with the student, although the child did not have to be a biological child. Third, the single mother had to attend the community college at least part-time. Finally, she had to have completed at least three quarters or two semesters to allow for some reflection on the college experience. The terms did not have to be contiguous. Of the ten possible participants, eight participants met the criteria
for the study. Three of the potential eight participants were not interested in participating or were unable to commit to the interview process. As such, five participants ultimately participated in the study, including the participant in the initial pilot study.

Once selected, I gave the participants consent forms detailing the study and procedures, demographics and data page, and the Adult Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1991). I discuss the Hope Scale in detail in Chapter 2. The participant completed the Hope Scale prior to the first interview, which created a participant profile in conjunction with the demographics and data page. Based on a review of the current literature, it does not appear that the Hope Scale has been given to single student mothers at a community college in line with the goals of this study. I did not look at the scale until the full data analysis was complete. The intent of the scale was to create a robust profile of each participant.

**Procedures**

As previously stated in the section on participants, prior to beginning, I requested study approval from the Institutional Research Boards of Ohio University and Zane State College. After receipt of an approval, I contacted the first participants. I sent an email to the recommended students describing the study and requesting their participation. During the initial contact, I arranged a time to meet with the prospective student personally to explain the study scope and participation requirements in detail, in person and provided the consent form. The consent form described the study and the responsibilities of me as the researcher and the student as the participant as well as a reassurance of confidentiality. I asked the students to provide names and contact
information for other possible participants. I contacted these possible participants in the same manner. As previously stated, faculty and other participants generated an initial pool of ten participants. Of these ten possible participants, five participants met the criteria and agreed to participate in the study, which included the one student that was part of the pilot study.

After participant selection, I scheduled three, 90-minute, in-person interview dates with the participant, each interview one week apart (Seidman, 2006). Based on Seidman’s (2006) interviewing technique, the first interview was a focused life history of the participant geared towards the experience of the individual as a single mother student to the present point. The goal is to create context. The second interview focused on details of the present lived experience, such as reconstructing a typical day in their life as a single mother student. The last interview focused on meaning making and asked the participants to reflect on their lived experiences (Seidman, 2006).

The reason for the week separation between interviews was two-fold. First, the interviews were initially spaced approximately one week apart to allow for reflection and continuity on the part of the participant, because each interview set the stage for the next interview. In addition, Seidman (2006) contends that the 90-minute period and spacing of the interviews builds a relationship between the participant and interviewer. Second, on the part of the interviewer, the spacing allowed time for journaling of my experience as well as any additional questions or paths I might want to follow with the next participant consistent with emergent design. In addition, summarizing the interviews shortly after each interview helped me shape the questions for subsequent interviews.
I planned the interview dates with the schedule of the participants in mind in order to respect their time. As stated, initially, I scheduled the interviews a week apart with 90 minutes allowed for each interview. For three participants, this schedule worked as intended. However, for two of the participants, a few of the interviews were more than a week apart due to scheduling conflicts and emergency situations. For example, during the interview period, one participant had a family emergency. For the other participant, inclement weather played a role in spacing the interviews greater than one week apart. The majority of the interviews lasted 75 to 90 minutes. However, one participant was more succinct in her recollections, and her interviews were closer to one hour each. In addition, this participant was the participant in the pilot study. Her interviews taught me to probe more by asking additional open-ended questions. This appeared to work with the subsequent interviews.

A mutually acceptable meeting place was arranged where the confidentiality of the individual participant was expected. These meeting places included a quiet room at the library, my office, and the student’s place of work. Each participant received the interview questions prior to the interview to allow for reflection as well as the demographics and data sheet and the Hope Scale.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format with an evolving design, and I changed the questions as needed to explore new or emerging themes. This allowed for conversational probes to comments that needed more depth (Patton, 2002). For example, in the interview with Constance, her experience with domestic violence and how it shaped her as a student and mother necessitated changing the wording of some of the
original questions. The questions were patterned according to the appreciative orientation (Cooperrider, 1987) framed within the topics as prescribed by the three interview structure (Seidman, 2006). The questions I asked allowed the participants to reflect positively on their experience.

The interviews followed an intensive conversational format (Charmaz, 2006). I recorded the interviews with the participants’ consent. I stopped the recording at any time the participant requested, such as in the event things were too emotional for the participant. In addition, redirecting the conversation to a lighter note helped in the event the conversation was uneasy or too emotional. Although I never had to stop the recording, I did occasionally redirect the conversation. I took notes during the interview on mannerisms and other observations with the consent of the participant as well as any thoughts or key words that I had during the interview. The key words played a role in my researcher’s journal and creation of themes.

At the conclusion of each interview, I recorded any thoughts or biases in my researcher’s journal as well as created a summary of each interview. The summary was not a detailed analysis, but rather informed the next interview. I completed the detailed analysis when all of the interviews were completed (Seidman, 2006).

With respect to the researcher’s journal, at first, I had trouble writing my thoughts and feelings. However, as the interviews progressed and I lived with the words of the participants in my head, I utilized it more. For example, one of the participants, Valerie, commented on how she chose not to go to school while her children were young because in her eyes, she would not have been a good mother. Given that I chose to pursue my
masters and doctorate while my children were young, even having more children in the
process, this comment stuck out to me. I used my researcher’s journal to elaborate on the
statement and my feelings towards it. As a veteran of motherhood, I learned how to deal
with different ideas of a “good mother” and forge my own definition many years ago.
Therefore, although the statement initially struck me, it did not haunt me.

The series of three interviews with new participants continued until data
saturation. Theoretical saturation is “no new properties of the category emerge during
data collection” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 12). By continuing to interview participants until
reaching data saturation, I explored categories as they emerged and filled in gaps as
needed. In this study, I felt I had reached data saturation at five participants.

I maintained confidentiality by turning off the recording when requested by the
participant. In addition, recordings and notes were stored in a locked drawer of the filing
cabinet in my home office and were marked with pseudonyms to protect the participant’s
real name.

Prior to the recruitment of the study participants through the faculty and official
interviews, I conducted a pilot study. According to Sampson (2004), a pilot study may
help new and experienced researchers flush out potential problems or improvements for
research instruments and interview questions. In addition, coding of the pilot interviews
may help determine if the data generated from the interview questions will help provide
insight relative to the research questions and identify gaps (Sampson, 2004). The pilot
study participant was one of my former students pursuing another degree at the
community college. She agreed to participate in the interviews so I could practice my
interviewing technique and work through the questions as well as any possible problems, such as the practicality and logistics of the three-interview format in the life of a single mother student. The pilot study provided the opportunity to learn how to use the technology for taping interviews and the opportunity to code and analyze material to determine validity of the questions as suggested by Sampson (2004). Finally, it afforded me the chance to work with my researcher’s journal and writing about my thoughts and feelings relative to the experience.

Data Analysis

I utilized data analysis methods consistent with the methods suggested by Riessman (1993) and Seidman (2006) for narrative analysis. After the interviews, I transcribed the recordings verbatim including any audible nonverbal signals and cleaned. I gave careful attention to punctuation as it affected the meaning of the transcription (Kvale, 1983; Riessman, 1993).

The first phase of the analysis process was reduction, which involved reading and responding to each transcript by bracketing phrases or chunks that are of interest or appear to be important (Seidman, 2006). Seidman (2006) writes, “The interviewer must come to the transcript prepared to let the interview breathe and speak for itself” (p. 117). During the reduction process, I used my judgement to decide what was important in the context of the research questions and what spoke to me. I labeled each passage with a focus code. According to Charmaz (2006), focus coding keys in on ideas that seem to repeat and are the most significant or frequent codes. The labels were not pre-determined. They emerged from the data (Charmaz, 2006). The researcher’s journal
helped keep me aware of the biases and prejudices that I brought to the reduction process, such as in the previous example of the participant that chose to wait to attend college until after her children were young adults.

In the second phase of the analysis process, I created profiles and themes (Seidman, 2006). First, utilizing the bracketed phrases, I created a profile of each participant. The structure of the interviews facilitated the production of the participant’s story. Seidman (2006) recommends using first person and direct quotes from the interviews to create the profiles to keep the profile summary true to the words of the participant. As such, I wrote the narrative profiles in the first person utilizing quotes pulled verbatim from the participants’ interviews. Words that are mine and used to thread the quotes into a profile story were marked with brackets. Any sentences not marked with brackets are direct quotes from the participants.

I shared the profiles with the participants for their feedback, a form of member checking. All of the participants provided feedback on the narrative profiles I created from their interviews, and I adjusted the profiles based on their feedback where needed. For example, Constance’s interview was extremely emotional. When she returned her profile, I had to fix several of the details recounted in her experience, such as the time she spent in the shelter. Please refer to Constance’s profile in Chapter 4.

The second portion of the data analysis utilized the same set of original bracketed phrases used in the profile development to create themes. It is in this part of the analysis that I used the focus codes applied to the bracketed passages in the initial reduction phase (Seidman, 2006). I looked for common themes among the participants. I utilized axial
coding to explore the relationships between the focus codes. According to Charmaz (2006), axial coding starts to relate categories to subcategories to develop a larger, more comprehensive picture of the emerging theory.

Completion of the data analysis steps led into the interpretation phase, which Seidman (2006) argues is a separate, distinct step. Although interpretation happens throughout the entire research process, as the researcher, I cannot stop at the end of the data analysis and let the codes and bracketed passages speak for themselves. Instead, Seidman (2006) states that researchers must examine what they have learned and the meaning they have made from the interviews and analysis process. These questions include:

What connective threads are there among experiences of the participants they interviewed? How do they understand and explain these connections? What do they understand now that they did not understand before they began the interviews? What surprises have there been? What confirmations of previous instincts? How have the interviews been consistent with the literature? How inconsistent? How have they have gone beyond? (Seidman, 2006, p. 129)

I explored the questions through memo writing and analyzed the memos to develop the emerging theory (Charmaz, 2006). After the full analysis was complete, I analyzed the results of the Hope Scale (detailed below) in light of each profile and the themes. Throughout the entire data analysis and interpretation process, the goal was to develop a “deeper understanding and appreciation of the amazing intricacies and, yet, coherence of people’s experiences” (Seidman, 2006, p. 130).
Adult Hope Scale

As indicated in the methods above, before the start of the interview process, I provided the participants with the Hope Scale questionnaire. The instrument informed the narrative profiles. I did not tabulate or analyze the scores until I completed the analysis and comparison of the narrative profiles.

As discussed in the literature on hope in Chapter 2, Snyder’s (1994) Adult Hope Scale consists of 12 questions, four of which are “dummy” questions not utilized in the calculation. The instrument puts a quantitative measurement to hope as experienced by the participants. Participants rate their feelings toward the question on a scale of 1 to 8 with 1 meaning definitely false and 8 meaning definitely true. Four of the questions are the agency sub score with a possible total of 32. Four of the questions are the pathways sub score with a possible total of 32. The sum of the two sub score comprises the total score with a maximum total of 64 and a minimum total of 8.

There are no established “groupings” as to what comprises a high score versus a low score, per se. However, in one study of college students by Snyder, et al. (2002), the students were divided into high-hope (mean hope score of 58.76), medium-hope (mean hope score of 51.93), and low-hope (mean hope score of 40.76) categories based on the aggregate Hope Scale scores. I utilized these numbers with caution as they are not from a community college setting with a similar composition of the student body. With that said, they do provide a beginning point for comparison for students in general.
Credibility and Trustworthiness

During this study, I addressed issues of credibility and trustworthiness as they pertained to the participant within the narrative inquiry process and as they pertained to me as the researcher. With regards to the participant and the narrative inquiry process, Riessman (1993) cautions that narratives are not meant to be an exact record of an event. She contends that the issue at hand is not the “truth” of the event. It is a reflection on the event and lived experience through the eyes of the participants intertwined with what the participants wish to see, what they wish to leave out, and the changing dynamics of relationships (Riessman, 1993).

The three-interview process has features in place that help enhance credibility and trustworthiness. First, the design allows the creation of context for the participants’ comments by setting the stage in the first two interviews. Second, spacing the interviews out over three weeks allows the participants to reflect on their comments and clarify inconsistencies. Finally, the interview process gives the participant the chance to “allow them to make sense to themselves as well as to the interviewer” (Seidman, 2006, p. 24).

These three features help shape the trustworthiness and credibility as it pertains to the participant and the process. The goal of the process is to understand the way that participants’ make meaning, not verify the accuracy down to the detail of remembered events. The importance is what they take away from those events.

In order to address concerns of credibility and trustworthiness on behalf of the researcher, I utilized three different methods including member checking, journaling, and the use of a jury team. Member checking is a form of feedback or validation by the
participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After I generated a profile and story for each individual, I sent the created profile to the participant for validation. As previously discussed, one of the participants, Constance, helped correct the details in her profile during member checking.

In addition, I utilized journaling. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, I am also a student mother, albeit married. The function of the journal is to acknowledge the experience of the researcher throughout the process and provide a window into my thoughts and feelings as I listen to the experiences of the single mother students. I utilized the journal extensively, especially when words of a participant stuck in my head, such as the experience detailed above during Valerie’s interview.

Finally, I utilized a jury team. During the research process, I met with a two practicing professionals that graduated from my doctoral cohort or program and have a different experience than I do. One of the members was a mother and currently works for the Department of Education after serving many years as an administrator at a community college. She completed her doctorate when her children were older. The second member was a grandfather and completed his degree late in life. He is currently an administrator in higher education at a community college and previously served as an administrator at a very large, four-year research institution.

The function of the jury was to offer alternative views to my analysis of the interviews as well as comment on the authenticity of the accounts as I profiled them. I adopted the idea for the “jury” from an explanation of and suggestions for corroborating evidence in qualitative research by Dey (1993). The jury team read each created profile
and provided a summary of themes based on their interpretations. As a team, we compared their interpretations to mine and identified common themes. Many of the themes the jury team identified corresponded with the themes I identified. Although the essence of the themes were the same, the way the jury member grouped the themes was slightly different, definitely shaped by their personal life experience.

**Summary of Method**

In summary, I selected participants for the study at Zane State College, a suburban Ohio community college, based on the established criteria utilizing the snowball technique. Five participants, including the pilot study participant, participated in the study. I conducted individual, semi-structured interviews following the appreciative orientation and the three interview sequences according to Seidman (2006) with each participant. I developed profiles of the participants utilizing a demographics and data sheet as well as the Hope Scale. Each participant received the profile as a form of member checking. I compared themes generated from the profiles by utilizing focused and axial coding and explored the themes with the memo technique to create emerging theory (Charmaz, 2006; Seidman, 2006). I analyzed the results of the individual Hope Scales at the completion of the full analysis. During the process, the jury team reviewed the profiles, created recommendations, and alternate interpretations. In addition, I conducted a pilot study prior to the official interviews. As a researcher, I acknowledged my potential biases and recorded them in a researcher’s journal.
Chapter 4: Narrative Profiles

As described in Chapter 3, I interviewed five participants as part of this study utilizing Seidman’s (2006) method. The interview process consisted of three separate interviews focused on the past, present, and reflection. The structure of the interviews facilitated the production of the participant’s story into a narrative profile as recommended by Seidman (2006). Using first person and direct quotes from the interviews, the created narrative profile is a story of the participant’s experience in her own words. Therefore, I wrote the narrative profiles in the first person utilizing quotes pulled verbatim from the participants’ interviews. Words that are mine and used to thread the quotes into a profile story are marked with brackets. Any sentences not marked with brackets are direct quotes from the participants. I shared the profiles with the participants as a form of member checking.

Chapter 4 is comprised of the narrative profiles. The narrative profiles are below beginning with Audrey, the youngest participant, and ending with Carla, the eldest participant. At the end of each profile is a paragraph detailing the Adult Hope Scale score.

Audrey’s Narrative Profile

[My name is Audrey. I am 20 and a sophomore at Zane State College. My program is radiology. I am currently in my last semester. I am single but recently engaged, and I have a three-year-old daughter. We are getting married after I graduate this summer. I share parenting with my daughter’s biological father. My daughter stays with him and his family every other weekend.]
I grew up on a farm in the area. My parents divorced when I was younger because my dad was an alcoholic. My dad remarried and built a new house on the farm. My mother remarried, too, but the guy went to prison. He really made me uncomfortable. Even though my parents were divorced, we were still really close.] In high school, I was always very outgoing, but I went through a rebellious stage challenging social norms. I had certain friends that I stayed close with that loved me anyway, and I was very focused on school. [In my junior year, I decided to go to vocational school and study nursing. My goal was to become a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN). Vocational school was completely different from my traditional high school.] Everyone knew me and was really nice. It was like a fresh start. [My original plan was to finish my LPN. After I passed my boards, I wanted to go to nursing school for my Registered Nurse (RN) license at Ohio University Zanesville or somewhere close and then complete a Bachelor’s of Science in Nursing (BSN).

I found out I was pregnant my junior year. I dropped out of the vocational school after completing my first year of the LPN program and decided to finish my high school diploma online. I didn’t drop out because I was pregnant.] I stopped because it was so overwhelming. I was very emotionally attached to the patients. I would get really close to them, and then any time something happened, I would be distraught. I loved helping people, but in nursing, bad things would happen. I'd be upset and with being pregnant on top of it, I'd be really upset. I'd come home crying to my mom any time we'd lose a patient and tell her I couldn't handle it. I loved the interaction with people because I'm very outgoing. I like to talk to people and make them feel comfortable. I wanted to be
able to help people somehow, but I wasn't sure how. [I just knew nursing was not the path for me.] I knew I was going to keep going to school, I just wasn't sure for what yet. I knew I wanted to stay in the healthcare field, but I didn't know what I wanted to do.

[Every time I returned to my high school to meet with the counselors, I could hear the whispers and feel the stares. All I could think was,] “Yes, it happens, and it could happen to anyone of you.” [I finished high school online, and at the same time, started] taking a few classes at Zane State College to get my foot in the door. I'm sure that I looked young, but I could have been however old anyone wanted to assume. I didn't have to sit there and feel like I had to explain myself. Even though I was coming into college pregnant, no one had any idea how old I was or anything like that.

[When I graduated high school, my daughter was just a few months old. While everyone else was partying, I was taking care of her. During the graduation ceremony, I could hear babies cry, and I would wonder if it was her and if she needed me. I continued my college classes part-time after graduation.] It was hard, mentally and physically. The worst thing was sitting in class, and my chest would get sore. I would need to get home and pump- the pain, the tingling!

Motherhood definitely made going to school more complicated. It was exciting and overwhelming. The timing obviously wasn't most convenient, but I wouldn't change a thing. I feel like it was difficult and obviously going to college with her has been more difficult. [For example,] I had a math class five weeks after I had her. That was really hard, but I was only going to one class at a time, so I thought, "Okay, I can do this." I thought, “I'm sticking with it, and I'm not changing my mind.” The classes have been
challenging. The hardest was when they disguised a physics class with another name. It was overwhelming but I stuck with it.

I refused to be the typical 16-year-old and pregnant like you see in the stories where they don't go on, or they start college and drop out because it's too overwhelming. I knew I needed to push myself. I was afraid if I took a break I would not have the motivation to come back to it, so I stuck it out. Now, when I graduate, I will have my Associates of Science in Health Sciences and the Associates for Applied Science in Radiology because I took extra classes to earn both. It's not the most ideal situation to find out you're pregnant when you're in high school. Instead of being discouraged, I decided I was definitely going to college. I'm definitely going to get a good degree and get a good job. I will be able to support my daughter because I know without education, it's hard to find anything. I worked even harder and pushed myself.

The biggest adjustment for my family wasn't the fact that I was a mom. It was that I decided I didn't want to do nursing because they all thought that I was going to regret it. When I decided to change my mind, I got some negative feedback. They would tell me I was making a mistake and that I should finish nursing, and then I could do something else. [My mom was the most supportive and told me it was my life, and she supported my decision.]

I knew nursing was not what I wanted to do.] I didn't want to get stuck in a rut of doing something just because it was convenient. I looked at different medical programs at the college and found radiology. I didn't know very much about it, but I thought it would be cool to take x-rays because I liked taking pictures, and I liked medical stuff. [I
had to apply to the program because it is selective admissions. I went into the program as an alternate, and two days before clinicals started, they called and offered me a spot.

I worried I wouldn’t be able to handle the program because I went from taking classes part-time and not being away from my daughter that much to literally being gone every day, some days for eight hours.] It was not at all what I thought it was going to be like, but I loved it. I'm glad I changed from nursing. Now I'm officially done with clinic, we've got finals, and then I graduate. When the beginning of the semester started, it felt like it was never going to end. I've been here for so long. Now, I can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

I couldn't imagine doing anything else. I can't imagine if I would have stuck with nursing how I would feel now or where I would have the opportunity to work or anything like that. I am very happy with my choices. Like nursing, we sometimes have reoccurring patients, and sometimes it's sad. We also have trauma, so it's hard to handle, but it's not the same people that I'm seeing every single day. Also, now I understand stuff more, and I am older to the point where I've been around it. I'm starting to be able to cope with it better. [The time I spent in nursing helped me understand radiology better.] I know different stuff that I wouldn't have known before getting into the program, and it has helped me relate it back to the program.

After I graduate, I have a contingent job at Children’s. It makes me feel good. Everyone was concerned that I wouldn't find a job, but I had one lined up before I even graduated. I'm very excited. I was not expecting it, but I've been trying so hard. I've been applying to all of these different places. Two days after I had it, I got another offer
for a full-time position that I had to turn down. I called my mom crying. I told her I didn't know what to do, and I was sick to my stomach. She said to be open and honest, to tell them I had already accepted a position. [It is great to feel like I was in demand with people fighting for me, but it is very overwhelming.]

School is definitely a full-time job. I feel like I'm prepared for when I start working, but I'll be getting paid instead of going to school. I know I've gotten negative feedback about the fact that I don't work while I’m in school, and I already feel guilty enough about that. But I think just seeing all the hard work I've put into it, all the time and everything, it proves to me that I'm not just doing it to do it. I'm getting good feedback from my instructors, like my clinical instructor, who is very tough. It makes me feel good that I'm making connections and people think that I am doing a good job at the clinic and at school. I’m proving myself. Sometimes I feel I'm juggling so much that I'm just a hot mess and then stuff like that happens, like getting a good job, and I think I kind of somewhat have a handle on this.

[Juggling the role of mom and student is tough; however, I’m doing it. I think there are a lot of reasons I’m able to make it work.] I think being a mother makes me more motivated as a student. I feel like I wouldn't be nearly as motivated to get projects done or get the best grades as I could if I didn't have her there as a reminder to push through things when I'm overwhelmed. I definitely feel like it was a push for me to go to school and stick with it. I feel like if I wasn't constantly doing something, I would lose my motivation. I always have to keep moving.
I think as a mother, I definitely had to mature a lot faster than if I didn't have to worry about another life. Even though I'm the youngest one in my class, I don't think of myself as being the baby because I've got my own daughter. I feel like I'm always motherly. The girls in my program are older than me, and they probably get so annoyed with me. I don't even realize I'm doing it.

[In my opinion, having a support system is one of the most important aspects of being successful as a student and as a mom. My mom and my grandparents are my biggest supporters.] I had a big support system because my parents were divorced, and my daughter will have a huge one. You've got all these different family members that look forward to helping you and being around you. She doesn't understand yet, but I'm so excited for her that she's going to have all of these people there for her. Her dad is still in her life, and I'm thankful for that. There are so many people that aren't with the parents of their kids and have such negative views. [It can be difficult because our parenting styles and family values are different. At his house, they don’t believe in following rules, and it takes her a bit of adjustment when she comes home.] So I'm not saying we haven't had our differences, but it makes me excited that she is going to grow up with such a big support system.

My family is very supportive, even with the circumstances of me being so young and getting pregnant. At first, when I didn't need a daycare, family members would watch her. My grandparents will watch her anytime. All of my family members fight over who's going to watch her if she's not in daycare. It was nice because on my breaks, I could text them to see how she was doing. When I got into radiology, I couldn't depend
on five days a week with different family members watching her. I felt like it would be very inconsistent for her, so I started sending her to daycare. The first day it was hard on both of us. I cried after I dropped her off. She cried and would say she didn't want me to leave. After about a week, I would take her in, and she would look at me and say "Bye, Mom" and just walk off. I was more upset than she was about leaving. I'm glad that she likes to go. Now she says, "Are we going to see my friends now?" Somedays I try to pick her up and she wants to stay and play with her friends. Sometimes it drives me nuts but I'm glad she has her own personality. She is at the age now where she wants to color and play and be herself.

[Family means more than just childcare.] I mean, I definitely rely on family to help me if I have a huge paper that I need to get done, or if I need to take the time to go and do something academically. [However, they also provide moral support and boost my confidence, like when I was prepping for job interviews.] They are very encouraging, which has definitely helped because if I didn't have that, I wouldn't be nearly confident enough and assured about things.

[My fiancé has also been a constant source of support, both financial and emotional. He been with me since my daughter was three-months old.] He pretty much considers her his. He genuinely cares about her as if she was his. This makes me feel good because I don't think twice. He'll take her to school and deals with the morning routine. I'm just so grateful for the fact that he's willing. I almost feel selfish to say that I'm a single parent because I feel like I've definitely had so much support from him. [He supports us financially while I go to school. He tells me that someday I will be making
big money, and it is worth the sacrifice right now. He knows my daughter is gone every other weekend, and I have] such a hard workload of studying. I could work but I would never see her, and I feel like that's not fair. [He wants me to be able to spend time with our family without worrying about money and says that it will be worth it later. He encourages me and tells me not to second guess myself or my decisions.

He also lets me vent and listens as I tell him about all of the things going on in our program. We have 16 girls, and] we're with each other more than we are around our families. It gets stressful at times. Girls get catty regardless of who they are. When you're around each other that much, it gets overwhelming. I know I can always come home to him, and he listens like he is one of the girls.

[A key aspect to balancing so many roles is stress management.] To be able to come home and really talk to my fiancé, play with my daughter and do something as a family, gets my mind off of everything. Any time I get overwhelmed or tense, my daughter senses it. When I get frustrated, she will come over and give me a hug and tell me it's okay. She's very compassionate and caring. I try not to show her that I'm upset because I don't want to overwhelm her, but sometimes I can't help it. She tells me it will be ok, and then I know it is going to be ok. [It helps me regain my perspective.

I also relieve stress by organizing and working on other things outside of school, like wedding planning.] I need some organization in my life because otherwise I would be crazy. Because with three-year-olds, you don't have much control over things. [When I organize, I feel like I have control.
As a mother, there are so many life lessons I want to teach my daughter so she can be successful. I want her to learn about delayed gratification and making sacrifices towards the ultimate goal. She equates it to when I make her put a toy back at the store because she didn’t make good behavior choices while we were shopping. She carries the toy around with her as an incentive to be good, and ultimately, the choice is hers. However, it’s really more than that. It will pay off later when she is older and getting an education, when she has to make tough choices and sacrifices to get what she wants.

I want my daughter to know that education is important, just like my mom and dad taught me.] I've definitely pounded in her head that I go to school so I can get a good job and make money, so we can get nice things and go do things together. She relates it back to her being able to get toys when she wants them, but it’s also so we can be clothed and eat. She'll say "Oh, so you can buy me toys? Okay, Mom, then you can go to school."

Sometimes, she thinks that I am just choosing to go. I hate that, but I feel successful when she knows if I'm not doing something I try to make the time for her. I want her to know she can always come to me. I try to make it a priority, and she knows that this is temporary. It breaks my heart when she says "Oh, you're working on homework again." I'm trying to reassure her that she's a priority and not feel like "oh well, after school, then you have time for me."

[A big incentive to getting an education is to get a better job so I can provide for her. Although money isn’t everything, it is a big part of survival. Financially, my dad has helped us a lot. He is letting us live on his farm in the original house I grew up in,
rent-free, in exchange for helping keep it up and remodeling it. All we have to pay for are utilities. He said we don’t have to pay rent until a year after I graduate. This will give us time to pay off debt and save money. Because I now have the job at Children’s, we will probably eventually move somewhere half-way in between Zanesville and Columbus. For now, though, the financial savings are worth the drive. We even went through a money management class.] I feel like I've definitely learned to budget my time a lot better, and money, too. I can do clearance couponing. They've all become my friends since I've had her. It takes a lot of time to sit there and go through clipping coupons and looking through ads. My daughter knows she’s not getting a toy every time we go to Walmart. Even though she usually asks, she understands.

[Of course, there’s more to being a successful mom and student than just managing money and working towards financial security. There’s also time management.] Being a mom and a student, when I come home, my job's not done. I'm a lot more time-oriented now. I feel like people talk about budgeting money, and obviously that's very important, but I think people neglect the fact that you have to budget time also. You have to make the time to do everything, and you have to make priorities become priorities. Obviously, school is important, but you have this other life that you're responsible for. You need to make the time to make sure that they're fed and make sure that they don't need anything or make sure that they still know you care. The girls tell me they don't understand how I do school and take care of a kid, and then have other stuff on top of it. It makes me feel good when people come up to me and say that and realize how much I’m trying to do.
When I don't have her, I try to get all my online homework done and try to get stuff knocked out as much as I can. I try to take advantage of the fact that she's gone. That way when I do have her, I don't have to worry about it. Others tell me they don't know where I am coming up with this time. I don't know either- you just learn time management. After I graduate, I'm going to pick up as many hours as I can just try to stay busy because I'm going to be a nervous wreck [when I don't have school to juggle as well. I won't know what I will do when I come home from work and don't have schoolwork to do!] I'm just going to try and make the best of it and make as much money by taking as many shifts as I can when she’s gone. When I do have her, I'll still be able to pick up shifts, but I won't feel as pressured about it.

I'm one of those people that does better under pressure. I feel like motherhood has made me focus. I do so good if I have a lot going on compared to if it's just one thing, because I make myself do it. Sometimes I do feel overwhelmed. However, I feel good about being a student-mom because I feel like I'm more task-oriented. I feel like working both of them together has made me sit down and focus a lot more than if I didn't have her.

[Motherhood has also helped me see things in a different way and to be more patient. These skills have helped me in school and at clinicals. For example, if something happens, like I can’t get a patient in the position I need him in to get a picture, I just kind of go with it. Before, if things didn’t go to plan, I would have been flustered. Now, I just handle it and figure it out.] I can look at it different ways instead of just getting flustered. We have to be critical thinkers. We have to think quick on our feet and
come up with another way. [I also have more patience in these situations, especially with kids.] I was always nurturing before motherhood, but now, I’ve definitely gained a lot more patience. It comes with learning to deal with a three-year-old that is screaming for ice cream for breakfast as we pass Dairy Queen in the morning.

[Motherhood is also teaching me to let go. I’m learning that I can’t control everything, as a mother, and it is ok to rely on others for help. For example,] when I’m at clinic, I can't have my phone on me. [I dread looking at my phone and seeing the voicemail icon. It usually means it is from the childcare center, and I don’t want to hear what they have to say. So many times it is for small things. For example, on Friday they called to tell me] she was good but she pushed a kid down because she wanted a toy. [That is a typical three-year-old behavior. By the time I saw it, I decided not to worry about it. They know to call my fiancé if I can’t answer.] I knew that they talked to him, and he handled it. I was ok with that and thankful.

[Hard work is definitely the key to success, particularly as a student. It is one of the values I would like to teach my daughter, and I think she is learning it as she watches me go through school.] It's not necessarily that you get all A's even though I'm very obsessive about trying to get all A's. It’s just knowing that I'm actually putting in the effort that I need to or trying my hardest, as corny as it sounds. Even if I don't get an A, as long as I know that I studied or I put in the effort that I should, I'm a little bit more okay with it rather than if I didn't put in the effort. I just have the motivation to sit there and keep trying to get stuff done until I'm done. I get home and I'm exhausted, but I put that effort in. My daughter knows I'm trying. [I want to teach her that being a hard
worker is important, because I] believe that helps people stand out. People definitely recognize that sort of thing.

[In addition to hard work, there is the willingness to help others. My dad always taught us to offer help, to keep looking for something to do to help even when it seems like the job is done. I want my daughter to have the same work ethic.] I feel that's something that sets me apart from the other girls. At clinic, I'm burned out, but I just try to stay busy. It makes the day go by faster. It’s also good because we're pretty much at a two-year job interview with clinical. I always ask what I can do before I leave, especially with the patients. I feel like that's been something that my dad pounded into our heads. I feel like that's something that's expected out of us because it's pretty much our job, we just aren't getting paid for it. When I was offered the job at Children’s, I offered to work different shifts or different locations as needed. I feel like that's something that a lot of people don't want to budge when they first start. I feel like that's something that will hopefully set me apart.

[Overall, I feel successful as a student because I worked] hard to have good grades. I developed the personal skills to be able to go out and interview. I'm so appreciative of having the opportunity to be able to say that two people have come to offer me a position before I even graduated. [I was also recognized for being on the dean’s list by an outside organization in the community.] These things made me feel really good because I'm doing something right. It's the reason I put in so many hours into papers that I thought were silly and everything else. That's why I'm doing it.
I’m also growing and learning new things about myself as a student and professional. Recently, at a job fair, I introduced myself to the recruiter for Children’s and told her I was the new contingent. I wanted her to put a face to the name. She recognized my name and thanked me for making a point to greet her. I think that will make a difference. I was proud of myself because I was thinking in a new way, not like the old Audrey.

Although I am very proud of everything I have done and all my hard work as a student, my biggest pride and joy is my daughter, and the person she is becoming. She is such a nice kid. She always uses her manners. She says please and thank you. She's very, very smart. I know she's always listening. She's like a little sponge. She has a conscience and sometimes even tells on herself. It makes me happy when she knows right from wrong. My daughter has been there for the most important moments in my life. She was there for my high school graduation. She will be there for my college graduation, the first day of my big job, and my wedding. She'll be a part of it, and she'll be there. Not many people get to have their kids in their wedding as flower girls. She's excited. I'm obviously excited. We have so much going on to look forward to. Finally, it's just a lot of good things coming.

Audrey’s total Adult Hope Scale Score was 63 out of a possible maximum total score of 64. Her Pathways score was 32 out of possible score of 32. Her Agency score was 31 out of a possible score of 32. An analysis of the meaning of the hope scale score is included in Chapter 6.
Constance’s Narrative Profile

[My name is Constance. I’m 24 years old and a single mom with a two-year-old daughter. I am currently working on my Associates Degree in Social Work at Zane State College (ZSC). I started my coursework last summer, approximately one year ago.]

I grew up in Indiana and went to three schools when I was in high school. At the first two schools, I felt like I didn't fit in. [One of the schools was so bad that] I felt like I had to have sanitizer and wipes [with me. The kids picked on me relentlessly. They would] throw pennies at you and take your lunch money. They even put Vaseline and baby oil on the staircase, and when we walked down, if you were not careful, you fell. [I hated going to school. My mom would always want to know why I didn’t want to go.] I didn't want to tell her that I was getting picked on, but I mean, how do you tell your parents that you're scared to fight back? [By the time I transferred to the third school, things were better. I even graduated with honors.]

When I was 22, I found out I was pregnant. At the time, the father of my daughter was just a friend. He was 47. I really did not believe I was pregnant, and I knew very little about the signs of pregnancy.] I honestly thought I had breast cancer, because I saw these little veins growing. [I told the doctors that I could not afford to pay for chemo because I was so convinced it was cancer.]

Getting pregnant changed my life. I quit smoking. I used to smoke cigarettes, and I threw a whole pack away that day. It was crazy, because I never quit, but that day, I just said “bye,” and I never picked them up again. It took me getting pregnant to do it. It can make [babies] so sick, and I didn't want her sick. [When I found out I was
pregnant, I would talk to her every day. I would tell her] I'm going to take care of you, and I'm going to nurture you.

[I did not plan on being a single mother, and I didn't realize the father of my daughter was doing drugs.] His friends knew, they were doing it with him... they knew all along and could've told me, and they didn't tell me until the last minute. [He would get angry, act crazy, and beat me.

Her dad beat me the night she was born.] I knew she was coming because I started leaking fluids...I didn't know if I was losing her...I knew it wasn't supposed to be blood coming. I was in this really bad hospital in the ghetto because they got me to the closest hospital...I called my doctor and she said, “If you can get to the hospital I'm at, then I can deliver her. We are more equipped and the baby will have a better chance of living. She's not going to be able to breathe when she comes out or suck right.” I signed myself out of that hospital in labor, leaking and everything.

[The hospital staff tried to convince me not to leave.] I said, “If you guys aren't equipped and if something happens, I'd rather take a chance on my baby living. I signed myself out and got out of there. She was born a couple of hours later...When she came out, she was not crying. I was crying. That baby looked dead at me and was looking around like "what the heck?" They laid her on a little bed with doctors and nurses all around her to check her heart and they kept saying something was not right...but she was breathing...and I asked if I could hold her, and that baby lifted her whole head up and looked dead at me like she was saying “hi.” I started crying...and she was fine. She was fine, and I couldn't believe it.
[I made a promise right then and there.] I prayed, “Lord please, I came this far.” I knew everything I went through pregnant with her and with her dad… I promised God I would leave him if everything was ok with my daughter. I didn't know how, but I told him to give me the strength to leave. I didn't know how I was going to get out of it, but I was getting out.

I was just praying about it from that day forward. Strength was my main focus. I needed strength, because I knew if I didn't have strength, I wasn't going to leave. I felt so weak. So once I got the strength and got out of the hospital, I kept praying to get my mind right and left...the baby wasn't even a month old...I had a bus ticket and two cents, and I left. I got on the bus to Ohio. Honestly, you just don't know your own strength. You have to go through something to really know how strong you are. I have a new perspective on life since I left. In every bad situation, I always try to find some good.

[I was afraid the day I left him. I thought he would catch me leaving.] I had just been through so much, and a woman gets so tired...he could throw a thousand punches, and I was still walking out that door. [We took the bus to the first of a series of shelters in Ohio while we waited for public housing in Marietta. I decided if we could just get to Ohio, we would be closer when the housing came through. I didn’t realize it would take eight months.]

In the shelter, I would sing to her, "I Got You" by Whitney Houston. I remember one time having to steal socks for her. We were in the shelter and when you've been there for a certain amount of time, they don't like to give you stuff...and I didn't have a
job. She was freezing, her feet were freezing because she had no socks. I was ashamed but I had to steal her socks because you got to do what you got to do as a parent.

[Sometimes I had to make really hard decisions.] When we went to the shelter in Athens, her dad found us. I had to decide if I wanted to get a no contact order or give him visitation rights. I got the no-contact order, and I decided to just try to go past this, and just move forward at this point. [He tried to convince Children’s Services that I was hurting the baby. He tried to have my assistance taken away. He even told them I was burning the baby and tried to force me to come back to Indiana. I showed the social workers that the baby was fine. He was not going to make me come back.

I managed to avoid him, and we kept moving as we waited for housing.] It was scary. I mean, a lot of the time I would cry so much, but then I would think about everywhere I'd been, how far I had come. It’s been a journey.

[At one point, I had to testify against him. He had two other children, a boy and a girl. He had been abusing the boy and molesting the girl. She was just four years old.] I helped DCS [Department of Children Services] establish a case and take away his rights so that the kids could go up for adoption by testifying against him twice, and they were able to take his rights from him. It made me feel really good. I hadn't seen him since I left him, and I had to sit in front of him and testify in March. I was scared to death...In my heart I knew if I didn't, they would have enough evidence to take the little girl but not the little boy...I have to be his voice for him. He kept bringing my daughter up in court, and he kept trying to make me give my address under oath. He would threaten me and say, “Don't be surprised if you wake up one morning and she's not there.” He wanted me
to look weak. He wanted me to be weak. He wanted me to run back to him, but I'm
doing all this on my own. How strong and invincible I was on that stand! He just
couldn't believe it. [The judge saw through his tricks and denied him custody of both
children. The judge also protected my information.

Being on that stand taught me] I could do something so strong and so powerful to
protect those children. There's so many out there that need protection. They need
somebody to be a support system for them. Sometimes they just need a friend, somebody
to talk to and somebody they can trust. I want to be that type of social worker. I don't
want to just go taking people's kids from good parents. I want to take those kids from
bad parents and make their lives better. [That’s when I realized I wanted to go into social
work.

By this time, we had found permanent housing in Zanesville, and I started
college.] We didn't have anything when I first moved into my apartment, and this church
helped us. I posted an ad on Craigslist saying we're new to town, and in two days our
house was furnished. The baby was sick from a respiratory infection she caught from a
little boy in the shelter, and they took us to a doctor. They were like little gifts from
heaven.

It took me four times, but I passed my entrance exams for college. I decided I
was going to get into college, and I wanted to stay. I'm getting back my mojo from 11th
grade. I was jumping into college and everything was weird. At one point, I thought “I
don’t think I can do this.” I had 2 D's, and I barely passed the first semester. I was
freaking out thinking college was not for me. I went from 2 D's to all B's the term after
that and then this term to an A and 2 C's, which is really good. I decided I didn’t get this far to quit. I'm the type of person that just gets it out of the way. I've been through worse, just get it over with. I want my daughter to know to not give up, to keep going. Even when things look like they're cloudy, and it's not going to turn around, just keep at it. It's going to be okay. Sometimes when I feel like I can't do something, I decide to give it a try, just one try. Then I keep trying, and I know I can do it.

[In addition to finding a place to live and starting college, I had to get help with childcare.] I'm on welfare, so I get cash assistance for her. The agency told me they wanted me to work and put her in daycare, which is hard trusting people when you aren't familiar with anyone here. [I only take my daughter to daycare on days I'm working or going to school. But the daycare wanted me to bring her on all the days so they could get money for the hours. I’ve also noticed they like to get very involved in my personal business and share stories with others about my personal life. Sometimes it feels like they treat us differently because we are on welfare, but I don’t let that bother me. I’m going to do what is right. I can’t take her on days I don’t need daycare because I would risk losing my daycare subsidy. I just say,] “Treat my daughter right, and we don’t have a problem.”

[I’m going to college and working to make a better life for my daughter.] I'm about breaking bad habits and being on welfare is a bad habit for generations in my family. My mom raised us, me and my sisters alone…to be independent and responsible. [She was a single mom and abused by my father. He beat her and my older sister with a hammer in front of us.] I always told myself that's what my mom went through. My
grandma went through that with my grandfather. I went through that with my daughter’s dad. My daughter is not going to go through that. I'm breaking this cycle. I feel like I can accomplish anything. It's taken sadness for me to be able to break that cycle, but I want to build something, and I want my daughter to build something. And before you know it, our generation, the new generation, is not going to be on welfare, because I'm going to change it, and it's starting over.

I want to be able to give my daughter the life I never had. I've had this dream for her room. I want her to have a Mini Mouse room. I've been saying that since I was pregnant with her. I want to be the best mommy ever. You can talk things into existence.

I want to be able to support my daughter on my own. I don't count on being a single mom forever, but I really don't want to depend on a man. I want to have my own life and have myself established so my daughter can run to me, and she doesn’t have to run to a guy because she knows mom's got it. She will know that she doesn't need a man to give her money and say she’s cute, because her mom gives her money and tells her she’s beautiful all of the time.

[When I need help, I’m not afraid to ask for help. In college, my instructors have been very supportive. For example,] some days my daughter wants to help me do homework and my homework looks like a two-year-old did it. My teachers always laugh and tell me they can see she helped that day.

[I have met other single mothers in class.] There's more single moms than you think in our classes. A lot of times you don't know people have kids until you talk to
them. I mean, they carry it well. Sometimes they share stories, and I can relate. It feels good to talk to other single moms.

[I have friends that want to help, too. Some are single mothers. Some live far away and don’t have a car, so they can’t help as much as they would like to, especially when it comes to watching my daughter for me if I need to do something. I do miss the support of my family.] I never had anyone. I'm 24, just now getting my life together. It would be nice to have my mom or my sisters come and pick her up. [They still live in Indiana. However, my mom tells me that she is proud of me and that means everything to me. She says.] “I'm just so proud of you…I never thought you could do this out of all your sisters.” I just wanted to show her that I could do it. I'm in college now. I've been shocking myself, and I've been shocking her a lot, too.

[I’ve also had help from the doctors.] I didn't know I had post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety. Something was literally wrong with me. The doctor said I looked so defenseless, like I was just screaming for help because I didn't know what was wrong with me. They started me on meds for a little bit and that was fine. But now, I don't even take my meds on some days. I'm fine. [I rely on meditation a lot now.] Meditation has been the best, as well as ice cream. That's my little moment. As parents, we need time-outs, too. When I feel like my world is tumbling upside down, and I don't know how I'm going to get through this, I have my daughter. She's given me the push to independence that I never thought I had.
As a mother, I believe in putting my child’s needs before mine and no matter what, not giving up on her. I remind her that I love her no matter what, even when times are tough. She can feel my pain. She can sense it.

When it comes to balancing my roles as a student and a mother, it can be very hard. It is a balancing act. Sometimes my daughter doesn’t understand that I need to study and can’t play with her. I have to multi-task.] I'm in college, I'm washing clothes, I'm fixing dinner, I'm cleaning the living room- all of these things by myself all at once. You have to have a lot of flexibility just to multi-task. You've got to be Wonder Woman and Super Woman at the same time…our job is tough.

[Being a mother has also taught me organization, which is essential as a student. As a successful student,] after everything I've been through on the journey and just the struggles of being a single mom, knowing that I can't depend on anybody else but me, that really motivates me. [I strive for stability- stability in my grades, stability in our home life, like a roof over our head.

I also have to have a tremendous amount of patience.] It helps me with challenges. Parenting is a challenge, and school is a challenge. It helps me not to second guess myself. I don't know what it is, but I just feel like since I've been on my own, and I've been so far away, I feel like everything is on me. I got to do this. I got this. I have to make sure this is taken care of and this is taken care of. I wasn't really the type of person that liked change. My past taught me change is okay. Everything isn't permanent. You can make changes. If you don't like something, you have to change it. You can say all day you're going to change, but it still takes your feet to move.
As a parent you hope that everything plays out all right. You don't know what the future will hold. You just live day by day, but if you do right, it works out. I think of everything I've been through, and it's amazing how I've bounced back. Looking at everything from my childhood and up until adulthood. It's just constant abuse throughout my life. I should be in pain, but thank God I still have my sanity. It's a blessing. Even with everything negative in my life, I'm able to bounce back and throw it behind me. How can I make this bad situation into a good situation? I don't like it but how can I deal with this or how can I make it better? It's not where you come from, and it's not what you go through, it's how you get through it.

Constance’s total Adult Hope Scale Score was 57 out of a possible maximum total score of 64. Her Pathways score was 31 out of possible score of 32. Her Agency score was 26 out of a possible score of 32. An analysis of the meaning of the hope scale score is included in Chapter 6.

**Megan’s Narrative Profile**

[My name is Megan, and I am a full-time student in my last semester of the Physical Therapy Assistant (PTA) program. I am 41, and I have two children: one 22-year-old son and one nine-year-old daughter. My son was born when I was 19.] I was never married to his father. We only dated for a couple of months. [Approximately ten years later, I married my first husband. Together we have a daughter. He also had a daughter from a previous marriage. We divorced several years ago. I am currently married to another man who has two sons from a previous marriage, but we do not have children together. My husband travels out of state for work and is gone most of the year.]
To be honest, our marriage is very rocky, and I’m still very much a single mom. I identify as a single mom.] I shouldn't have gotten remarried.

[My early childhood years were full of creativity and imagination. I was a very imaginative child. I would mix all of my toys together and find new ways to play with old toys.] like making a horse corral out of my sister’s guitar stand. I would make all kinds of stuff out of construction paper and Legos. I would sit in my room playing for six hours straight, and you would never hear a peep out of me. To this day, I still like to be creative and paint.

I was also a very stubborn child. One time, I refused to pick up a game because I wasn't done playing with it. My mother put it in the trash, carried it to the trash-burning barrel, and burned it. She came back and asked me how I felt about it. I told her that at least I didn’t have to pick it up. That was my personality with her my whole life. She could never tell me what to do. Now I see it in my daughter. The other day she told me that I don't scare her. I'm getting it from her all over again. It's going to be tough!

My parents divorced when I was 11. [My mom divorced my dad because he was an alcoholic and abusive, although he was never abusive to me and my sister (my only sibling).] I argued a lot with my mom because she's very self-centered. I guess she had so much stuff that she was trying to emotionally deal with. Ironically, she started drinking after they got divorced. Both of them are still alcoholics.

[After the divorce, we lived with my mom and step-dad.] They would constantly complain about us not doing this right or that right or whatever, and so on. If I did the dishes, I had to wash them all over again if there was a spot left on anything. If I
vacuumed the floor, and I didn't move a stool, I had to do it all over again. My mother was very critical of me. We grew up in an environment where you learned a lot of negative self-talk. On the flip side, I learned how to clean really well and later had my own cleaning business for ten years. I'm really good at it, and I'm very obsessive compulsive because of it, so that's the positive. However, I still don't wash my dishes very well, and I laugh every time I see something on them. My sister does the same thing.

[As a freshman in high school, my grades were ok.] However, my sophomore year, I just went wild because I didn't have anyone to govern me. I did everything I could to not be in my mom’s household because it wasn't a positive place to be. No one ever looked at my grades. No one ever asked me for my report card. My grades went downhill, and I didn't do very well. I would leave school every day whenever I felt like it. I would drive out of the parking lot, and the principal would wave at me. I remember standing in the parking lot of the school, and my geometry teacher yelling at me through the window to get in there and take my midterm. I ended up going back and taking it. I have no idea how I passed. I don't know how things worked out, but they did. That year was my roughest as far as grades went. After that, I kept everything at a C or D- not perfect, for sure.

I was very independent, and I pretty much took care of myself. At my mom's, I had to purchase all of my own stuff, like deodorant and shampoo. We didn't share anything, and it was my responsibility to earn my own money to pay for my toiletries and clothes. If I couldn't afford mine, my sister would help me. She shared her clothes with
me and stuff. She was older than I was, and she made a little bit more money than I did. My sister was my only support.

[I left my mom’s and ended up moving in with my dad until my senior year. He was still drinking a lot. He was able to keep his job and make money, but I had to work, too.] I started paying the bills. I went to school. I went to the grocery store. I cooked dinner. I cleaned the house and did the laundry. [I had to take care of him. When he would pass out in his car during the winter at night, I would turn off the car and get him into the house.] He even had an accident where he ended up in the hospital with a broken jaw. He almost died. I took care of him through that. No one ever made me to go to school. I would call school and call myself off. I would do it in front of my mom when I lived with her, so the school knew my voice as her voice.

[Finally, I just couldn’t take care of him anymore. I had to get out. At the beginning of my senior year, I moved in with my boyfriend’s family.] He was really more of a friend, even though I lived in his bedroom with him. [His family was very large. He had seven brothers and sisters. Although they did not all live there, they would come back and stay with their children.] I helped buy food. I worked. I helped cook. I helped do laundry. It was a completely different environment for me. I earned all A's that year. I had no trouble with my grades at all. I got away from all that crap, and I was able to focus. I think they knew that they were taking care of me emotionally instead of me just living with my boyfriend. His mom was like a mom to me for sure.

[My childhood was not all negative.] I love both of my parents, and I still see them and spend time with them. There are so many positives from this kind of
upbringing. As I said, I learned how to clean, which I later turned into a profitable business. I learned early how to save money and how to not waste money on stupid things. I learned how to do things right and take pride in what I did because I was doing it for me, not for anybody else. The only negative part was a neediness that was never fulfilled.

So I got through high school. I survived it. I decided I should go to college because that's what everybody does society-wise. I had no parental influence saying I needed to go to school. My sister went to college, and she made that decision to go on her own. I mean, we are fairly intelligent. We're not stupid. When I apply myself, I know I can do well. My dad even helped me pay for it.

[I started working on my general education coursework. However, I got pregnant with my son. I kept going up until I delivered him. I didn't stop the minute I found out I was pregnant. I decided to get done as much as I could before he came. I wanted to stay and figure it out, but I didn't have help.] I'm not the kind of person that has a mother or a father that helped with childcare. My sister was very busy. She had her own small daughter, worked and was married. I couldn't rely on her for babysitting, and the only babysitter I had was not family. I could not leave him for school and for work. I couldn't do it. It was not in me to let someone else raise my child.

I lived in an apartment by myself. I worked, and I took care of him. I had a good job. I made baskets, but not for Longaberger. [When I was 21, I bought a house with the help of my sister and brother-in-law. I paid her back when I later sold the house. I wanted my son to have a safe place and a yard to play. When I lost my basket-making
job, I had to go to the Salvation Army to ask for help to pay the heating bill.] I was 22 and bawling at the Salvation Army. I was so embarrassed. [It wasn’t long after that I started my cleaning business.]

I knew that I wanted to go back to college. Here and there I did go back to school, picking up a couple of classes to get my general education out of the way. I didn't know what I wanted to do. When I was younger, I didn’t want to be around people. I had tunnel vision. I would think about all the things I had to handle and do. I was never a person that was mean to someone, I just didn't open up to anybody. My personality was very closed, and I thought I would prefer to work in an environment where I wasn't in contact with people a lot. I thought I would like to be a lab tech. I knew that I would still like that because I love science.

I ended up getting admitted into the radiology program, but I did the first semester and quit. I'm not sure why I quit. I just did. That's it. It's no small feat to get into that selective program. I just quit. I just gave up. [Before I left, I interviewed the woman in charge of radiology at the hospital. She had been there for 26 years and still had to be there Christmas morning. She advised me to continue with the cleaning business I had started because I was making more money at that point than I would working as a rad tech, and I was home on the holidays. Around that time, I met my ex-husband, and I got married instead.

My ex-husband is the father of my daughter.] Having her was a completely different experience because I was married. However, he is not a nice person. My son is more like a father figure to his little sister. They are ten years apart. She doesn't see her
dad very often. She will eventually learn that he's not a good person. I got full custody of her last year. [I’ve had to fight him in court for everything.] The system won't even enforce what he owes in back child support because he's no longer in their jurisdiction. At one point I had the option of sending him to jail, but I couldn’t do it for the sake of my daughter.

[I’ve even had to mother his other daughter from his previous marriage.] She's 17 now, and she's just about had all of him that she ever wants right now. That's so heartbreaking. She still comes and visits me. She still looks at me like I'm a mother figure for her. She considers my son to be her brother. Her mother and I talk. We have learned to work together. My ex-husband got remarried again to a 26-year-old a few years ago. He’s 46. I feel so bad for that girl, but she's not going to listen to me. My daughter gets better cared for when she's with her dad because of his current wife. I know it’s very selfish of me, but my daughter is what's most important.

[When we were married, we started a multi-level marketing business, and we were very successful.] We operated as a team, and teamwork made it work. We were very good business partners. I was the nurturer. I helped people with their problems. I helped them see their goals. I helped them build their dreams and lose weight. My ex-husband was the persuasive person. He would get them in, and I would nurture them, love them, and help them through all of it because it is an emotional rollercoaster. I'm a very honest person, so that's why I couldn’t keep doing the job. However, he got to the point where his head got so big that he got too big for his business partner. Growth is good. Growth like that is not good. I just couldn't deal with it anymore.
There are positives to multi-level marketing, which have changed my life. It helped me realize the toxicity of my marriage and helped encourage me to go back to school, to get to where I am now. Multi-level marketing is huge for personal growth and development. This is one thing that I think helped me get to where I am now. They have all of these personal growth, positive self-talk, positive relationship books. We attended so many positive conferences because in order to do that business, you have to build yourself up to that point. You can't do it and be someone that doesn't have a lot of positive growth, positive self-confidence. Positive self-talk and learning how to building relationships with people, that’s what's important. You learn how to talk through things. You also learn that to make things happen, you have to stay on top of them.

Being in that multi-level marketing company built my confidence. I had to do trainings in front of 5,000 people. I cried doing those trainings because it was so emotional for me and talking about the positive things in life. I inspired people to see that everything's not negative and that what they put in their head is what they are. It feels good to be 41, look at yourself in the mirror and acknowledge that there are things that need fixed, but it's okay. I still love me. So through that company, I became a different person, which is probably why I got divorced.

After meeting and marrying my current husband, I finally decided to go back to college. The multi-level marketing business was consuming me. It was constant phone calls, conferences, traveling out of town. It was tough. I went somewhere every month. It was a lot work. I couldn't sit down to dinner with my family without my phone ringing. If you didn't answer, there was no sale. You have to stay on top of anything
positive that's about to happen. I was working all day, too, because I was still cleaning. I
had employees and the other business. I remember sitting down in my bathtub and
crying, admitting I couldn’t do everything. So school was almost easier, less time
consuming and a relief from the multi-level marketing. My kids were very supportive.
They knew how frustrated I was.

[Going back to school was a huge decision. There were financial considerations
and time management considerations.] Financially, I've had to take loans that I will have
to pay back. I have some scholarships. My husband does work a lot in order to make up
for it. My ex-husband does nothing to help with supporting our daughter. [Even though
I’m not actively working the multi-level marketing business right now, I still get a
residual paycheck.] It's not a whole lot but it's been enough to keep us afloat. [Before I
quit working as much, I was making a lot of money and I learned to spend it. I especially
loved to shop. I was spending it differently than I ever had in my life, and now I can’t do
that anymore.] It's hard to pull the reigns back on that one. I had to change back to how I
used to manage money, and it's not any fun. [I’ve also had to work on time management,
although I’ve always been very good at that as I’m used to being a single mom.] Since
my husband is not home, it can be challenging. My daughter comes home, and I have to
help her with her schoolwork. [I still have to do all the things a mom does with less time.

The biggest hurdle for me as a student, and definitely my biggest success was
conquering the Health Occupation Aptitude Exam (HOAE). All of the selective health
programs require it, and it is a major piece of the admissions process. I had decided to
pursue the PTA program because I realized that as I aged, I really did love and want to
help people. The nurturing aspect of my personality had surfaced in the multi-level marketing job. I had done the required observation hours with several physical therapists that were friends, and I knew it was the right fit for me.

Before I could even take the exam, I had to conquer my math classes. I made it a point to take each one a single step at a time and congratulate myself after I successfully completed each course. When I finished each class, I acknowledged that I could do it. I also faced huge challenges with spelling because I’m a horrible speller. But the math and spelling were no competition for my fear of the HOAE.

I had to be successful on that exam. I was hysterical about it and studied for three months. If I failed it, then I couldn’t do what I wanted to do because all of the programs required it. There was a lot riding on that exam. I didn't have an extra year to wait because I knew that if I wasn't working my multi-level marketing business, I was going to lose my paycheck. I put a ton of pressure on myself over that exam. I was still scared to death when I took it because I didn't know if I was going to be able to pass it. I had a mental breakdown. This was the toughest part for me with going back to school and deciding if I could do it at this point in my life. Was I smart enough? Did I have enough information left in my brain? What am I going to do if have to start over? I was going to make damn sure that I passed that test because I wanted into the PTA program, and I wanted in this year, so I was determined.

[I’ll never forget walking in to take that test.] I thought it was going be handwritten, so when I walked in and it was on a computer, I panicked. The very first section was math, but I did my best. The last section was common sense stuff, and I
think I missed maybe one of those. I don't remember now, but I was in panic mode for so long. I think my brain was just done. I started panicking and running out of time on the exam. [I calmed myself by remembering that I had taken advantage of the first opportunity to take the exam, and there would be a second one, if needed. I passed with an 86%.

I knew I could do it. I knew it might take time for me to do it. I'm not super-fast. I have to study a lot, but my grade point average now is 3.9. I only have two B's, and one of those was one point away from an A. [It was in my sociology class from one of the times I came to school when I was younger, and I still remember exactly what happened.] I had to do a community service project for the class. I went to Children's Services, and they stuck me in a library the size of this room with the door shut and made me reorganize books. I was so mad because there was nothing I was going to learn reorganizing books. I wrote about it in my paper, and I got a B because of my negative attitude in the paper. I'm not mad about it anymore. It's a funny story now. I have a really good sense of humor. That makes a big difference in getting over things.

In the end, I really went back to school because I wanted that self-fulfillment. I wanted to say I did this. Even though what I did with the multi-level marketing company was great, I did it with someone else. Even though what I did with the cleaning business before was good and successful for as long as it could be, I did it with someone else. It wasn't just me. It wasn't just my thing. This is just my thing. This is just me. This is my knowledge, my ability. No one else can take credit and say it worked because of them. I wanted something that's just mine- all mine. Now that I’m almost done, I would say that
I would definitely do it all over again. However, I don't think I want to go back to school ever when I’m done.

[School also helped me acknowledge a few things about myself.] I shouldn't have remarried. I still have that needy in me from my childhood. I'm trying to work through it. I see it now, but I didn't see it before. Through the last two years with my husband not working in town, I've been able to become like an independent me again. It's been enlightening, amazing. I’ve gained self-awareness through school, putting my time into school and not letting somebody control me or tell me what I can and can't do. My husband is having a hard time with me because I won’t let him tell me what to do. He'll come home and accuse me of studying or doing homework all weekend. I have a midterm on Monday. I can't make my schedule match his anymore. It just works out that when I have something big, he comes home the weekend before. I'm here studying with people from school, so he's jealous.

[I’ve decided that as a student and as a mother, I’m going to make mistakes. I put the mistake behind me and move forward. I can’t keep thinking about it because it doesn’t change it.] I don't care that I mess up. I allow myself mess-ups. Honestly, I sometimes relapse. I drink a little bit. Not like my parents, but it happens. You have to quit beating yourself up and judging yourself. Just put a smile on your face and work through it. Be happy, because where else are you going to go?

I also think that helping the other students has helped me a lot, too. These young people nowadays, they're amazing. They know so much about life and relationships, and they're so amazing. I've learned from them. They don't make stupid decisions like I did
at their age. [On the not so positive side of helping others, I’ve had to deal with guilt.]
Last semester, I had been helping another student in the classroom who was on the verge
of failing. I spent a lot of time helping her, and I got to the point where I couldn't do it
anymore. I stopped studying with her because it was too time consuming for me. I was
putting her before my daughter, and I don't put anybody before my kids. I shouldn't have
helped her in the beginning as much. That weighs heavily on my shoulders.

[Even with all I’ve accomplished balancing my working life and my school life, I
am most proud of my role as a mother.] I have had a wonderful time raising my children.
It's me and them. I'm very protective of them. No one is allowed to enter their world.
It's difficult for other people, too, like my ex-husband with my son, and my current
husband with my daughter. I'm their mother, and you're not going to discipline them.

I think that my kids are both absolutely wonderful kids. Other people see that,
too. Not that society makes me decide how to be a mother, but my son has never yelled
at me or gotten angry with me. He has such a big heart. He is so super sweet and so
nice. He's not mean to people. He's not perfect either. I know that he drinks sometimes.
He's a wonderful person. I helped create that. That is a huge success. My daughter is
amazing, too.

I don't smother my children. I just make sure that I'm the best mom I can be to
them. I let them have their own independent ways because I know that part was very
good for me. I don't try to control everything that they do because they have to learn how
to be who they are by themselves. I was granted that, and I wouldn't want it any other
way. My mom couldn't tell me what to do ever, even when I was really little.
I respect my children like they're people, and they respect me equally. The love is so amazing, and that's why I'm so protective of them. My son respects me like I respect him. All of these other people that I've given respect haven't respected me back. I have a relationship with my children that I've never been able to create with another person with the exception of my sister.

My most successful moment is that I have always been there for my kids, and I always will be. I always make everything work that they need, and I will always make everything work. There will always be a lot of love. I care about my kids very much. I make sure that I make them number one over everything else. I made that decision when I had my children that this is where I'm going to be. I'm going to be a different parent than my parents were.

Megan’s total Adult Hope Scale Score was 55 out of a possible maximum total score of 64. Her Pathways score was 29 out of possible score of 32. Her Agency score was 26 out of a possible score of 32. An analysis of the meaning of the hope scale score is included in Chapter 6.

**Valerie’s Narrative Profile**

[My name is Valerie. I am in my next to final semester of an Associates of Science Degree at Zane State College (ZSC). I am a single mother with two children. My daughter is married with a child of her own and another one on the way. My son is a freshman at ZSC and lives at home with me. I take classes part-time and work a full-time job during the week and a part-time job on the weekend.]
I grew up in Zanesville. My parents divorced when I was in second grade, and I lived with my mother. My grandparents on my mother’s side were very influential in our lives. My grandmother was tiny but full of life and a very strong-willed woman. They gave us a place to live and put us to work, which built my strong work ethic. I was ten years old when I worked for my grandfather and got my first paycheck. My grandmother on my father’s side was also influential in my life. She was of Native American blood—a big-boned, bull headed woman with a significant amount of strength.] My mother had inner strength in her own way as she went through a lot and maintained a positive attitude.

I had a full high school career. I was popular. I played basketball, volleyball, ran track, and played the saxophone in the band. I also worked as a waitress and then started modeling school when I was 17. When I was 18, between my junior and senior year, I met the man who ended up being my husband. I got pregnant my senior year. We decided to get married in March. Two months later, in May, I graduated high school with my diploma. I had my daughter in August.

Up until that point, I was a 4.0 student. As an honors student, getting married and getting pregnant totally turned my world upside down. I was always really focused on my academics and never really dated in high school. I was one of those students who always knew what she wanted to do. I wanted to be a veterinarian. I was in the advanced placement program at Ohio University Zanesville (OUZ) with only 20 other students from my high school during my junior and senior years. I was accepted to go into pre-veterinary medicine in Colorado, and when I got pregnant, all of that changed. I was in
total shock, in total denial. I had my whole career and my whole life basically in front of me, and things completely changed. As I walked down the hall, pregnant, I was made fun of by not only students and peers but by teachers. There were very inappropriate things said by the teachers. I was stripped of wearing honors at graduation. The school didn’t feel that someone in my “state” should wear honors walking through graduation.

Once I got married and had my daughter, I felt that college wasn’t an option. I had a lot of family support- my mother, brothers, grandparents- but it was still difficult early on. I think I was in denial for probably the first couple of years, that this is my life, this is where I am. It took some time.

My husband was not supportive at all of me pursuing a college degree. He didn't want me to be more intelligent than he was, and he didn't want me to be around people who were more intelligent than he was. Looking back, he had a real self-conscious problem with that. He was a very jealous person. He was also an alcoholic for the last ten years of our marriage. The first few years it was about making ends meet. Where he worked, he didn’t have health insurance, so I ended up getting a job at a local hospital. A couple of years just turned into a few more, which turned into a few more. [I strongly felt that] having a family and being at home for my kids was more important than my needs.

When my son turned 16- he’s my youngest and finally self-sufficient- things had finally settled down in my life for me to be able to focus on what was right and what was important for me. It was time for me to pursue my goals, and I decided to start college. I had my evenings free. I was divorced at that point and my daughter had gotten married and moved out of the house, so it was just my son. I found myself spending the evenings
at home alone because he was with his dad or his friends. I spent a lot of time by myself, and I thought it was time to do something productive.

Going to college was a personal goal I always had. It was always a bit of a downer for me knowing that I was capable of a college degree and allowed myself to be in this situation. I can't necessarily blame my ex-husband because, even though he was very controlling, I guess I allowed him to be that way. Once I was out of that situation, and I got my finances and everything in order, it was just something I had to do for myself. It was something I wanted since I was in junior high school. The older you get, there are certain goals in the back of your head that if you never reach, you would die feeling like your life is not fulfilled. Pursing my education was something I always felt compelled to do. I'm not one to let things go undone. Sometimes it might take me awhile, but I always get everything done. I always find a way to do it. If I didn't do it, it would always be a major regret in my life. Staying on track and staying focused, realizing you can eliminate some of the things in your life that cause drama or cause issues, was the key.

[However, there was more in my decision to finally go to college, not just the fact that it was a lifelong dream and the timing was right. I wanted the equality at work that a college degree could bring.] I love my job, but I feel I don't get recognized for what I do. I'm not paid for what I do. And, I feel like because I only have a high school diploma, that it's taken advantage of a little bit when my skill set is so much higher. For example, whenever we have a director leave a department, I step in and take over until the new director is hired. How could someone with a high school diploma be held responsible to
do that and not get paid or get the notoriety and title? Only because I don't have letters after my name. The degree and the letters that I can add after my name will help with the equality I think I deserve.

[Making more money because of a college degree did not play a primary role in my decision to go to college.] Money and material things are not high on my importance list as long as I have enough to do what I want to do. I've always struggled with money, so I guess maybe I'm just used to it. Even growing up with my mom, we always struggled financially. As long as I have money to feed my kids, and I have a vehicle I can depend on, I'm ok. If I had more money, I would travel more. I would like to do that, so maybe getting the degree will open up some doors. It can’t hurt!

[However, money does raise a concern when it comes to having enough to get through college and not creating a ton of debt.] Being in my mid to late 40s and going into debt because of college is a concern. I do get some Pell grant, and I have a couple of scholarships that pay for a little more than half of my tuition. For the other half, I take out student loans. It is kind of concerning at my age, but I try to not take any more than I need. I figure I'll pay it back as I can. If I die, then Uncle Sam will have to just absorb them. I don't have the time to write essays and apply for a ton of scholarships. That takes away from my parenting time, my work time, or my time doing homework. The cost of books is rough, too. A lot of people might have money or finances that pay for their tuition but if they can't pay for books, they know that there's no sense in taking the classes.
Returning to college was a big deal. I talked to my son about my decision, but he is not expressive with his feelings. My daughter was really excited. My mom, who now lives in Florida, was concerned that I was not going to be able to juggle everything. So basically, the support system I had when I was younger was not there at this point. It has not been there for the last three years. My grandparents are deceased. My brothers have moved out of the city and have their families. My daughter has her husband and her baby. I've never remarried. So there's not really been a support system outside of the verbal encouragement via a phone conversation with my mom or daughter.

I don't necessarily have too many, if any, people that I can really point fingers at and say that they've been significant in getting me where I am. I feel pretty much responsible for that myself. It does help to have the positive reinforcement of compliments from my daughter and my mother. [My daughter tells me she is proud of me and admires my strength.] To me, being a successful mother is when your kids give you positive feedback, [especially when they get older.] My dad's a guy, so he doesn't really say a lot. My son's a teenager, so he doesn't even understand. My ex-husband is probably one of them that will tell me more than anybody else that he is proud of me, but he was the one that prevented me from going to school back when we were married. I don't have any ill will towards him but it's just kind of ironic that he's the one saying "I'm really proud of you." Where was that twenty years ago when we were married, and I needed to hear that? So I've got to give myself credit.

[Even though I had attended college when I was still in high school, the process of starting back, starting over was] pretty tedious with forms, meeting with advisors, getting
books- it can be really overwhelming, even as an adult. I just tried to focus on one thing at a time and not get overwhelmed.

Starting college seemed like a long time coming. I remember starting and thinking, I'm never going to make it to 60 credit hours. Now here I am. When I'm done with this semester, I will have 53 credit hours. I'm trying not to get too excited. I've had my share of disappointment in 40 some years, so I've learned to not appreciate what could be until it actually is. When I'm handed my diploma, I'll be happy. I'll say "Ok, I've done this."

It's taken me about four years to do a two-year degree. I try to focus on small chunks- another week down, another week closer. I keep the bigger goals in the back of my head, but setting small goals is a lot easier. For example, I used to run hurdles in high school. You can look at the end and say that's where I need to be, but if you're looking too far over there, you're going to miss the jump. My philosophy is just keep on going.

[I'm proud of what I've done as the first in my family to go to college. I'm also proud of my daughter as she attended college, too, completing a two-year program at OUZ.] My kids are my biggest achievement. We have a really good relationship. Maintaining communication with your kids and keeping in touch is a big achievement. Seeing them grow and seeing them happy, it makes you feel like you have done something.

My son is a freshman in college. I'm proud of my son. He still has some growing to do. He struggles with focus, organization, and keeping on task. [I try to help him by teaching him what I have learned as a student.] I'm also proud of my daughter. She did
everything the way everybody expects you to do. She went through high school, went to
college, graduated, got a great job, got married, built a house, and then had a baby. She
did everything in sequence and broke the family cycle of having children at a young age.

My grandmother was 16 when she got pregnant with my mom. My mom was 17 when
she got pregnant with my oldest brother. I was 18 when I got pregnant with my daughter.

My daughter was 23 when she got pregnant with my grandson. Realizing that I'm a
grandmother has been really hard to accept because I don't even feel like I'm grown up
yet let alone grown up enough to act like a grandmother! I think because I was so young,
I missed out on my 20s. The decade from my 20s to 30s was a whirlwind.

I know I made the right choice on waiting to attend college until my children were
grown and self-sufficient. I know there are a lot of mothers that go to school while they
are working and while their kids are younger. I wouldn't take that away from them, but it
just wasn't what I felt. I wanted to be at home with my kids at night. I didn't want to
work all day and then they would be with their dad or babysitter all night and be in bed
when I got home. I wanted to be with my kids. I've always spent a lot of time with them.
I've never missed any, hardly any, of their athletic activities. Now is the right time to
focus on my future. I don't want either one of my kids to go and feel like "my mom's by
herself." I don't want my son to feel like he can't move out and move on with his life
because I'm not remarried or with a significant other. I want them to know I'm doing
what I want to do and not feel pressured to hang out with Mom all the time.

[One of the biggest challenges with going to college is juggling all of my
responsibilities, including work and motherhood.] I work full time during the week and
part-time on the weekends. I work every day and then go straight from work to class. When I get home from class, it's either running errands, paying bills, going to the grocery, doing chores at home, feeding the animals, and of course, dinner, and laundry and all of that stuff. I'll do some homework at night, but typically I get up really early in the morning and work on homework when I'm fresh.

[Thankfully, I’ve been at my current job for quite some time. Because of that, I have a lot of vacation time.] My full-time supervisor is somewhat flexible with my schedule. My vacation time allows me to take off a couple of hours early so I can go to class. [I can also take off one day every other week to get things done, like errands, doctors’ appointments, paying bills that I can’t do because of work and school. Other important pieces included the flexibility of being able to take classes at the different ZSC campuses based on my work schedule/needs and the affordable tuition at the community college.] I don't know if I could've done it with tuition so much more at four-year universities.

[Of course, the success of a student can be measured in grades.] I think I'm doing good. I'm pulling a 3.86. I've only gotten two B's. I think that shows the hard work right there, especially with everything I'm juggling. I want to do as well as I think I can, which most of the time means an "A." As a perfectionist, I'm not happy to settle for anything less. But it's not just about getting the grade, it's taking something away from it. [I have a love of learning.] I see each class as a learning opportunity even if it is something I'm not necessarily interested in. I just finished a psychology class, and it was actually quite
interesting. All of the subjects I've had, I don't think I've had any bad subjects or subjects
that I didn't find interesting or find some worth.

[My advice to my children and other students is to figure out what kind of learner
you are.] I'm a hands-on learner. I work much better by physically attending classes. If I
read and sit still and sit idle, I just want to sleep. When you have the interaction of the
other students and instructor, it works best for me.

[I also stress the importance of networking.] I know younger people don't
necessarily understand the value of networking, but I've made a lot of connections at the
college. [Because of one of my connections, I was able to earn a scholarship. The
benefactor noticed my dedication and hardwork. Networking also helps with acquiring
books at reasonable prices.] The first couple of semesters I had to buy all my books, but
then I started meeting more people and finding people I could borrow books from or
purchase at a lower price.

[Other key aspects of being a successful student are prioritizing, staying organized
and not procrastinating.] If you're not organized and identify priorities, you feel like
you're losing grip a little bit. It lowers my stress level. You can teach prioritizing and
organization by breaking things down. For me, an organizer is really helpful. I'm also a
list person, which is probably because I’m a perfectionist. My son struggles with
organization, so for him, I help color code his school supplies for his classes and created
a dedicated workspace in our home. We also just got a dry erase board to try. I'll write
two or three things on a list for him to do. If he’s overwhelmed, I tell him to pick just
one thing. If you pick one thing and get it done to get it out of your head and off your
mind, you will feel better. If you're organized, you feel in control. [In addition, avoiding procrastination is key.] Over time and over the years, I've learned not to procrastinate. I've gotten much better at it. I keep up with the homework, especially in online classes. I've learned you can procrastinate, but it doesn't make it go away- it just makes it worse.

[As a student, it is also important to know when to ask for help.] I have a hard time asking for help but I will if it's dire, so you have to not be afraid of knowing when to ask for help. But you also don't want to be one of those people who is constantly needing attention so when you really do need it, people want to help. [At the college, I’m a member of TRiO, which is a big help, especially when I run into scheduling issues. With respect to which classes I’m taking,] I do my research and self-advise. However, I keep in contact with my advisor every semester. I tell her the classes I want to take, and she gives me advice. [I’ve also had very helpful instructors that have been patient and willing to work with me.]

Sometimes college can be overwhelming, and this semester has probably been the hardest so far with juggling work, family issues, and school.] I don’t like the fear of failing. [Sometimes I feel that if I set these big goals, it may lead to failure. To deal with that, I break the big goal down into smaller goals. The reality is] if you set a number of small goals, you're obtaining the big goal. This also works with solutions to problems I face. I don’t like to worry and lose sleep, because you need your sleep. [Therefore, to keep from worrying, I break the problem down, and the solution presents itself.] You talk through things and see it is not as bad as it seems. It's going to work out somehow.
It may not be exactly how you figured it would be, but there's going to be some kind of resolution. It will be what it is. I can only do what I can do.

I like to live in the present. I'm very realistic and in the moment. I don't look too far into the future, and I don't look too much behind me either. I keep all the things that have happened to me in the back of my head. It's like a famous saying that I have with my kids, “it is what it is.” You just deal with it, and you set goals.

[My identity as a mother and a student is a bit more complex. It takes a lot of focus and dedication when combining the roles. The biggest thing I’ve had to do is acknowledge my limits and know when to say no.] You have to be selfish a little bit to an extent. You have to protect your core, yourself, your kids. You have to protect what you are responsible for. You have to try and be a good person and help when and where you can, but you can't do it all. I don't want to feel like I can't do anything, so I feel like I can do everything, which sometimes is not good. I have a hard time saying no. But I've learned, and when people come to me and ask, I say "wait a second." Sometimes when you do say no, they make you feel like you're being mean, but you just can't do everything.

[Being a student and a mother can be very stressful. I’ve learned I have to make time for me, although I’ve had to sacrifice most of my “me” time. For example, I was always a runner and loved intense exercise with my kids, but that’s on hold until I’m done with school and have more time. I’ve had to learn other ways to take time for me. When I finally took a vacation to Myrtle Beach, I spent the first two full days in the hotel doing homework before I could enjoy my vacation. I still relaxed a bit by looking out at
the ocean while I worked, which gave me a sense of calm. When I first started my job, I would be so busy I would eat my lunch at my desk. I refuse to do that anymore.

[Because I work at a conservation center, I have access to the incredible beauty of the outdoors, so now I make sure I take my lunch outside or take a walk when I need a break.] I typically have a really high capacity for stress, but you have to know what your limits are. I can feel it coming on, and I know it's temporary and what to do to deal with it.

[You also have to find a sense of balance.] Everyone has their positive points, and everyone has their weak points. Draw on your positive and then try to work to strengthen your weak points. [I am a perfectionist, which is a strong point and a weak point. It's great for my work ethic but as a mother and even as a student, it can be a challenge.] If I'm going to do something, I do it full out. If I ask my son to sweep the floor, but he doesn't do it exactly how I would do it, at least it's done and I don't have to do it. You have to find a good balance because everybody doesn't do things like you do.

[The other key to well-being as a student and a mother is being happy with yourself.] You have to be at peace with yourself and comfortable with where you're at and how things are going. I'm pretty hard on myself when it comes to being productive, and so I don't know if I'm there yet. I feel like overall, I'm always at a place that I'm fairly comfortable in my own skin, with what I'm doing, and where I'm headed. I don't have a lot of money, but I'm able to take care of what I need to take care of without too much stress. I know people are always striving to do better and be different, and I'm kind
of happy with where I'm at. The only thing that bothers me a little is being alone. I've been by myself for a while.

[One day that sticks out in my memory with a sense of definite well-being at combining my roles] was when I was actually sitting in the first class and realized, “this is really real. I'm here.” I won't really be at a good sense of complete well-being until I get that diploma. Then I'll have that sense of "I did it. I always knew I could, but I actually did it." [Another important moment was when the college highlighted me in the profile book.] I was profiled as one of the transfer students. They came out to my work and took all kinds of pictures. It was pretty important and special to me. It gave me something to share with other people and family. It also gave me something to look back on in the future. It gave me energy and renewed juices to keep moving forward. It made me feel really hopeful and helped me keep going.

As a student and a mother, I value being able to combine responsibilities. I'm actually doing it and succeeding. However, I don't think about it a whole lot because I just do what needs to be done. [Another benefit of merging the roles of student and mother is perspective.] Being a mother and a student at the same time I think allows you from one perspective to look at the other and know what that other role is going through and vice versa. So as a mother you can look at some of the challenges that the student will face. And as a student, you can look at the mother and see what challenges that role faces. I think by waiting later in life to take classes and being a student has helped as a mother. I can show my kids the hard work and the study tools. It's not just talking the talk, they see me walk that walk. I can show my kids that hard work pays off.
It’s important to remember that the hardest thing as a mother, student or not, is watching your child struggle, whether it be through health problems or school. You want them to be successful. You want them to be happy and healthy. [It is the meaning of parenting.] When they struggle and you can help them, it makes it easier. But when they struggle and you don't know what to do, you feel lost and feel like you've failed. [You have to find a balance between helping them and letting them grow up. With my son,] I try to steer him, but not baby him. Things all happen for a reason. My son struggles with his learning disabilities. If he's going to be successful, he's got to learn to do a certain amount on his own. Maybe that's why my schooling has waited, to be helpful to him, too.

[When I look back, I think all of these things I’ve described have led me to where I am now.] I think all of us growing up, we have some dysfunction in our family at some level. We all choose to deal with it differently. You have to take that dysfunction and turn it into a positive. I used to think that the worst thing in my life was when my parents got divorced. I love my dad, we've reconciled. But now I know that if I would have grown up living with my dad, I wouldn't be the person I am today. He's very controlling and expects you to be who he wants you to be, not your individual self. So when I look back, it was a blessing that they were divorced because I wouldn't be the strong person that I am today. I can stand up to my dad and not worry about it. I am who I am.

[When I think of hope and resilience as descriptors, I would say] hope is not a good word for me, but resilience definitely is. I don’t hope for things to happen. I make them happen. I hope that bad things don't happen. But I don't necessarily believe that
something is going to happen until it actually happens, when I can actually feel it, see it, breathe it. I don't have hope that it's going to happen. You drive and push yourself to make it happen. I haven't thought along the way, "I hope I make it to graduation." If you don't, then something got in your way. You need to find out what those obstacles are and clear the path. It's not easy.

[My life has made me] a stronger and more resilient person. My ex-husband was controlling, but it was more from an addiction as an alcoholic. If I had stayed in that relationship, I would never have gone to school. I permitted him to do that. I've built a pretty tough skin through some of the stuff I've been through. It's your choice when you go through things. You can either let it beat you down or you can grow tough and take some good with the bad. Now sometimes I'm too strong and don't show emotion, which is hard for me. I've built up this wall, so I have to learn to balance it. I have broad shoulders, and I take whatever is thrown at me and deal with it. I hope with all of the things I have taught my kids by either by doing or saying, they will pass on and teach their kids. That's what life is about, teaching my kids the right things- giving them the tools to be successful is my job.

Valerie’s total Adult Hope Scale Score was 55 out of a possible maximum total score of 64. Her Pathways score was 24 out of possible score of 32. Her Agency score was 29 out of a possible score of 32. An analysis of the meaning of the hope scale score is included in Chapter 6.
Carla’s Narrative Profile

[My name is Carla. I’m in my early 50’s. I completed one Associate’s degree in Transportation Management and a second Associate’s degree in Environmental Science, Safety, and Health at Zane State College (ZSC) while I continue to pursue a Technical Studies degree at the neighboring Ohio University Zanesville campus. I am still taking classes at ZSC to meet some of my requirements for my bachelor’s. I have two daughters, one in fourth grade and one in college at West Virginia University. They have different fathers. I have worked my entire academic career and am currently employed part-time as a lab assistant at ZSC.

When I was 29, I found out I was pregnant. I had always wanted to be a mother but assumed it was an impossibility due to medical conditions. I had several miscarriages in my twenties and decided that motherhood was not going to be a reality. When I found out I was expecting, I was ecstatic.

Unfortunately, my husband and father of my eldest daughter was emotionally abusive, and my marriage did not work out, leaving me as a single mother. I worked as a home health aide to support my daughter. However, the job grew tiring and I desired a change, something different.] I needed something else, but I wasn’t really qualified for anything, so I went to college.

[My early experiences with education left a lot to be desired. As a junior high student, I was awkward. I didn’t make friends easily and hated high school. In fact, hate was a mild word. I loathed high school. I dropped out and earned my GED. Now faced
with a young daughter to feed and bills to pay, I decided to return to school and go to college and pursue my childhood dream - a career as a truck driver.

I enrolled at Akron University in the two-year, associate’s degree transportation management program. My experiences in college were vastly different than secondary education. I loved the college environment, the way the instructors treated the students like real people, and the love of learning and seriousness for study the other, older students like me brought to the classroom.

After completing my program and graduating summa cum laude, I took a job as a truck driver. At first, things went well. However, the long days and the commute took a toll on me and my daughter. I had to leave my daughter at a childcare center until her father could pick her up. He would then keep her until I could get home from work. This arrangement was not ideal, and he often did not keep his end of the bargain. As such, I decided to try a different position within the trucking industry, taking a desk job and working as a safety manager. Unfortunately, this, too, was not the answer. The days were still long with my daughter in childcare eleven hours a day. I switched companies, but the company refused to let me take off work if my daughter was sick.] It was a “good ‘ole boys” network where they would tell me, “You are supposed to be working, that’s somebody else’s job.” As I turned in my resignation, I retorted, “No, that’s my job. I’m the Mom.” [Although the pay was poor, I returned to home health care where at least I could control my schedule and be guaranteed flexibility. During this time, I had another daughter.
As my daughters grew and needed my constant attention less, I decided to return to school to pursue another field of study. I always told my kids, you have to do something you love if you want to be truly happy. I entered ZSC, originally beginning the radiology technology program. However, as I waited to be admitted to the selective program, I pondered the long work hours with the night shift, holiday, and weekend requirements. I didn’t really love radiology and decided if I was going to put in the time, it better be for something I loved. In one of my math classes, I overheard another student talking about an environmental science, safety, and health program. This piqued my interest as I had done safety work in the trucking industry. I was tenacious, questioning my math instructor about the program. He provided me with the program director’s name, and I reached out to him for more information. I didn’t give up. I realized the program would allow me to marry my love of the trucking industry with my interest in safety.] I really felt like it was important to show my kids that it's never too late to go back, it's never too late to change your mind. It's never too late to do better.

My daughters were excited for me as I returned to school, but at first it was a little rough. They wanted my attention. They are used to me being there to help them at their whim, at a moment’s notice. In the eyes of my youngest, I always had a book in my lap, and there was no place for her in my lap. [That was hard. As things settled into a routine and I juggled the housework, working, and school, we found a way to make the new arrangement work. In fact,] we would sit at the table sometimes and study together. It became something that was more of a partnership, a “mother-daughter” thing instead of “you’re not spending any time with me” kind of thing. [Sometimes I had to take one of
them to school with me if I couldn’t find a sitter.] I felt like it was important for her to see me in that role. Mom's not out horsing around telling you that I’m at school. I'm really doing this, and I'm working hard at it. In the back of my mind, she gets to see that mom is an adult studying herself stupid to try and get ahead. And to see that if I can do it, she can. I’m setting the bar for her.

[I always tell my daughters,] be able to take care of you before you worry about somebody else taking care of you. [I needed to show them it was true for me, too. Education is power, it gives me freedom, the power of choice and the ability to control my destiny.] A lot of girls coming out of high school, get married or get into relationships and they don't work out. Then what are they going to do? They have nothing. [It was not going to be me again, and it was not going to be my daughters.]

As a girl, it's so easy to fall into the wrong kind of relationships because you can't take care of yourself. I watched my mom be abused emotionally and mentally. There was no way I was ever going to be my mother and dependent on a man and like that. I was always going to be in a position that if a man mistreated me, I was able to walk out the door and know that I would be ok. And I did.

[I was blessed to have two very strong-willed aunts that were single mothers. Aunt May made her own baby food. She dressed in clothes from the thrift store but you would never guess they were thrift store clothes.] To this day, I don't know if that woman has ever bought new clothes! [Aunt June started in the same transportation management program that I did for my first degree when her son was little. I didn’t know it at the time that she had completed the same program years before, but I ended up
starting my path following her footsteps. She worked her way through eventually earning a bachelor’s degree and a law degree. She’s now an attorney. My grandmother was also amazing. Although not a single mom, she was a southern sharecropper. They were poor, and she found a way to make money as a seamstress doing contract work on the side. She’s passed on now, but these women have been role models for me. They’ve provided emotional support even though they couldn’t help financially or with other things, like childcare due to their age and the distance from my home. They showed me that women can do anything and stand on their own- no man required.] I wasn't raised to fall down and wait for somebody to come along and help me or do it for me.

[I have the skills to take care of myself.] I could always take care of myself, even if I didn't have the skills to get a good paying job. You do whatever you got to do, you figure it out. [For example, if my car needs a minor repair, I can do it myself. When my eldest left for college, she wanted to take the car with her. I told her no, not until she could change a tire.] I'm not sending you to West Virginia and having you call me because you have a flat!

[I would like to think I’ve taught my girls the benefit of an education. In our house, education is a priority! My youngest always reminds me.] “Mommy, you always say, homework first.” [My eldest refuses to be in a serious relationship until she is done with school. She wants to focus on her education. She’s now double-majoring in political science and history and will have completed both degrees in four-and-a-half years! This is even after she’s changed her major three times from biomedical engineering to music to political science/history. She refuses to give up. I’m very proud
of her.] Her accomplishments are what really feed me. She doesn't have kids. She’s not struggling to balance. By the time she's ready to have a family, she'll be rolling right where she wants to be. I think that's where the success is. If you find something you can spend the rest of your life doing and be happy doing it, that's the success story.

[My advice to other single mother students out there is to never give up.] Kids don't come with handbooks. They don't come with instruction manuals. Somehow it will all work out. [People would always say how great my kids were in public. I couldn’t understand how they were such different children at home.] Somewhere along the way it dawned on me that at home is where they are supposed to feel safe enough to test boundaries and spread their wings, and if she's not doing it anywhere else, and home is a safe enough place to try it, then I must be doing something right.

[I think the most important thing besides the emphasis in our house on education as power is the lesson on sacrifice.] I want kids that have the right values, and so I have to try and live those values that I want to instill in them. [I think they understand that even when I have to miss out on time with them, it’s so I can do better things for them. It is only temporary.] I just keep telling them that sometimes you've got to make sacrifices. But when you can see the light at the end of the tunnel, you know there's an end to it, it's not a forever thing.

[There are lots of people who have made sacrifices to help me get to where I am today. Not just my kids and my family, but my instructors and friends who have stood by me and worked to get me through the program. I feel I am a successful student. Grades do help define academic success. I’m proud that I’m summa cum laude with degrees in]
fields I love, and I achieved these successes as a single mom. But I also want my kids to know a successful student is one that tries. I mean, not everybody can do everything. If you are giving it your all, a C is a successful student if you've given it everything you had and made every effort. [A successful student has the] ability to set priorities and keep things moving. The good thing is, that comes with being a mom.

[In addition, as a student, I found my love for learning.] I think the things I really enjoyed the most were the projects. This is what you have to do, this is what we expect, now go do it. I would just tear it up, every time.

[On the flip side, I also figured out there would be different obstacles that I had not anticipated. Different situations that would try and test my faith and belief in myself. I had an instructor that was very difficult, and I did not like him in the least. He made class miserable, and I found myself dreading going to class. However, I thought of my girls, and I just could not give up.] Instead, I got mad. Because in those moments when I felt like that, that person had control over me, over my head, and I refuse to give somebody that I don't even like that much power over me. I had an abusive father that had that kind of power over me, and a husband after that, but I think that's why I won't ever let that happen again in my life. You don't get to have that power over me. If that's how you feel, if that's what you think of me, well you are entitled. I can't help that, I can't change it. I know better. I know exactly who I am and what I am, and I like me. So I don't care what anybody thinks. It took me a lot of therapy to be able to look in the mirror and know what my faults are and say, but I can live with that, I like me.
[I think hope means] the ability to keep going and push through no matter what. Hope goes along with never giving up and being determined. Resilience is those days where the kids were upset but you still have to go because you can't afford to miss this lab or you have an exam you can't afford to miss. You fight through and you bounce back. At graduation, I know I did this. I'm a success, and my daughters are here to see it.

Carla’s total Adult Hope Scale Score was 52 out of a possible maximum total score of 64. Her Pathways score was 26 out of possible score of 32. Her Agency score was 26 out of a possible score of 32. An analysis of the meaning of the hope scale score is included in Chapter 6.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter 4 presented the narrative profiles of the five participants in the study. The narrative profiles were the stories of the participants in their own words. The last paragraph in each narrative provides the scores of the Adult Hope Scale instrument for each participant. The common themes I, as the researcher, found among the profiles are in Chapter 5. The analysis of the hope scale scores is in Chapter 6.
Chapter 5: Common Themes

The purpose of Chapter 5 is to explore the common themes among the participants’ profiles provided in Chapter 4. The chapter begins with a discussion of the demographic characteristics of the women and a table to help understand the profiles of the individual participants.

It then proceeds into a discussion of the first common theme entitled “This Wasn’t the Plan” as the women share similar early childhood and high school experiences. None of the women envisioned themselves as single mothers when they were dreaming about adulthood in their childhood years. The theme also explores their feelings about becoming a mom, and their desire to begin again with the added role of college student.

The next theme is entitled “The Purpose” or the reason the women decided to attend college and what keeps them going. The Purpose fits into Snyder’s (1994) definition of hope and sense of willpower or agency. The participants in this study identify the key purpose of education in terms of economic power, breaking the cycle, and self-fulfillment. These are the drivers that keep them going to class even when there are obstacles in their paths.

The third theme is entitled “Overcoming Obstacles.” This theme explores how the women navigate the obstacles as they work their way through the community college. In Snyder’s (1994) definition of hope, this would be the waypower. The women employ a variety of mechanisms to navigate obstacles including a specific set of key attitudes and strategies. The effective strategies include support systems, goal setting, time and money
management techniques, and stress management techniques. The key attitudes include resilience, willingness to sacrifice, independence, and self-acceptance.

The final theme, entitled “Measuring Success,” explores the views of the women as they examine their roles as mother and student. The women view their children as their biggest success. With respect to their roles as students, they defined success in terms of grades but also in terms of effort/hard work, survival skills, and confidence levels/attitudes needed to make it through each day.

**Participant Characteristics**

The study included five participants. A summary of the characteristics of the women is included in Table 1. The women range in age from 20 years old to the early 50’s. The two younger moms– Audrey and Constance– are in their 20’s. Each mom has one child, approximately the same age (toddler to preschool years). The three remaining moms– Megan, Valerie, and Carla– are in their 40’s and 50’s. Their children are older ranging in age from nine to 24 years old. All of the children reside with the mothers save for Valerie’s 24-year-old daughter who is married and on her own with her own child, and Carla’s 21-year-old daughter who is away at college.

All of the women are near degree completion with the exception of Constance, who is just beginning her sophomore year. Megan and Audrey are in selective admissions programs in the health field. Valerie and Carla are pursuing general degrees in the sciences. Constance is pursuing a social work assistant degree, which falls under the social sciences.
Table 1

Summary of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant’s Age</th>
<th>Children (Age)</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Rank-Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audrey</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>One (3 years old)</td>
<td>Radiology</td>
<td>Sophomore- Final Semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constance</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>One (2 years old)</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>Start of Sophomore Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Two (9 and 22 years old)</td>
<td>Physical Therapy</td>
<td>Sophomore- Final Semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valerie</td>
<td>Mid 40’s</td>
<td>Two (18 and 24 years old)</td>
<td>Associates of Science</td>
<td>Sophomore- Next to Last Semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>Early 50’s</td>
<td>Two (9 and 21 years old)</td>
<td>Technical Studies Degree</td>
<td>Sophomore- Final Semester</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme 1 — This Wasn’t the Plan**

With respect to early life histories, the women were very similar. Their childhoods appeared to be marked by similar traumatic events and motherhood was not anticipated, especially motherhood as a single parent. In short, being a single mother was not the original plan for their lives. In this theme, I explore the connection between the women in terms of traumatic events in the years before college; the experience of becoming a mother; and the chance to begin again by adding the role of college student.
**Traumatic early years.**

There were several similarities in the early life histories of the women. All of their biological parents were divorced and at least one parent was an alcoholic and/or abusive. For most of them, their family circumstances appeared to lead to difficulties in school save for Valerie who excelled at academics and sports and enjoyed popularity until she became pregnant in her senior year.

In the case of Constance, she witnessed her father almost beat her mother and sister to death with a hammer. She remembered, “I woke up to my mom in a pool of blood… [my sister] was trying to stop him from beating my mom in the head with a hammer. He hit my sister with the back of the hammer that pulls the nail up, and she lost her eye. She was 12.” As a result, her mom finally left her dad, and they moved repeatedly. During high school, she changed schools three times. The schools were “rough,” and she spent much of the time bullied and afraid to fight back. Her grades suffered, and she did not begin to excel until her senior year.

Carla and Megan also had alcoholic and abusive parents. They, too, had rocky high school careers. Carla said she was awkward, struggled to make friends, and “loathed high school.” She eventually dropped out to earn a General Education Diploma (GED). In Megan’s case, both of her parents were alcoholics. She indicated her mother was very critical and difficult to be around. After moving out of her mother’s house in high school, she lived with her dad, only to be in charge of the household affairs and act as his caretaker. She said, “My sophomore year, I just went wild because I didn't have anyone to govern me.” She barely made it through high school. Reflecting on her high
school experience, Megan recounted, “I have no idea how I passed. I don't know how things worked out, but they did. That [sophomore] year was my roughest as far as grades went. After that, I kept everything at a C or D- not perfect, for sure.”

Similarly, Audrey indicated her father was an alcoholic, which led to the divorce of her parents and remarriages for both of them. Although she did well in school, Audrey challenged the social norms in her small town. She left the traditional high school and transferred to the vocational school, where she said, “Everyone knew me and was really nice. It was like a fresh start.” Audrey’s challenge in school was not academic performance, but instead, her desire to quit her nursing program at the vocational school against the wishes of her family.

**Becoming a mom.**

For many of the women, abuse followed into their adult years and all of their pregnancies were unplanned. Except for Audrey, all of the women were involved in abusive relationships with men. Valerie and Audrey became pregnant in high school. Megan and Constance became pregnant in their early 20s, and Carla became pregnant “later in life.” All of the women were originally in denial either believing they could not physically get pregnant, as in the case of Carla and Constance, or simply could not emotionally wrap their minds around pregnancy at that particular time in their life, such as high school or early college. In Valerie’s words,

> I was in total shock, in total denial. I had my whole career and my whole life basically in front of me, and things completely changed. As I walked down the hall, pregnant, I was made fun of by not only students and peers but by teachers.
There were very inappropriate things said by the teachers. I was stripped of wearing honors at graduation. The school didn’t feel that someone in my “state” should wear honors walking through graduation.

However, all of the women eventually embraced the idea of motherhood. According to Constance, who did not plan to be a single mom, “When I found out I was pregnant, I would talk to her every day. I would tell her I’m going to take care of you, and I'm going to nurture you.” In fact, for Constance, the power of impending motherhood was so strong that she quit smoking during her pregnancy. She says, “It was crazy, because I never quit, but that day, I just said “bye,” and I never picked them up again. It took me getting pregnant to do it. It can make [babies] so sick, and I didn't want her sick.” Megan, who had already started college, put her college dreams on hold for her son and went back to work, saying, “I could not leave him for school and for work. I couldn't do it. It was not in me to let someone else raise my child.” Valerie echoes the same sentiment saying, “[I strongly felt] having a family and being at home for my kids was more important than my needs.”

The chance to begin again.

Each of the women reached a point in their lives where they felt they must make a positive change, and the change takes the form of attending college. It is a chance for a new beginning. Constance and Audrey choose to attend college while their children are toddlers. Valerie, Carla, and Megan waited until their children are a little older and more self-sufficient. The reasons for the life change and assuming the role of student in
addition to mother are in “The Purpose” section below. This section focuses on the
courage to take on a new role in a completely new environment.

All of the women believe that the college environment is a positive change from
their previous schooling and offers a chance to begin again. For the two younger women,
Constance and Audrey, it is a new start and a chance to make a different future for their
young daughters. For example, Constance says, “I decided I was going to get into
college, and I wanted to stay. I'm getting back my mojo from 11th grade.” For Audrey,
no one knows her history or that she had a baby while she was still in high school, and it
allows her to reinvent herself into the person she wants to be. Audrey says, “I'm sure that
I looked young, but I could have been however old anyone wanted to assume. I didn't
have to sit there and feel like I had to explain myself.”

The older women also reflect on the positive change from their secondary
education years to their college years, although there is a much larger gap between the
times they were in high school and when they returned to college as compared to the
younger women, who were just a few years out of high school with young children. The
older women had children that were nine and older. Their perspectives on the difference
between college and high school focused more on the value of learning, the learning
environment, and self-awareness. For instance, Carla says, “My experiences in college
were vastly different than secondary education. I loved the college environment, the way
the instructors treated the students like real people, and the love of learning and
seriousness for study the other, older students like me brought to the classroom.” Valerie
also reflects on the importance of learning and how she has found value in every class she
has taken, even if it wasn’t related to her field of study. She says, “I see each class as a learning opportunity even if it is something I'm not necessarily interested in… I don't think I've had any bad subjects or subjects that I didn't find interesting or find some worth.” Megan notes the self-awareness that she has gained because she is now putting her time into school, which was different from when she was in high school. She says, “It's been enlightening, amazing. I’ve gained self-awareness through school, putting my time into school and not letting somebody control me or tell me what I can and can't do.”

**Theme 2 — The Purpose**

Single student mothers make the decision to attend college and earn a degree knowing that they will have to balance multiple roles. They must be driven or have a strong sense of purpose in order persevere through the trials that they will encounter in completing their degree. This corresponds with the first part of Snyder’s (1994) theory on hope — the importance of willpower. All of the participants highlight the importance that their children play in their lives. They view motherhood as their most important role, their biggest success. What key components or sense of purpose with respect to education could make it so enticing that they are willing to integrate the role of student with mother? The sense of purpose must be so strong that they are willing to make numerous sacrifices with respect to their children in the short-term for long-term gain. The belief that obtaining an education provides economic freedom motivates the participants. It allows them to break the cycle of poverty, early motherhood, and single parenting and leads to self-fulfillment.
**Economic power.**

According to the research completed by Breese and O’Toole (1995) and Haleman (2004), one of the main motivators for mothers to attend college is to increase their economic power in the hopes of supporting their families. For this reason, many of the women enroll in programs that are very pragmatic and increase economic welfare. For example, Audrey completed the radiology program, which is a highly selective program with high job placement rates upon graduation. Her interests were always in the medical field, where she started in a nursing program. Her family believed this was a great choice because it meant employment. However, she did not like nursing, and when she switched to radiology, she faced resistance from her family. In fact, in her words, “The biggest adjustment for [my family] wasn't the fact that I was a mom. It was that I decided I didn't want to do nursing because they all thought that I was going to regret it. When I decided to change my mind, I got some negative feedback. They were all worried I wouldn't find a job.” Audrey secured a job in the months leading up to graduation, and she counted it as one of her greatest accomplishments as a student. In fact, she had numerous job offers from which to choose. She said, “I figured I was going to be graduated and looking for somewhere, but…people are fighting over me. It's such a weird feeling.”

Earning a degree in an in-demand field means the ability to secure a job and provide money for the family. The need for money and financial security appear in the narrative profile for each participant. The desire is for just enough money to support the family and live comfortably. For these women, comfortably means not living paycheck to paycheck to meet essential needs, such as food and housing. For example, Valerie
says, “Money and material things are not high on the importance list as long as I [have enough] to do what I want to do. I've always struggled with money, so I guess maybe I'm just used to it. As long as I have money to feed my kids, and I have a vehicle I can depend on [I'm ok].” Many of the women experienced struggles in their childhood/past lives with money, which underscores the importance of education. Megan’s childhood struggle with money helped her learn the value of money at an early age. She says, “I learned about money. I learned early how to save money, how to not waste money on stupid things.”

For the younger mothers with smaller children (Constance and Audrey), in addition to meeting their bills every month, they would like the ability to provide their children with things that they wished they had growing up. Audrey promises her daughter they will have nice things, such as more toys, when she graduates and gets a good job. When her daughter wants to know why she has to go to school instead of staying and playing with her, Audrey tells her “Mommy has to go to school so I can get a good job, so I can make money, so we can get nice things and go do things together.” Constance echoes a similar hope saying, “I want to be able to give my daughter the life I never had.”

There is another bonus to economic freedom that goes beyond material things and physical needs. In Constance’s view, if she is able to earn her own money, she will not need to depend on a man to take care of her and her daughter. She hopes to teach her daughter that earning her own money keeps her independent. She illustrates this desire by saying she wants her daughter to remember as she grows up “I don't need a man to
give me money and say I'm cute, because my mom gives me money and tells me I'm beautiful all of the time.”

Carla views things similarly to Constance and wants her daughters to realize the importance of getting an education in a field that will allow them to make enough money to take care of themselves. Economic power is equivalent to freedom from a man. She says, “A lot of girls coming out of high school, get married, getting into relationships and they don't work out, and then what are they going to do? They have nothing.”

**Breaking the cycle.**

In the views of the participants, the purpose of education is not just to give them financial security; it is also the secret to “breaking the cycle,” which includes the cycle of physical and emotional abuse, poverty, and young motherhood. All of the women come from backgrounds where some type of abuse or trauma occurred during their childhood or previous relationships/marriages. There is more on the line for these women than just supporting their children. The future of generations of their family is at stake with a strong desire to prevent their children from suffering from the same abuses. Examples of various types of abuses are below including Constance’s experience with domestic violence, Valerie and Carla’s experiences with abusive relationships and young motherhood, and Megan’s experience with mentally abusive parents. In the eyes of the women, education is one way to prevent these cycles from continuing.

Constance realizes that education is not only a way out of poverty and the cycle of welfare that has plagued her family for generations, but it is also the key to breaking the
cycle of domestic violence and building a new life. She witnessed firsthand the abuse of her grandmother and mother as well as abuse from her daughter’s father. In her words:

I always told myself, that's what my mom went through. My grandma went through that with my grandfather. My mom went through that with my dad. I went through that with her dad. She's not going to go through that. I'm breaking this cycle…I feel like I can accomplish anything…I want to break that cycle. I'm about breaking bad habits…being on welfare is a bad habit for generations in my family. It's taken sadness for me to be able to break that cycle, but I want to build something.

In Valerie’s life, she weathers the storm of an unplanned pregnancy in high school and a marriage to an alcoholic, jealous and abusive husband before finally divorcing and eventually pursuing higher education, which was a life-long dream. She went back to college showing her daughter and son that hard work can pay off and education can change the course of your life. She sees her daughter as breaking the cycle of young motherhood, doing everything in the proper order including completing her education before motherhood. In Valerie’s words:

I’m proud of my daughter. She did everything the way everybody expects you to do. She went through high school, she went to college, she graduated college, has a great job, and then she got married. Then she built a house, then she got pregnant and had the baby after she did everything in sequence. She broke the family [cycle]...My grandmother was 16 when she got pregnant with my mom. My mom was 17 when she got pregnant with my oldest brother. I was 18 when I
got pregnant with my daughter. She was 23 when she got pregnant with my grandson.

Carla’s story is similar to Valerie’s in terms of wanting her daughters to do things the “right way” in the “right order.” She says, “She doesn't have kids, she's not struggling to balance. By the time she's ready to have a family, she'll be rolling right where she wants to be.”

For Megan, the key was to break the cycle of abusive parenting by becoming a better mother and using education to provide a better life for her children. She does not want to be the type of parent that her parents were — neglectful, self-absorbed, and critical. Although Megan is able to turn many of the negative aspects of her challenging childhood into positives, she realizes that she is very needy because she never felt fulfilled. This will haunt her throughout her life and come back several times to create problems, specifically in her marriages. She says, “I care about my kids very much. I make sure that I make them number one. I made that decision when I had my child that this is where I'm going to be. I'm going to be a different parent than they were.” She realizes that earning a college degree can help lift her out of despair and help her find herself again, breaking a cycle of self-doubt. This includes realizing she is not happy in her current marriage, where her husband is absent most of the time, and she still feels like a single mom. In her words:

I see it now, but I didn't see it before. Through the last two years with my husband not working in town, I've been able to become like an independent me again. It's been enlightening, amazing. The self-awareness I've gained through
school and putting my time into school and not letting somebody control me or
tell me what I can and can't do.

This idea of breaking the cycle leads to the desire for self-fulfillment and the sense that completing the degree fulfills a life-long dream.

**Self-fulfillment.**

With respect to the purpose of higher education, the motivation to earn a degree was not solely economic or viewed in terms of breaking a family cycle. For the participants, earning a degree also meant earning respect as well as financial stability, similar to the findings of the research completed by Duquaine-Watson (2007). In other words, earning a degree was not just about providing a better life for their children. The women, especially the women with older children, found a sense of self-fulfillment. This corresponds to the findings by Gigliotti (2004a) that women in a mid-life transition were seeking self-identity. While Audrey and Constance noted the power of education to change lives and the ability to have a career they loved, their immediate concern was improving their financial situation. This is likely because they as well as their children were young and financial needs for basic necessities were in the forefront of their minds. However, the older mothers with older children (Valerie, Carla, and Megan) perceived earning a college degree as personal fulfillment of a life-long dream.

An example of finally pursuing a dream after self-sacrificing as a mother is Valerie. She waited until her children were grown and self-sufficient to return to college, a journey she started as a promising high school student before her unplanned pregnancy. When she becomes a mother, she decides that the needs of her children are more
important than anything she personally wants or needs. The call to motherhood is selfless and more important than her personal goals. However, those dreams are not gone forever, just temporarily placed in the background. She says:

The older you get, there are certain goals in the back of our head that if we never reach, you would die feeling like your life is not fulfilled...Pursing my education was something I always felt compelled to do. And I'm not one to let things go undone. Sometimes it might take me awhile, but I always get everything done. I always find a way to do it.

Of importance, for Valerie, earning her degree is more than just fulfilling her dreams, but also gaining respect at work. She realizes that she contributes a lot to the organization where she works and often takes on responsibilities that are above her education level. However, she will never be promoted or earn the title, money, respect for the work she is doing until she gets the “piece of paper.” In her words:

I love my job, but I feel I don't get recognized for what I do. I'm not paid for what I do. And, I feel like because I only have a high school diploma, that it's taken advantage of a little bit when my skill set is so much higher. For example, whenever we have a director leave a department, I step in and take over until the new director is hired. How could someone with a high school diploma be held responsible to do that and not get paid or get the notoriety or title? Only because I don't have any letters after my name. The degree and the letters that I can add after my name will help with the equality I think I deserve.
Carla also realizes that money is not the only reason for education. The real purpose is doing something you love every day and finding fulfillment in your work, more than just making money to get through life. Carla says, “I think that's where the success is. If you find something where you can spend the rest of your life doing and be happy doing it, that's the success story.”

Megan goes a step further and realizes that earning a degree to do something you love not only provides self-fulfillment and respect, it provides a sense of accomplishment that no one can take away. Megan ran a cleaning business and then a multi-level marketing business before attending college full-time to earn a degree in physical therapy. While these businesses were successful, they were not the result of just her work or talents. She says:

I wanted that self-fulfillment for me to say I did this. Even though what I did with the multi-level marketing company was great, I did it with someone else. Even though what I did with the [cleaning] business before was good and successful for as long as it could be, but I did it with someone else. It wasn't just me. It wasn't just my thing. This is just my thing. This is just me. This is my knowledge, my ability. No one else can take credit and say it worked because of them. I wanted something that's just mine. All mine.

**Theme 3 — Overcoming Obstacles**

Single mother students face numerous obstacles as they work towards the completion of their degrees. One of the research questions in this study focuses on how these women manage to balance all of their roles successfully. Based on the interviews
with the participants, it appears that there are two main components to their success: effective strategies and positive attitudes. The effective strategies include support systems, goal setting, time and money management techniques, and stress management techniques. The key attitudes include the desire to keep getting back up no matter what (resilience); the belief that sacrifice is temporary and worth it for a long term gain; a confidence in their ability to be independent; and a sense of self-acceptance and the ability to forgive oneself.

**Effective strategies.**

The women employ a series of effective strategies to navigate the obstacles that occur along their path to degree completion. For the younger women with young children, obstacles included things like childcare and finding support services. However, this was not the overall experience for the women. The bigger obstacles appeared to be finding supportive individuals and managing time, money, and stress. Therefore, the women developed a variety of coping mechanisms or strategies to surmount the obstacles as discussed in the sections below.

**Support systems.**

The participants in the study employed a variety of support systems to help them on their journey through college. The key support appeared to be from various members of their families. Similar to the findings of Gigliotti (2004b), the key was the meaning of the support or who gave it, especially from older children, and not necessarily how much support was given. Each woman indicated how important the emotional support was from key members in her family, many of which she viewed as role models. For
example, Carla talks about the importance of her aunts as her role models. They were strong single mothers that took care of things by themselves, including one whose path she followed in earning her college degrees. Audrey indicated her mother provided her greatest emotional support system as well as her grandparents, her fiancé and a large extended family. Valerie’s support system included her mother and extended family. Megan and Constance appeared to have the least extensive support system with Megan relying solely on her sister for emotional support and Constance mainly influenced by her mother.

In addition, key support figures included their children. For the moms with younger children, their children could not verbalize support similar to an older child. However, the young children helped remind them why they were seeking higher education and kept them motivated. For the moms with older children, their children provided more of an active emotional support role. For example, Megan talked about her relationship with her teenage son. Her son supported her return to college. He understood her desire to change from a career in multi-level marketing to something less stressful. It allowed her to spend time with and support the family. She stated, “I think I started back to school his senior year. He was very supportive of me and is still very supportive. They knew how frustrated I was with multi-level marketing.” Carla summed up her experience with respect to support from her college-aged daughter by saying, “My daughter's out there, and she's cheering me on, so proud of me.”

Most important, these familial support systems appeared to provide mostly emotional support. For all of the women, there was very little mention of financial
support from family members. Megan briefly mentions her father helping her at one point with tuition when she originally started college. Audrey’s father helped in a different way with respect to finances by providing her and her family with a place to live rent-free while she was getting on her feet. However, for the most part, it appeared that family financial resources were sparse.

All of the women mentioned the importance of family support with childcare at various points during their periods of motherhood. For the older mothers, childcare was an issue when their children were younger, but because they waited to return to school until their children were older, it did not factor into their current situation. For example, for Megan, it prevented her from earning her college degree when her son was an infant/toddler. However, by the time she entered into the physical therapy program, her children were older, and childcare was no longer an issue. The situation was similar for Carla and Valerie.

Because Audrey and Constance had young children, the need for childcare help from family was crucial. Childcare issues provided a significant obstacle. This was similar to the findings by Duquaine-Watson (2007) where mothers with younger children encountered childcare barriers with the potential to impede their academic progress. Constance did not have family in the immediate area, and the network of friends that she had built could not provide a reliable source of childcare. Therefore, she relied on government assistance to pay for childcare at a private childcare center. Constance is the only participant that relied on significant external resources such as government and community assistance. She indicates she is grateful for the help, calling the church
community that helped her “angels.” Their assistance helps meet her basic living needs, but she does not cite the agencies as directly responsible for helping her stay and persevere in college. Audrey was able to rely on family for childcare help early in her academic career but then switched to a childcare center as her family members aged and her daughter needed more of a preschool setting.

With respect to sources of support outside the family, there were not many. This is in contradiction to the previous research. For example, most of the women did not indicate the importance of peers as suggested in the work by Mottarella, Fritzche, Whitten, and Bedsole (2008) or Van Stone, Nelson, and Niemann (1994). Audrey mentions the conflicts and challenges of working and studying with her peers, which consisted of the same cohort of women for two years. She says, “We’re with each other more than we’re around our families. [It] gets stressful at times. Girls get catty regardless of who they are and when you’re around each other that much, it gets overwhelming.” She often felt she was more of a mother to the other students and served as their support system instead of the other way around. Megan assumed a similar nurturing role in her program, providing more of a support system for other students than garnering support. Although inspired by the younger students, she recounts a situation where her support of a peer hurt her. In her words:

Last semester I had a lot of guilt. I helped another student in the classroom who is on the verge of failing. I've spent a lot of time helping her, and I got to the point where I couldn't do it anymore. I stopped studying with her because it was too time consuming for me. I was putting her before my daughter, and I don't put
anybody before my kids. I shouldn't have helped her in the beginning as much. That weighs heavily on my shoulders.

Although their classroom peers did not seem to provide a significant system of support, the students did indicate that they appreciated the support from their instructors and advisors. For example, Carla indicates that she had “instructors that bent over backwards to help me get through the program.” Valerie was part of the TRiO program, which helped her navigate any barriers she encountered with scheduling as well as provided encouragement. However, it appears that her advisor was a resource she utilizes on an as-needed, limited basis. She says, “I self-advice. I do my research, but I do keep in contact with my advisors every semester. I tell them the classes I want to take, and they give me advice.” Audrey draws strength from her instructors, especially her clinical instructor who was very critical and did not easily give praise. She says, “A couple of weeks ago, she … was talking to me, looking out for me. That made me feel good because I'm obviously doing something right if they're concerned with my future. When I got the job…she was so excited about it.” Once again, it appears that the support from the instructors and advisors was mostly emotional support and encouragement with little emphasis on navigating physical or institutional barriers with the exception of Valerie discussing scheduling issues.

Goal setting.

One strategy employed by the women in the study was goal setting. The participants started with a goal and then broke it down into various steps. Interestingly, although the ultimate goal was graduation, the participants did not cite that as their main
focus as it was too overwhelming or too far into the future. Instead, they picked a smaller, immediate goal, one thing at a time, which they divided into steps or mini-milestones. Valerie sums up her strategy by saying:

You just got to take it and try to focus on small chunks — another week down, another week closer. You do want to look a little far in advance, but for me, not looking too far. I keep the bigger goals in the back of my head. Setting small goals is a lot easier… It's overwhelming, and I don't like the fear of failing. If I don't set those big goals, there is no fear of failing. And the reality is, if you set a number of small goals, you're obtaining the big goal.

Audrey employed a similar strategy when she returned to school five weeks after the birth of her daughter. Her first step was to take one math class that just met a few days a week. After successfully completing that class, she slowly increased the number of classes until she went back full-time. Megan also took one class at a time as she built the skills she needed to take the entrance exam for her program. She started with a math class, because that was her biggest fear and then proceeded to English until she was ready to take the exam.

Carla and Constance speak about goal setting in terms that are more general. For example, Constance talks about making it to the end of each semester with her grades gradually improving as she goes. She says, “I was jumping into college and everything was weird…I thought…I don't think I can do this. I had 2 D's and I barely passed [the first semester]. And I was freaking out, like I don't think college is for me. But to go from 2
D’s to all B’s the term after that and then this term to an A and 2 C's, that's really good.”

She is determined to keep improving her grades each semester, one step at a time.

**Money and time management.**

Management of money and time appeared to be critical to the success of the single mothers as students. As previously indicated, the participants struggled with financial issues in their early years with many of them learning first-hand the value of money at a young age. Megan’s life experience illustrates this point as she discusses managing the household finances while she was in high school when her alcoholic father could not handle basic household chores. These financial struggles drive her to start multiple successful businesses. However, even though she makes a significant amount of money, the investment of time and sacrifices by her family inspire her to give up the businesses and return to school. By returning to school, she once again has to go back to the old days of strict financial discipline. She says, “I started spending money differently than I ever had, and it's hard to pull the reigns back on that one. You have to let that happen, change back to what I used to be but it's not any fun.”

The women also discuss little life changes, like becoming masters at clipping coupons as in Audrey’s case, or learning how to find community resources, such as using Craig’s List, as in the case of Constance. Audrey and her fiancé even seek the help of outside financial advising programs to learn the best ways to manage money.

The management of time appears to be just as important, if not even more important, for the student mothers. Their roles are many, and they must be able to multi-task, organize, and prioritize. Carla sums it up in just a few words by saying, “[It’s the]
ability to set priorities and keep things moving. It comes with being a mom.” Valerie provides more insight into the level of complexity of being trying to do it all alone by describing a typical week during the school term:

I work full time and work part-time on the weekends. I work every day and then go straight from work to class, and then when I get home from class, it's either running errands, paying bills, going to the grocery, doing chores at home like feeding the animals, and of course, dinner, and laundry and all of that stuff. I'll do some homework at night, but typically I get up really early in the morning about six and work on homework when I'm fresh…What I value the most about myself is being able to combine responsibilities. I'm actually doing it and succeeding. However, I don't think about it a whole lot because I just do what needs to be done.

Other strategies Valerie employs includes not procrastinating and making lists. She says, “if you're not organized, you kind of feel like you're losing grip a little bit. It lowers my stress level. You can teach organization by breaking things down.”

Constance knows what she needs to do and acknowledges that she is the only one that can do it. In her view, time management and organization skills are a necessary means of survival. She says, “I'm doing laundry, I'm in college, I'm washing clothes, I'm fixing dinner, I'm cleaning the living room.” There is no one else to do the work, and it must be done. She continues, “You have to have a lot of flexibility just to multi-task…you've kinda gotta be Wonder Woman and Super Woman at the same time…just being a woman, our job is tough.”
It appears that one of the biggest conflicts or role strains occurs for the women when they must choose between studying and spending time with their children. It is at this point that the women remind themselves they serve as role models for their children. Carla says:

But as a student and a mom, it was a bear trying to keep up with homework, and the house, and kids…But they kinda got it, and we would sit at the table sometimes and study together…And you know, it became something that was more of a partnership, a mother-daughter thing instead of you're not spending any time with me kind of thing…Mom's not out horsing around telling you that she's [at school]… I'm really doing this, and I'm working hard at it. In the back of my mind, she gets to see that Mom is an adult studying herself stupid to try and get ahead…If I can do it, you can.

In the case of Audrey, her time and organization management skills are necessary for more than just managing a household and school. She shares parenting with her daughter’s biological father. Because of this, she knows there is no room for procrastination and must manage her time wisely so she can make the most of the time with her daughter when she has her. Other students comment on how they cannot believe she can do everything and want to know how she gets it all done. Her reply to that is time management. It is the key to combining family and school responsibilities. She says:

When I don't have her, I try to get all my online homework done and try to get stuff knocked out as much as I can. I try to take advantage of the fact that she's
gone, that way when I do have her, I don't have to worry about it… I'm a lot more time oriented. I feel like people talk about budgeting money, and obviously that's very important, but I think people neglect the fact that you have to budget time also and make the time to do everything and make priorities become priorities. Obviously, school is important, but you have this other life that you're responsible for that you need to make the time to make sure that they're fed and make sure that they don't need anything or make sure that they still know you're caring.

**Stress management.**

The participants discuss the importance of stress management as they seek to balance the roles of mother and student. For Constance, her stress management strategy involves meditation. She says, “Meditation has been the best, and ice cream…That's my little moment…As parents, we need time-outs, too.” Valerie retreats to the outdoors, finding peace in her natural surroundings. She works at a nature preserve, so she makes sure to carve time out each day to go outside during her lunchtime. Audrey and Carla’s stress management strategies include spending time with family and re-connecting with their children. Audrey says, “To be able to come home and play with her, really talk to my fiancé, and go do something as a family to get my mind off of everything… I feel like that definitely helps, because I would go crazy being around everybody and not having them to go to and kind of relax and get away from it.”

Megan’s strategy is a bit different. She works through her stress by utilizing positive self-talk and growth techniques. It is a coping mechanism learned during conferences in her multi-level marketing career. In fact, learning positive self-talk coping
strategies were so powerful that she ended up divorcing her mentally abusive first husband. In her words:

Multi-level marketing is huge for personal growth and development. This is one thing that I think helped me get to where I am now. They have all of these personal growth books, positive self-talk, positive relationships. We had so many conferences because in order to do that business, you got to build yourself up to that point. You can't do it and be someone that doesn't have a lot of positive growth, positive self-confidence. So through that company, I became a different person, which is probably why I got divorced.

**Positive attitudes.**

In addition to the key strategies discussed above, the participants shared several common attitudes or internal characteristics. It appears that maintaining a positive attitude helped them along their journey to degree completion. These positive attitudes included the ability to keep getting back up each time they encountered an obstacle or boulder in their path, which is resilience. The women also believe that the sacrifices they are making to go to college are temporary and will be worth it when they obtain their degree. The women have confidence in their ability to be independent and stand on their own two feet without the help of others. For most of the women, this included the ability to stand independent from a man or not rely on a man to survive. Finally, the women had a strong sense of self-acceptance and the ability to forgive themselves. They believe in their abilities and love themselves for who they are and are willing to forgive themselves when they make a mistake. This helps keep them going instead of succumbing in defeat.
Keep getting back up.

Throughout the interviews, the various participants repeatedly express their desire to keep getting back up no matter how many times life knocks them down. They face numerous challenges/risks, and they find the courage to push through or find a way out of their current circumstances. This is similar to the definition of resilience, the ability to overcome adversity or risk in a positive manner. It also corresponds with Scott, Burns, and Cooney’s (1998) findings that indicated life circumstances are a better predictor of future successes than motivation.

While all of the women exhibit this attitude, one of the most poignant examples of this is the life experience of Constance. A long-time victim of abuse from childhood through adulthood, Constance finds the courage to leave her daughter’s father after he repeatedly abuses her. The last time he beats her results in the premature birth of her daughter. When the baby survives, she promises her she will change their life circumstances. Upon returning home, she packs her bags and leaves for good. She says:

I knew everything I went through pregnant with her and with her dad…I promised God I would leave him if everything was ok with my daughter. I don't know how, but I told him to give me the strength to leave…I was just praying about it from that day forward. Strength was my main focus. I needed strength, because I knew if I didn't have strength, I wasn't going to leave. I felt so weak. So once I got the strength and got out of the hospital, I kept praying to get my mind right and left...the baby wasn't even a month old...I had a bus ticket and two cents, and I left...Honestly, you just don't know your own strength...you have to go through
something to really know how strong you are… Because I had just been through so much, and a woman gets so tired…he could throw a thousand punches, and I'm still walking out the door.

As a result of these past experiences, including living in various shelters with a small baby until she finds a permanent place in Zanesville and starts college, Constance realizes that completing college is nothing compared to what she has been through in the past. She reminds herself of this as she faces challenges in the classroom. She says, “To not give up, to keep going, even when things look like they're cloudy, and it's not gonna turn around, just keep at it. It's going to be okay… I've been through worse, let's get this over with.”

**Temporary sacrifice.**

Another key attitude among the women is the belief that the sacrifices they are making during their time in college are only temporary, and the reward will be greater than the short-term sacrifice. The greatest sacrifices the women make appear to be in relation to the time spent with their children. According to the participants, the most important people in their lives are their children, and they believe that their relationships with their children will withstand the temporary sacrifice. To this end, this is similar to the findings of Quimby and O’Brien (2006) that secure attachment with their children was crucial in the persistence of student mothers.

Carla talks about the adjustments her children made when she returned to school and how difficult the initial transition was as her focus changed from meeting their every demand to juggling the role of mother and student. She says, “It was a little rough…they
wanted my attention. They are used to me being there to help them…at their whim, at a moment's notice.” She found herself constantly repeating, “Mommy has homework, mommy has to get this done, mommy has to study for a test.” She sometimes missed their activities because of the demands of her schoolwork. Carla says the hardest part was the realization that she “always had a book in my lap so there was no place for her in my lap.” Carla deals with the emotions very pragmatically, and simply says, “Yay, you know, it's a thing.”

Audrey and Constance have very young children. Their children struggle with the fact that “Mommy can’t play” because she has to go to class or do homework. It is more difficult for them to understand due to their age as compared to the older children of the other participants. Audrey explains, “I hate that [she’s not old enough to understand], but I feel successful that she knows if I'm not doing something I try to make the time for her or I try to make it a priority to know that this is temporary.”

It is not just the children that experience the temporary sacrifice. Megan’s spouse is rarely home due to his out-of-state job and is not the father of her children, hence her self-classification as a single mother. While her children are supportive and handle the temporary sacrifice of time with her, her husband is not as supportive or willing to sacrifice. He accuses her of studying or having a test every time he is home. She says, “I can't make my schedule match [his] anymore. It just works out that when I have something big, he comes home the weekend before and then I'm here studying with people from school, so he's like jealous.” During the interviews, Megan indicated the future of her marriage was uncertain, and she was not sure it would be able to withstand
the pressures of returning to school. However, the relationship with her children was solid. She says, “I care about my kids very much. I make sure that I make them number one. I made that decision when I had my child[ren], that this is where I'm going to be.”

In addition to viewing the sacrifice as temporary with respect to their children, Valerie acknowledges there has been personal sacrifice with respect to her time to take care of herself. She says, “I used to run a lot, so some things I'm not able to do with going to school. I don't exercise anymore. I have a free membership, and I can't get there because I'm too exhausted or have skads of homework to do. You have to make some sacrifices here and there, but it won't be forever.”

**Confidence in their independence.**

A prominent trait displayed by the women is confidence in their ability to be independent and succeed. They believe that they can be successful and will meet their goals. This corresponds with Quimby and O’Brien’s (2006) suggestion that self-efficacy is a predictor of well-being. These women have demonstrated through their life experiences that they believe in themselves and will carry-on regardless of personal obstacles. They have no problem counting on themselves to persevere with or without the support of others. They are fiercely independent.

For example, because of the circumstances of her childhood, Megan learned to be independent at a very early age. She places significant value on the trait of independence, so much so that she counts it as one of the most important things she can teach her children. She says:
I don't smother my children. I just make sure that I'm the best mom I can be to them. I let them have their own independent ways because I know that part was very good for me. I don't try to control everything that they do because they have to learn how to be who they are by themselves. I was granted that, and I wouldn't want it any other way.

For some of the women, independence not only means being capable of standing alone and taking care of what needs taken care of without help, it means being independent of a man. As previously discussed in the section on support systems, Carla and Constance want to make sure that their daughters do not depend on a man. Carla stresses the importance of independence as a woman saying, “A lot of women, young women, think they can't live alone. They are not ok being alone. They are not comfortable in their own skin or with themselves. Or they don't trust themselves. Whatever it is, I do. I like me.” Constance uses her independence as motivation saying, “Everything I've been through on the journey and just the struggles of being a single mom...knowing that I can't depend on anybody else but me...that really motivates me.” Constance also says, “When I feel like my world is tumbling upside down [and] I don't know how I'm going to get through this...[my daughter] has given me the push to independence that I never thought I had.”

This fervent independence also means that no one else has the right to define them. The women define themselves in their own terms and refuse to succumb to society’s definitions or stereotypes of a single mother. Audrey passionately expresses this when she says:
I would not be the typical 16 and pregnant like you see in the stories where they don't go on or they start college and drop out because it's too overwhelming. I knew I needed to push myself to get something. I was afraid I would take a break and not have the motivation to come back to it, so I stuck it out.

Not only does the independence allow them to define themselves, it means that no one has psychological power over them. For example, Carla refuses to let others have power over her, to make her feel inferior, ruin her day, or make her quit. The way she does it is by getting mad. She emphatically stresses this point by saying:

I got mad. Because in those moments when I felt like that [like giving up], that person had control over me, over my head. And I refused to give somebody that I don't even like that much power over me…You know, I had an abusive father that had that kind of power over me. And a husband after that, but I think that's why I won't ever let that happen again in my life…You don't get to have that power over me.

**Self-acceptance and the ability to forgive themselves.**

Finally, another common theme among the participants is an attitude of self-acceptance and the ability to forgive themselves. Their life experiences have taught them to love themselves just the way they are, including their perceived flawed past and imperfections. Because of this self-acceptance and forgiveness, they are not afraid to change, to make mistakes, and to move forward. This helps them get over the fear of trying new things, such as college, and keep trying even when they face setbacks in their courses.
During Carla’s interviews, she talks a lot about self-acceptance and learning to love herself just the way she is. She notes the long journey and years of therapy it took for her to say, "If that's how you feel, if that's what you think of me, well you are entitled. I can't help that. I can't change it.” She continues, “I know better. I know exactly who I am and what I am, and I like me. So I don't care what anybody thinks…It took me a lot of therapy to be able to look in the mirror and know what my faults are and say, I can live with that, I like me.” Valerie agrees with Carla and says:

You have to be happy with yourself to be able to spread that beyond and to be a good soul. You are at peace with yourself and comfortable with where you're at and how things are going. I'm pretty hard on myself when it comes to being productive, and so I don't know if I'm there yet. I feel like overall, I'm always at a place that I'm fairly comfortable in my own skin, with what I'm doing, and where I'm headed.

Constance notes that self-acceptance and patience with herself have helped her succeed as a student and a parent. She says, “Parenting is a challenge and school is a challenge. It helps me not to second guess myself.” She also says that learning to accept herself and forgive herself helps her to deal with change. In her words, “I wasn't really the type of person that liked change. [My past] taught me change is okay. Everything isn't permanent. You can make changes…You can say all day you're going to change, but it still takes your feet to move.”
An integral component of self-acceptance is also being able to forgive yourself. Megan explains the importance of this concept in her life the difference it made for her.

In her words:

I messed up because I did this. And I think, did it happen tomorrow? No. It happened yesterday. It's gone. It's done. I try not to talk about it or think about it because what good is it going to do? I'll probably go through it again because I still make mistakes. You've gotta quit beating yourself up and judging yourself. Just put a smile on your face and work through it. Be happy, because where else are you gonna go? I still mess up. I don't care that I mess up. I allow myself mess-ups.

The women realize that in order to keep moving forward, they must forgive themselves. They cannot afford to dwell on past mistakes. They must accept the inevitability of change. In order to become the person they want to be, they must embrace the person they are.

**Theme 4 — Measuring Success**

The final theme centers on how the women measure success in terms of their roles as mothers and their roles as students. The women describe the key lessons they want to pass on to their children and moments when they felt that they were successful as mothers. In general, the women felt that their number one achievements were their kids. With respect to their roles as students, the participants measured success in terms of grades. Although grades stood as physical proof of success, they also represented the
amount of effort/hard work, survival skills, and confidence levels/attitudes the students needed to make it through each day.

**As a mother.**

As a mother, the measure of success was in the values imparted to the children. The women felt that their children were their biggest achievements, and the relationships that they built with their children were their number one priority.

Audrey believes that being a successful mom means your children can come to you. She says, “I think just knowing that they feel like they can come to you. I feel like that's something that I struggle with now.”

Valerie says, “Being a successful mother is when your kids give you positive feedback. They get older, and they express to you how great you are. My daughter tells me how strong of a person I am, how much she admires me, and for them to see that, that's being a successful parent.” When reflecting on the importance of her role as a mother, she says “All of the things that I have taught her either by doing or saying, and she's going to pass it on and teach her kids. That's what it's about, teaching them the right things. Giving them the tools to be successful is our job.”

Constance measured her success as a mother by never giving up on her child. She says, “No matter what, [a mother] doesn't give up on her child. Always love the child and remind the child they love them no matter when things seem like they're tough.” Her key message to her daughter, in her words, is “It's not where you come from, and it's not what you go through, it's how you get through it.”
In Megan’s words, her most successful moment as a mother is “I have always been there for my kids, and I always will be. I always make everything work that they need, and I will make everything. There will always be a lot of love.” She has a tremendous amount of respect for her children, and in turn, they show her and others respect. One of the key values she wishes to teach her children is respect.

As a student.

As a student, the participants indicated that grades mattered and were a direct, physical measure of their successful integration of the role of student to their role as a mother. The factors to achieve this success included the amount of effort involved/hard work, the general ability to survive the day-to-day chaos, and conquering self-doubt.

For Audrey, success is the amount of effort and how hard you try. She attaches significant importance to hard work, and she wants to pass this along to her daughter. In Audrey’s words:

It's not necessarily that you get all A's even though I'm very obsessive compulsive about trying to get all A's. Just knowing that I'm actually putting in the effort that I need to or trying my hardest, as corny as it sounds, because even if I don't get an A, as long as I know that I studied or I put in the effort that I should, I'm a little bit more okay with it rather than if I don't put in the effort. I just have the motivation to sit there and keep trying to get stuff done until I'm done and then I get home and I'm exhausted, but I put that effort in. They know I'm trying. When she starts getting older [daughter], and starts doing stuff like that, just making sure that she
kind of proves herself that she is a hard worker, because I believe that helps
people stand out, and people would definitely recognize that sort of thing.

Carla is more succinct and direct when she talks about measuring success as a
student and combining the role with motherhood. Her sense of accomplishment comes
from surviving each day. She says, “What I value most about [combined parent/family
responsibilities and school responsibilities] is my sanity [and] the ability to survive it.”
As she thinks about it more, she concurs with Audrey. The success of a student is the
effort regardless of the grade. She says, “A successful student is one that tries, and I
mean, not everybody can do everything. If you are giving it your all, a C is a successful
student if you've given it everything you had and made every effort.”

Valerie also values her grades and the dedication/effort required to earn her
grades. However, she also provides a concrete example of a time when she felt she had
succeeded as a student that was beyond just earning good grades. She explains:

They highlighted me in the profile book [for the college]. I was profiled as one of
the transfer students. They came out to my work and took all kinds of pictures. It
was pretty important and special to me. It gave me something to share with other
people and family. It also gave me something to look back on in the future. It
gave me energy and renewed juices to keep moving forward. It made me feel
really hopeful and helped me keep going.

Similar to the others, Megan cites the importance of her grades. However, one of
her proudest, most successful moments as a student was conquering her self-doubt and
passing the Health Occupations Aptitude Exam. The idea of self-doubt also surfaces in
the theme related to confidence and acceptance. Megan believes she has the ability to succeed as a student and measures her success by breaking her goal into measurable pieces, tiny stopping points along the way.

**Summary**

Chapter 5 begins with a summary of the demographics of the participants. The participants are all Zane State College students ranging in age from their early 20’s to the 50’s. Their children ranged in age from two years old to their 20’s. Two of the women enrolled in selective programs in the medical field while the remaining women enrolled in the social and physical sciences or transfer programs.

The chapter then describes the four common themes I identified among the participant profiles that highlighted the findings relative to my research questions. The first theme discusses the shared early childhood and high school experiences as well as the experiences of becoming a mom. For the women, single motherhood was not the original plan, and college offers a chance to make a new start.

The second theme explores the motivation of the women to attend college, or the willpower utilizing Snyder’s (1994) definition with respect to the hope theory. In general, the women find motivation in the fact that a college degree will make a difference in terms of their economic power, breaking the cycle, and achieving self-fulfillment. These drivers keep them going to class even when obstacles are in their paths.

The third theme dives into the idea of waypower as described by Snyder (1994). The women navigate obstacles by employing effective strategies such as support systems,
goal setting, time and money management techniques, and stress management
techniques; and key attitudes including resilience, willingness to sacrifice, independence,
and self-acceptance.

Finally, the final theme delves into the way the women perceive their experiences
as a mother and student integrating the roles. As mothers, the women view their children
as their biggest success. With respect to their roles as students, they defined success in
terms of grades but also in terms of effort/hard work, survival skills, and confidence
levels/attitudes needed to make it through each day.

Based on the common themes, the next step is to review the findings in light of
the research questions and explore the implications for practice and further research.
These ideas are in Chapter 6.
Chapter 6: Summary and Implications

In Chapter 6, I explore the findings from the themes presented in Chapter 5 as they relate to the research questions and implications for practice and future research. I begin with a summary of the problem and research questions. Following is a review of the methods and significant findings, including a review of the Hope Scale scores for the participants and a discussion of the themes relative to the research questions. I conclude with the implications for current practice and future research as well as a personal reflection.

Restatement of the Problem and Research Questions

As previously stated, we know little about the relationship of the positive psychological beliefs such as hope and resilience and the balancing of the mother and student roles among the single mother students in the community college. Research suggests that psychological beliefs are a key to academic success. Therefore, my goal was to explore the motivational systems utilized by single mother students. I wanted to provide the institution with the information needed to create targeted retention programs and increase student success in the single mother student population.

To achieve this goal, I devised the following research questions: 1) How does the single mother student experience hope in her college journey? 2) What background, symbolic and environmental factors contribute to single mother students’ resilience? 3) How do they utilize hope and resiliency to overcome roadblocks? 4) What attitudes, strategies, and support systems help them succeed? 5) How do they view their roles as mothers and students?
Summary of the Method

The study included five participants from Zane State College, a suburban Ohio community college recommended by the faculty. I interviewed each participant using a three-interview sequence based on Seidman’s (2006) protocol with questions written in the appreciative lens. I developed narrative profiles of the participants utilizing demographics and words from the participants themselves as well as the Hope Scale. I shared the profiles with the participants as a form of member checking.

As part of the data analysis, I compared the profiles and themes generated utilizing focused and axial coding. I also explored them with the memo technique to create emerging theory (Charmaz, 2006; Seidman, 2006). I did not analyze the results of the individual Hope Scales until I completed the analysis of the themes. I used the Hope Scale scores to inform the data analysis. In addition, I presented the profiles to a review team for recommendations and alternate interpretations. I tested the questions and interview structure in a pilot study. As a researcher, I worked to acknowledge my potential biases and reflections in a researcher’s journal.

Findings

The Findings section begins with an analysis of the Adult Hope Scale scores for the participants and then moves into a recap of the four emergent themes detailed in Chapter 5. The themes I identified as part of the analysis of the narrative profiles included: This Wasn’t the Plan, The Purpose, Overcoming Obstacles, and Measuring Success.
Adult hope scale scores.

As indicated previously, Snyder’s (1994) Adult Hope Scale numerically measures hope. The score includes an agency sub score and a pathways sub score, with the sum of the two equaling the Hope Scale score. The sub scores may range from four to 32. The total Hope score ranges from eight to 64. There are no established cut-off points designated for low, medium, or high hope. However, a study completed on college students provides a comparison (Snyder et al., 2002). This study appears in the section reviewing the literature on hope in Chapter 2 and the Hope Scale section in Chapter 3.

The Hope scores for the participants ranged from a low of 52 to a high of 63 as presented in Table 2. If utilizing the numbers from the Snyder et al. (2002) study, Carla (total score of 52), Valerie (total score of 53), Megan (total score of 55) and Constance (total score of 57) exhibited medium-hope levels. Only Audrey (total score of 63) exhibited high hope. With respect to the sub scores, the pathways sub score was higher or the same as compared to the agency sub score for all of the women save for Valerie.

In general, it appears that the participants of the study have strong pathways sub scores, which would be essential to navigating the obstacles presented by integrating the role of the student and mother. The strategies and attitudes essential to building those scores include the themes as discussed above such as support systems; time, money, and stress management; goal setting; and positive attitude characteristics.

Given the strength of the total scores presented in Table 2, the agency sub score is also strong, albeit not as strong as the pathways score for most of the women. This may
Table 2

Summary of Adult Hope Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Total Score (out of 64)</th>
<th>Pathway Score (out of 32)</th>
<th>Agency Score (out of 32)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audrey</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constance</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valerie</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Be because the women desire to achieve economic power, break the cycle for their children, and attain self-fulfillment.

Interestingly, the total score appears to decrease with age of the participant as shown in the table, with the participants in order from youngest to oldest. It is not clear why this might be the case, and it is difficult to generalize due to the small number of participants. However, it is an interesting observation that warrants further exploration. Ideas for further research with respect to the Hope Scale are in the sections below.

The themes.

I identified four common themes among the participant profiles that highlighted the findings relative to the research questions. The first theme explores the common traumatic experiences shared by the women as well as their experiences related to becoming a mother and going to college. The second theme discusses the similarities
among the women in terms of their motivation to attend college. The third theme describes how the women surmount obstacles, and the fourth theme explains how the women measure success as a student and a mother.

**Theme 1 — this wasn’t the plan.**

For all of the women in the study, their dreams did not involve the title “single mother.” This first theme explores the path of their earlier years before becoming a college student and how they became mothers. I identified several commonalities in their profiles.

The first similarity was traumatic events. With respect to their years before becoming a college student, particularly their early years, all of the women were victims of some type of abuse including but not limited to mental and physical abuse. Several of the women had at least one alcoholic parent or significant other. Influenced by numerous traumatic events in their lives, these women used the lessons from the events to persevere. They also drew strength from various strong role models, including other strong women from their families.

The second similarity among the women was in their experiences of unplanned motherhood. With respect to becoming mothers, two of the women experienced unplanned pregnancies in high school and had to deal with the stigma of being a teenage mom. Valerie and Audrey discussed the insults and discrimination they experienced as young mothers from the school administration, teachers, and students. Although the other women had graduated high school before they became pregnant, with one mom not
getting pregnant until her early 30s, the pregnancies were still unplanned. Motherhood derailed plans to go to college.

It is important to note that although the original plan changed, the women never gave up hope that they would someday attend college. This segues into the next commonality in this theme. All of the women viewed entering college as a chance for a new beginning and a change in environment. For the younger mothers, the need to attend college became a necessity to find a career that would support their family. For the older mothers, the desire to attend college was fulfilling a dream that they postponed until their children were older or more self-sufficient.

**Theme 2 — the purpose.**

Theme 2 focuses on the reason for attending college. The participants in this study identify the key purpose of education in terms of economic power, breaking the cycle, and self-fulfillment. These drivers keep them going to class even when obstacles are in their paths.

The desire for economic freedom and the ability to support their families is a practical reason for attending college. The women choose fields that are in demand, such as in the medical field, or will help advance their position in their current jobs, such as a general science or technical studies degree. This is most evident with the younger mothers Audrey and Constance that are struggling financially and want to give their children a safe place to sleep, food to eat, and some of the luxuries that they never had.

In addition, all of the women talked about breaking the cycle. For some, this meant the cycle of poverty and generations of family on welfare. It also meant the cycle
of single motherhood or doing things in the “wrong order” such as having children before attending college or getting married. Breaking the cycle also meant the cycle of dependence on others, and in the case of several of the women, dependence on a man in particular. These women wanted more for their children, especially with respect to their daughters. They wanted their daughters to be independent and free to be with a man by choice instead of necessity.

Finally, a powerful form of motivation was the desire for self-fulfillment. This was especially evident with the older mothers (Megan, Valerie, and Carla). Their children were older, and they were ready to focus on their own development as women, not just their roles as mothers. Megan passionately describes her return to college as a time of self-awareness, remembering who she is and that she is strong and independent. She views her education as something that she has done on her own, and no one can take it from her or claim the credit. Valerie describes the feeling of finally working towards a lifelong dream. She does not regret the time she spent raising her children as she felt it was her calling and her duty. She did not want strangers raising her children, a sentiment echoed by Megan. However, now that the timing is right and she has the opportunity, she welcomes the chance to achieve her childhood goal.

**Theme 3 — overcoming obstacles.**

This theme explores how the women overcome the obstacles as they navigate their way towards degree completion. Their coping strategies include a variety of mechanisms grouped into effective strategies and positive attitudes.
The effective strategies include support systems, goal setting, time and money management techniques, and stress management techniques. For the women in the study, the support systems provided emotional support and consisted mostly of family and significant others as well as emotional support from their children. This appeared to be more important than financial or other types of support. For example, although the younger mothers needed help with childcare, they did not cite it as a reason they could not achieve their goals. However, they did employ strategies to get the childcare they needed by tapping into family (Audrey) and government assistance in paying for a childcare center (Constance). The mothers with older children indicated the lack of childcare was part of the reason in the past that they did not attend college, but it was not the main reason. The main reason was they were not ready to leave their children in the care of others, especially after they had worked all day. They were not willing to sacrifice the time away from their children to go to college. Another form of emotional support was encouragement from their instructors and advisors and peers, such as in study groups.

In addition to support systems, the women learned effective and purposeful goal setting. Goal setting kept the large goal (earning a degree) visible but not overwhelming. They achieved this by breaking the large goal into smaller goals. Each smaller goal was easily measurable and achievable in the short term. For instance, passing the first math class in a series of developmental math courses or increasing her grade point average each semester by just a little bit.
The women also utilized a variety of management strategies to harness time, manage money, and deal with stress. Each woman had a unique way to organize her daily life and run her household to meet the demands of the roles of student and mother. All of the women talked about the need for time management and indicated that organization and time management were required skills for success in both roles. They also discussed the need to manage money and allow time for themselves to decompress and stay focused on the task. These practical skills help keep self-doubt in the background.

In addition to effective strategies, the women had a set of key attitudes that included the ability to keep getting back up (resilience), the willingness to sacrifice, confidence in their independence, and self-acceptance that allowed them to forgive themselves when needed. Each of the women expressed the desire to keep going no matter what got in their way. They each exhibited the spirit of resilience. Some of them explained it eloquently and passionately, while others just noted it was something they had to do. Getting back up again and again after getting knocked down as a mother was not a choice, it was a mandate.

Along with an incredible resilience comes the attitude of sacrifice. The mothers sacrificed time with their children to achieve their educational goals. As stated, there was a tremendous motivation for earning the college degree, and the attitude that the sacrifice was short term and would be worth it in the end was critical. This willingness to sacrifice temporarily is key in goal setting, the ability to keep moving towards the goal and placing the sacrifice in the perspective of the bigger picture.
All of the women displayed confidence in their ability to be independent, to stand on their own and make decisions for themselves and their children. Constance provides a moving example of how confidence in herself led her to leave her abuser and make a new life for her and her daughter, which included going to college. She had to get to the breaking point before she was able to find the path out and have the confidence and courage to take it. She summed it up when she said, “Sometimes a woman just gets so tired.”

Finally, the women learned to love themselves for who they were and forgive themselves for mistakes they made. Carla talks about taking years to learn to love herself. Megan emphasizes the importance of learning positive self-talk and self-acceptance. This key attitude helps the women succeed. The ability to forgive themselves when they fail helps them keep getting back up again and taking on new challenges. They do not succumb to the fear of making a mistake or the fear of change.

**Theme 4 – measuring success.**

The women discussed how they integrated the role of student and mother and their greatest accomplishments. With respect to their role as mother, the women viewed their children as their biggest success. They valued the beliefs and morals they passed on to their children such as the value of education. The women viewed themselves as role models for their children in the educational process. They valued the relationships of respect that they built with their children, and the fact that their children could come to them when needed. Most important, they wanted their children to know they were loved more than anything else.
With respect to their roles as students, the definition of success was good grades. However, when asked to expand about measuring success as a student in terms other than physical grades, the women indicated that the letter grade told a bigger story. The grades were the physical manifestation of the hard work, time, and effort the women put into their studies. They illustrated the self-confidence needed to persevere and be successful. Most importantly, they represented the fact that the women were able to survive and make it through each day — one more day down, one more day to go to get to the goal.

Discussion

The research questions focus on two key components: hope and resilience. As previously stated, the literature review appeared to be lacking in studies detailing the analysis of motivational systems utilized by single mother students. The interviews with the participants show that hope and resilience are critical components to their success as students and as mothers.

The Discussion section includes three components, which address the research questions. The first two components discuss hope and resilience as they are integral to addressing the first four research questions. The last component discusses the integration of the roles of student and mother, which addresses the last research question.

Hope.

Snyder (1994) defines hope in the terms of setting goals and achieving those goals through willpower and waypower. One of the emerging themes throughout the interviews with the participants was the need for goal setting. Specifically, working
towards a larger goal by carefully creating smaller, achievable goals. In other words, a step-by-step approach.

One of the participants, Valerie, emphasized the importance of taking small steps to individual goals so as not to be overwhelmed by the number of steps needed to get to the large goal (graduation). Megan provided an excellent example of this methodical approach as she carefully plotted how she was going to work towards passing the Health Occupations Aptitude Exam, which was the first hurdle to her completion of a degree in Physical Therapy. Accomplishment of this goal helped fuel her confidence and propel her to her next goal ultimately leading to graduation.

This discussion of the importance of goal setting reiterated by each participant provides insight into the first research question of how the participants experience hope along their college journey.

*Willpower.*

Research questions three and four seek to discover how single mother students overcome roadblocks, and specifically what strategies, attitudes, and support systems they utilize. In addition to setting goals, which is a key component of hope, there has to be a strong sense of purpose (agency), which Snyder (1994) refers to as willpower. It is not enough to want to achieve a goal; it needs to be desired for a specific reason. This willpower helps to explain how the women overcome roadblocks.

The research (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Haleman, 2004; Mottarella, Fritzsche, Whitten, & Bedsole, 2009) suggests that the motivator for single mother students is their children. This appears to be true as illustrated by the women in this study, but it is
incredibly simplistic. The participants indicated a deeper, more complex motivation. The women did not just want things to change for the benefit of their children; they wanted to *be* the change.

On the surface, there was the popular motive of economic power. The participants, especially the younger mothers, Audrey and Constance, were in need of degrees that would get them careers to support their young families. However, the promised paycheck meant more than just food on the table or more toys to enjoy. It meant economic freedom. It meant not being dependent on anyone, especially a man as reiterated by Constance and Carla, who were victims of domestic violence. It meant the power to have a choice, a say in the future.

This power also meant breaking the cycle. In some instances, breaking the cycle meant the cycle of poverty. Other meanings included breaking the cycle of violence and single motherhood. The women expressed the desire to make sure their children and future generations were free from these constraints.

Finally, especially for the older mothers, Carla, Valerie, and Megan, the motivator was self-fulfillment. They yearned to fulfill a lifelong dream. They wanted the respect that comes with earning a degree. For Valerie, it was respect at work. For Megan, it was the respect and self-fulfillment that comes with knowing she had done something by herself that was just for her and that no one could take away.

*Waypower.*

Willpower is not enough to ensure completion of a goal or the ability to overcome roadblocks. It also takes waypower, the ability to navigate around the obstacles that will
inevitably appear along the journey. Some of the obstacles are easier to see than others. For example, Duquaine-Watson (2007) indicates that young mothers often faced childcare issues. This appears to be true in this study as well with Constance and Audrey discussing childcare issues. Audrey had an extensive network of family willing to help and later utilized a childcare center. Constance had little family in the area, but she was very resourceful and secured funding to send her daughter to a childcare center. These women navigated this roadblock with the help of support systems. However, the support systems appeared to play a much greater role than just help with physical obstacles, which begins to address the essence of research question four specific to support systems, strategies, and attitudes.

The essence of the support system for these participants appeared to be in the area of emotional support. The key figures in the support system appeared to be family members such as mothers, fathers, siblings, children, significant others, and even extended family and an ex-husband. Even when these people could not provide financial support or support in a physical manner, such as childcare, their real contribution was the words of encouragement and sounding board they provided. For the women in the study, this emotional support was the key.

In some cases, this emotional support also came from instructors/advisors and peers. This included the encouragement provided by mentors associated with the college. For their peers, Megan and Audrey mentioned the helpful nature of study groups and the cohort of students accompanying them through their programs. Several of the older women indicated inspiration from the younger students. Again, this support from
instructors and peers appeared to be emotional in nature and not tied to physical or policy supports.

Interestingly, there did not appear to be a significant amount of support needed in terms of policy or institutional support. For example, the women did not indicate that college policies, such as not being able to bring a child to a lab class, were prohibitive or made it difficult for them to navigate obstacles. It is possible that the women did not cite the college policies as impediments or obstacles because they believed college policies were stagnant, incapable of change. They appeared to accept the system of academia the way it is without questioning the reasoning or validity. The only mention came from Valerie when she discussed the struggle of finding enough night classes to meet her degree requirements. However, she did not dwell on this challenge and quickly found a way around the obstacle by eliciting the help of the TRiO advisors. She viewed the obstacle in terms of what was in her power to fix, and not what the institution could do to help.

Other effective strategies included goal setting skills as discussed above and management skills. Management skills included the ability to manage time, money, and stress. The women were very good at organizing their time to get things done in the most effective manner possible. Many of the women juggled jobs in addition to school and family responsibilities. Procrastination was not an option. They discussed specific organizational strategies, such as Valerie’s examples with color-coding folders and designating early morning hours as homework time. Stress management was also an
important component with the women acknowledging the need for “me time” even with all of the responsibilities they had to juggle each day.

With respect to this study, the most interesting tools used by the women to overcome obstacles where those defined as key positive attitudes, which also provides additional insight into research question four. This is the area where prior research was the most lacking. Attitudes exhibited by all of the women included a significant amount of inner strength, and the belief that they could overcome anything. This is resilience, which appears in the next section.

Another key positive attitude included the willingness to make temporary and often painful sacrifices, with the belief that the long-term gain would prove worth it. In other words, keeping the end goal in the back of the mind while working diligently to meet the incremental goals. The most painful sacrifice was the time away from their children. Many times they would try to integrate what they needed to do with the needs of their children such as studying together as in Carla’s story. This also served as a role modeling positive student behaviors for their children.

The participants also had a strong belief in themselves and their ability to navigate the waters alone. They were not afraid to be independent, although for some of them, this path to independence was a very painful one. In Constance’s story, she talks about how she was not sure she could do it, but then she realizes what she has been through, and it gives her strength to stand-alone. In the case of Audrey, she has to exercise this independence when she goes against her family’s wishes and leaves nursing to pursue radiology.
The last common attitude found among the participants was the ability to accept and forgive oneself. By accepting themselves for who and what they are, they are willing to take on new challenges. Their past does not hold them hostage because they learned to let go. They can turn a negative situation into a positive one by utilizing reflection, which is a requirement in the self-acceptance process. This attitude helps keep them moving.

Resilience.

Key to research questions two and three is the concept of resilience. The concept of resilience involves the ability to overcome adversity or risk (Kaplan, 2002). People with high resilience levels exhibit positive psychological capital, such as self-confidence, optimism, and hope (Luthans, Vogelgesang, & Lester, 2006).

It is evident from the stories of the participants that they have experienced numerous roadblocks in their lives even before they attended college. Their shared experiences of traumatic childhood events and unplanned single motherhood as described in the first theme provide the environmental factors that have contributed significantly to the development of resiliency. Howell (2004) suggests positive successes moving roadblocks help build resilience and increase the likelihood of future successes. Therefore, it is possible that the previous experiences of the women placed the groundwork needed to succeed in college.

When asked to describe resilience, the women referred to it as the refusal to give up. A repetitive theme in their stories is the idea that they must keep moving forward and getting back up again and again no matter what happens. Failure is not an option in their
worlds. They build on numerous characteristics to increase resiliency including the ability to turn negative experiences into positive ones. For example, Megan says that her rough childhood and obsessive-compulsive mother with respect to cleaning helped her build a very successful cleaning business in her adult years. She also credits her upbringing by alcoholic parents with making her the independent person she is today.

Role integration.

The very first thing evident in each of the interviews with the participants was the pride in their children. Their facial and emotional expressions conveyed this sentiment as well. These women view their children as their number one success. They are willing to sacrifice anything and everything for them. Many of them expressed the desire for their children to do things the “right way” instead of the path they took. Although they did not do things in the “traditional manner,” i.e. go to college and then have kids, the women took pride in the fact that their children would be there to witness their graduations. They believe in being role models so their children will also go to college. They talked about the positive traits they see in their children that will help them build hope and resilience, the components for success.

It is evident that role strain exists for the women as they discuss the challenges of integrating the role of mother with the role of student. The younger women faced some different challenges as compared to the older women, such as with childcare, but overall, the biggest challenge was just surviving day-to-day. They discussed the key components to being a successful student, such as a significant amount of effort and hard work. They all believed the final grade was not as important as the amount of effort that went into the
work. Several of them talked about learning just for the love of learning and not completely driven by earning good grades. Emotionally, they had to conquer the self-doubt that tried to creep into their daily lives at the college. They employed the strategies detailed in the waypower and willpower sections above to defeat self-doubt. Based on the contributions of these factors, the ultimate manifestation of success was in the final course grades. In their viewpoints, the sum of the grades equaled graduation.

**Implications for Current Practice**

The ultimate goal of this research study was to develop implications for current practice. As a faculty member at a community college, I am very interested in learning from the experiences of these students and building on them to assist other students with similar experiences.

Based on my research as well as interventions suggested in the prior research, I think the community college, specifically Zane State College, would benefit from administering the Adult Hope Scale to incoming single student mothers and potentially, all incoming students. Utilizing Snyder’s (1994) theory and recommendations, there are specific interventions designed to increase waypower and willpower thinking. The participants in this study provide the evidence that such strategies work. As such, based on the students’ Hope Scale scores, the college would provide targeted interventions through intrusive advising, which may lead to increased retention as the students persevere on the path towards degree completion. In addition to targeted interventions, the institution would use general workshops to reach a larger group of students, cost effectively expanding the potential impact of building hopeful thinking.
Other ideas include implementing a mentorship program and educating faculty members and advisors on the needs of single mother students. Finally, the institution needs to review policies and their impact on single mother students, specifically in regards to retention.

**Adult hope scale.**

As suggested by Snyder, et al. (2002), the Hope Scale may be a useful tool for predicting student success and retention. The Hope Scale identifies areas of concern, such as low waypower or low willpower. Administering the Hope Scale as part of intrusive advising allows the institution to identify students with low Hope scores. This allows the institution to target interventions for students and increase retention so the students achieve the ultimate goal – a college degree.

Achievement of a goal inspires the students to achieve additional goals (Snyder, 1994). The students build relationships with others sharing goals, which creates hopeful thinking among their peers. This in turn leads to retention of those peers. It may also lead to recruitment of new students from the successful student’s support network that think, “If she can do it, I can, too.” Hopeful thinking has the potential to spread like the ripple effect empowering the entire community. This is, and should be, a key component to the mission of the community college.

Is it possible to increase hope in adult students? Snyder (1994) contents it is. He suggests several ways to increase waypower and willpower among adults. The women in this study confirm the necessary skills and attitudes for high waypower and willpower as
presented in Snyder’s (1994) work. They illustrate many of the principles he stresses as key to hopeful thinking.

Based on the Hope Scale scores of the participants of this study, the women exhibited a decent level of hope. They persevered despite the obstacles in front of them. I think it would be beneficial for the college to consider administering the Hope Scale to single mother students through intrusive advising. This could potentially help the college determine which interventions or services may be helpful to the student and implement targeted interventions.

For example, a potential new student takes the Hope Scale. The scores indicate low pathways thinking. During the advising session, the advisor learns the new student is a single mother with young children. Knowing that the pathways score is low, the advisor asks questions about the obstacles the student faces or may face in getting to or through school. The advisor learns the student anticipates childcare issues. Now the advisor is in the position to provide information on community resources about childcare. More importantly, the advisor has the opportunity to provide methods on increasing waypower. In Snyder’s (1994) book, he suggests several specific techniques to build waypower in adults and spark hopeful thinking.

The women in the study utilized many of the tools suggested by Snyder (1994). The tools include breaking larger goals into easily achievable sub-goals, identifying future potential roadblocks, and mentally rehearsing paths around those roadblocks forming multiple routes to success. Snyder (1994) also cites the importance of building skills in deficit areas that help the student accomplish a sub-goal. He provides the
example of learning to type, which facilitates the completion of assignments. This leads to the achievement of the sub-goal of successfully completing a course and ultimately another step closer to graduation.

Snyder (1994) also suggests a way to increase waypower through the building of relationships. He recommends taking small steps every day to make new friends that share similar goals. The women in this study underscore the importance of the emotional support system. Key support people, such as friends, family, advisors, help build confidence. Student peers share the same ultimate goal – graduation. Bonding with other students with a similar goal may help increase waypower thinking, and therefore, retention.

Also critical is the ability to ask for help when needed. Although fiercely independent, the women in this study knew when it was time to ask for help and were not afraid to ask.

If the agency sub score is low, it could be that the student may need interventions with goal setting or confidence building. Snyder’s (1994) suggestions for building willpower in adults include learning how to set realistic, achievable goals. This does not include just setting small goals and achieving them. Sometimes, it means learning to give up a goal. In this case, “re-gaoling” is the answer. The women in this study illustrate this by setting priorities. They are not afraid to wait on a particular goal or adjust their expectations. For example, Valerie always wanted to go to college. When she had her children, she “re-gaoled,” placing the needs of her children first. After they were self-sufficient, she “re-gaoled” again and focused on herself and her needs.
Also key to increasing willpower thinking is to live in the present but also draw strength from past successes (Snyder, 1994). The women repeatedly demonstrate this skill. They reflect on their accomplishments drawing strength without dwelling on the past or focusing too much on the future. In particular, Constance uses her past experiences to reinforce her determination to succeed, especially in the face of a roadblock. She recalls what she went through and decides that if she can get through that, she can get through anything. This keeps her moving forward.

Another important component to increase willpower, and one that I feel is most often overlooked, is humor (Snyder, 1994). Intuitively, we know the ability to laugh at oneself and finding humor in unfortunate events and mistakes is critical to our mental well-being. Snyder (1994) demonstrates in a scholarly manner the importance of humor, and its ability to increase willpower thinking. The women in the study show how they laugh at themselves, finding humor in past experiences and self-forgiveness. Megan illustrates this by recounting her experience with her community service assignment. She laughs at herself and, in reflection, admonishes herself for her previous poor attitude. Humor increases willpower.

Finally, Snyder (1994) provides numerous practical elements to increasing willpower, such as eating a healthy diet, exercising, managing stress, and managing/defeating bad habits (such as smoking). The college is in a unique place to address these issues with students and in the community in general through educational outreach.
**Workshops.**

The college may implement many of the ideas mentioned above at the student community level instead of just targeting individual students, which may be cost prohibitive. As mentioned above, the college would benefit from administering the Hope Scale to all students. This would help identify the areas of need for the general student body. Adult Hope Scale scores, specifically the sub scores, could provide clues as to what interventions or workshops would be helpful to the student community in general.

As previously stated with respect to individual students, one of the key components to the success of the participants in this study was effective goal setting. If the students can learn to set incremental, realistic goals, each achievement will feed into the next. This is also a key concept in the idea of developing resiliency. It is likely that goal setting is a common challenge among the student body. Developing workshops utilizing Snyder’s (1994) principles on goal setting described previously would likely benefit the student body as a whole.

Other possible workshops besides goal setting potentially influencing the study body at large include workshops geared towards building self-confidence. Quimby and O’Brien (2006) suggest counseling targeted at helping manage psychological stress instead of interventions for academic performance. In Megan’s case, she experienced the power of confidence building workshops in the multi-level marketing world. She speaks to the power of that type of positive environment and intervention. For others, the focus may be on time, stress or money management, which were key areas for success identified by the participants.
Creating workshops comes with a word of caution. It is my experience that sometimes workshops include a one-size-fits-all approach. As indicated by Gigliotti (2004b), workshops tailored to the needs of the students, such as workshops on handling young children for mothers with young children versus workshops for older mothers that may need help communicating with older children or discovering their identity, are the most beneficial. By giving all students the Hope Scale and using the Hope Scale sub scores, the institution would design workshops targeted to those different needs and areas for development specific to our student population.

**Mentorship.**

All of the women indicated that support systems were crucial to their success. For the younger mothers with young children, these support systems include external resources, such as childcare and/or government resources. The older women did not need these types of external support services. However, all of the women indicated that emotional support systems were necessary.

In general, the emotional support system was close family members and to a lesser extent, instructors, advisors, and peers. The institution should try to help students cultivate this emotional support system keeping in mind the needs of the new role the single mother assumes – the role of student. The women in this study illustrate the special needs they have integrating the role of mother and student. For the women with local emotional support systems, this means inviting key family members/support persons to orientation and explaining ways that the family can support the college student.
For some of the women, such as Constance, the family support system was very far away. To that end, it would be worthwhile to explore establishing a mentorship program. A network of possible mentors might be beneficial and would likely provide support to those students that have local family support systems. The network could consist of mentors in the field of interest of the student that could provide guidance on juggling the numerous roles of single mother students.

**Faculty/advisor education.**

The study participants indicated that their instructors and advisors played a role in their success, particularly with respect to emotional support/encouragement. Therefore, as part of professional development programs already in place at the institution, it would be helpful to educate faculty and advisors on the needs of single mother students. The women in the study did not indicate they needed special treatment or accommodations because they are single mothers. Instead, they indicated the power of words of encouragement and acknowledgement.

It is through the professional development forum that faculty and advisors learn about hope and increasing hopeful thinking. The faculty and advisors should be taught some of the basic principles of increasing waypower and willpower thinking indicated in Snyder’s (1994) work. These techniques would be employed in the intrusive advising process as well as in individual interactions with students-faculty and in the classroom. As an added benefit, this would provide insight for the advisors and faculty members with respect to their own Hope score and waypower and willpower thinking and skills.
Policy review.

As highlighted in Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, the students at the college do not exist in a vacuum. Their environment influences them and their behaviors. Relevant environmental systems operate at different levels—from those in direct, regular interaction with students (i.e., Microsystems) to major societal events (i.e., Macrosystems). As previously mentioned, the women did not identify many institutional roadblocks. When they did identify a roadblock, such as inconvenient class times, they dealt with the challenge as if it was their problem to handle and not the responsibility of the institution. It is interesting that the women challenged the status quo or “the way things were always done” in many areas of their lives, but not in the academic setting.

Therefore, it is incumbent on the institution to review policies that might be contributing to the roadblocks for single mother students. Bronfenbrenner (1979) indicates that political arenas at the macrosystem level include policies and procedures that influence human development. As such, policies and procedures at the institutional level affect student development, which ultimately influences retention and degree attainment.

Examples of policies and procedures potentially impacting single mothers include course-scheduling timelines. Valerie indicated the difficulty she had finding the courses she needed after work to finish her degree. She surmounted the obstacle with the help of an advisor. However, at the institutional level, the college should examine course scheduling and distribution of courses throughout the day instead of continuing the “we
have always offered this course at this time” approach. Data generated at the institutional level would provide insight into student enrollment trends a specific course times.

Another policy potentially affecting single mother students is the “no children at school” policy. This is certainly understandable in a lab situation for safety considerations. However, this blanket policy does not allow for the special circumstances, such as when a student needs to simply make-up a test or quiz or visit the financial aid office. Overly restrictive policies without latitude might place an unnecessary roadblock in the path of the student. There are creative solutions and simple adjustments to policies like this, such as allowing children in certain areas of the college or at certain times of the day.

The best way for the institution to identify and address these policies and procedures is to ask the faculty and staff to troubleshoot the problems they encounter every day. They are in touch with the changing needs of the student population and can brainstorm ways to help the institution eliminate unnecessary roadblocks. They can identify roadblocks based in policy and based in procedure. This also empowers faculty and staff to make a difference on behalf of the institution at the institutional level.

Implications for Future Research

There is always a lot to learn from any research study with the promise of how much more there is to learn with future research. To that end, future research in this area could center on expanding the use of the Adult Hope Scale to all students entering the community college as well as to all returning sophomores as Hope Scale scores may change over time. It would help to have a large body of data to determine the
effectiveness of using the Hope Scale as a predictive tool as well as a key to developing workshops for interventions based on the sub scores.

In addition, future research could involve evaluating the Hope Scale scores of instructors. Snyder, et al. (2002) suggested that the Hope Scale score of the instructors could influence the scores of the students. This activity should be incorporated in professional development for faculty and eventually expanded to all staff as each and every person interacts with students at some level.

Finally, we need to do additional research into the needs of single mother students at our institution. As the economy and political environments change, the needs of the students will change. Enrollments fluctuate with the changes in the job market. The availability of resources and services constantly changes as well. As an institution, we need to keep our hands on the pulse of the members of the community and constantly assess the needs of our various groups of students. This will allow us to implement effective, targeted measures to increase retention.

**Personal Reflection**

The personal reflection allows me to reflect on the impact of this study in my life as a researcher, a practitioner, and a student mother. It is the perfect way to wrap up a topic that is part of my every day experience.

My prior academic experience involved training in the natural sciences and quantitative methods of research. This dissertation allowed me to learn a new study technique known as qualitative research. At first, I was apprehensive and skeptical. My husband, also a natural scientist, teased me about “just talking to people.” However, I
wanted to learn something new and push myself into a new way of thinking. I wanted to research something that had the potential to rock me to my foundation and challenge what I thought I knew and understood. Hence, the idea for this study was born. I was right. It did challenge me in ways I could not have imagined and not just as a researcher. It was at this point that I was very thankful for my researcher’s journal. I could not have anticipated the emotional experience that was to come, and the way I would live through some of the themes my participants described as I completed my own studies.

As a researcher, I learned how to listen. I do not mean listening the way I listen in a faculty meeting, nodding my head in assent half-paying attention and half-grading papers at the same time. I mean truly listen, mesmerized by what the participants were saying, caught in their stories and tuning out time. I also learned how to ask questions in an open-ended manner and learned how to probe for deeper reflections. As I moved from my pilot interview to my final interviews, I could hear the changes in my questions and verbal cues on the recordings as I transcribed them. I found myself constantly thinking about what they had said in the interviews, living and breathing with their words in my head throughout the day.

As a faculty member, I was able to hear the stories of our students that I normally do not have the opportunity to hear. Dedicating three interviews of 90 minutes with the same person over a specific period gave me a chance to get to know them in a way that I could not do in a classroom. I wish I could have that much time with all of my students. I benefited from listening to the participants tell me how faculty members had made a difference in their lives and educational experience. I knew it was important to provide
affirmation to students, but I never realized just how important, how much of a difference just a few positive words of encouragement could make.

With all of that said, my biggest revelations would come as a student mother. The best way for me to describe this is by providing an example that happened just days before I sent my dissertation draft to the committee.

I had received the notes and edits from my dissertation chair that Saturday morning. It had been a rough week. Baby number six arrived the previous Monday, and her delivery was very traumatic. She came out in distress but quickly rebounded. We spent the week in and out of the hospital. Throughout this entire time, I knew my deadline was looming. I worked feverishly at the hospital as doctors and nurses came in and out of the room with the baby sleeping on my chest. Some even asked me what I was doing, and as I explained, they shared their stories, including a nurse that put herself through nursing school as a single mom with five kids.

When the edits came Saturday morning, I sat down to make them with the end finally in sight. I was struggling with the personal reflection, trying to figure out what to write when it happened — the one thing I tell all of my students to watch for as the end nears. It all fell apart. My well-meaning two-year old tried to find his way on my lap as I typed and spilled a glass of water on the computer. I heard the sickening, sizzling sound of the circuit board frying. It was gone. The whole thing was gone.

I could not decide if I wanted to laugh or cry, so instead I posted my epic mom/student fail on Facebook. I needed help from that emotional support system the women described in their interviews. I needed the courage to keep charging forward. I
needed to call on every one of those key attitudes my participants outlined for me in such beautiful detail. My internet network did not disappoint and comments of solidarity and understanding poured onto my page.

However, the key moment of support came from a source least expected — a former student from several years ago. She is a single mom of four children, one of which is a special needs child suffering from a disease my husband spent years working on trying to find a cure. We had bonded in our class based on her son and my knowledge of my husband’s research. She later dropped out of college, temporarily, as her son’s health deteriorated. I had almost forgotten we were friends on Facebook, until she posted a comment to my initial post. She reminded me “You got this” and thanked me for being supportive of her as a single mom when she was in school. She wanted to return the favor when I needed it the most. In that one post, she helped me understand why support systems and words of encouragement are crucial. She helped me connect with my participants and the themes I had identified on a very personal level. Suddenly, I had what I needed for my personal reflection. The whole computer incident, the whole emotionally and physically exhausting week leading up to it, the whole dissertation process itself and all of the survival skills I needed to get through could be summed up in one quote by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “If you can’t fly, then run. If you can’t run, then walk. If you can’t walk, then crawl. But whatever you do, you have to keep moving.”
References


Appendix A: Interview Questions

Research Questions

1) How does the single mother student make meaning of hope in her college journey?

2) What allows the single mother to be resilient in terms of symbolic factors and environmental factors?

3) How does she utilize hope and resiliency to overcome roadblocks?

4) What attitudes, strategies, and support systems help her succeed?

5) How does she view herself as a mother and a student?

Interview One: The Past

1. Please describe your experiences in terms of:
   a. Growing up in high school
   b. Becoming a mother
   c. Becoming a college student (to this point in time)

2. How did you decide to go to college? What brought you here, to this point? Please describe those experiences.

3. Describe for me your most successful moment as a) student and as b) a parent thus far including the important players and events that led to that moment.

Interview Two: The Present

1. How would you define your present experience as a mother, as a student, and as a student mother?

2. What is your definition of a successful student? A successful mother?

3. When you are faced with a tough situation as a student mother, how do you overcome the challenge?

4. What rewards and satisfactions do you receive as a mother and student combined?
5. What do you value most about yourself as a parent who is combining your family responsibilities with your school responsibilities?

Interview Three: Reflections

1. What role do you think being a mother has played in your development as a student?

2. Describe a time when you experienced a sense of well-being that you associated with successfully going to school and being a parent at the same time.
   a. What were the important factors that contributed to your sense of well-being?
   b. What was it about you—unique qualities you have—that made it possible to achieve this result?
   c. Who were the other significant people involved and why were they significant?

3. Looking at your entire experience, describe for me a time when you felt most alive, most hopeful, most captivated or most excited about being in college.

4. What role do you think hope and resilience have played in terms of your experience as a student mother?

At the end of each interview, always ask: Is there anything I have not asked you that you think might be important for me to know.

At the beginning of the second and third interviews, ask: Is there anything you want to add from the previous interview?