A STUDY OF SINGLE MOTHERS’ EXPERIENCE OF PERSISTENCE AT A FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

A dissertation submitted to the Kent State University College and Graduate School of Education, Health, and Human Services in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

Geraldine Hayes Nelson

August 2009
Dissertation written by

Geraldine Hayes Nelson

B.S., Kent State University, 1978

M.Ed., Kent State University, 1981

Ph.D., Kent State University, 2009

Approved by

___________________________________, Director, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Dr. Steve O. Michael

___________________________________, Member, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Dr. Gary M. Padak

___________________________________
Dr. Dale L. Cook

Accepted by

___________________________________, Interim Chairperson, Department of Teaching Leadership, and Curriculum Studies
Dr. Alexa Sandmann

___________________________________, Dean, College and Graduate School of Education, Health, and Human Services
Dr. Daniel F. Mahony
A STUDY OF SINGLE MOTHERS’ EXPERIENCE OF PERSISTENCE
AT A FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC UNIVERSITY (162 pp.)

Director of Dissertation: Steve O. Michael, Ph.D.

The overall purpose of this study was to uncover and describe the barriers that low-income, single mothers between the ages of 17-24 experience and the strategies they adopt in their efforts to persist through year one to year three of college at a four-year public university. Adult education scholarship has shed light on the obstacles to college enrollment and persistence for adult students. For example, Cross (1981) classified obstacles that have an impact on the persistence and retention of adult students under three categories: situational, institutional, and dispositional. Non-traditional age adult students are challenged by these barriers as they attempt to enroll and persist in college. Less well known is whether these barriers also pertain directly to single mothers who are traditional age students with adult responsibilities.

This study provided an examination of traditional age, first generation, low-income single mothers’ persistence in college from entry to third year at a four-year public institution. In addition, the study examined multiple barriers and strategies concerning student’s employment and residential status, relationships of students with parents, and academic/college preparedness. The qualitative inquiry method used in this study allowed for an examination of low-income first generation student and their persistence from year to year. Narrative analysis was utilized in this study to assist the
researcher in creating a written detail of the phenomena of single parents’ persistence towards college completion and to investigate and identify barriers and support systems identified by single-parent students. The researcher employed a retelling of the struggles and strategies of the study participants as individual interviews were weaved together in the coding and discussion of the study.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I give praise to God for granting me peace and clarity of mind during this process. I would like to thank my mother, Geraldine Hoover Hayes, for providing me with prayer and encouragement from the beginning to the end. To my husband Donald (Pete), thank you for always being by my side and supporting me in so many ways. I am forever grateful for your love and support. To my children, Roberto, Kristina, and Angelo Chavez, thank you for understanding the importance of education and permitting me to complete my degree. I love you all.

To the Upward Bound and Pre College Staff, thank you for your patience and unwavering love and words of encouragement. Special thanks to each one for your support and encouragement, and for holding down the “fort.”

To the Upward Bound Students and parents who where always there with uplifting words, and for always encouraging me to “press” on, please accept my sincere appreciation for being there.

To Dr. Gary Padak, who provided unselfish support and inspiration to me, thanks for believing in me. Special thanks to Dr. Steve Michael who stayed with me in this journey. To the members of my committee, thank you for your unwavering support and patience and for caring enough to see me through till the end.
To my special friends, Margret Payne, Charles Cantale, Dr. Terry Kuhn, Dr. Gloria Dunnivan, Dr. Marlene Dorsey, and Dr. Tina Kandaki, who would always take those late night and early morning phone calls, thanks for keeping me focused.

In closing, to my siblings, Toni Carter, Thomas Hayes, Mary Davis, Rachel and Toronda Hayes, I love you all, and thanks for your love and the continued support that you all have always provided.

Finally, I must thank the students who participated in the interviewing and focus groups, for all this would not have been possible without your individual contributions to the process.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</th>
<th>..........................................................</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td>....................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>....................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>.........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Research Problem</td>
<td>.........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumptions</td>
<td>.....................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>.....................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>.....................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Persistence in Higher Education</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers for Single Mothers in Higher Education</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Barriers</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logistics—Duality of Roles</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity Issues</td>
<td>.....................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Parents’ Strategies for College Success</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Year College Students</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Academic Preparedness of First year Minority Students .................. 31
First Generation, Low-Income First Year Students .......................... 34
Adult Learners in Higher Education ............................................. 38
Conclusion .................................................................................. 41
III. METHODOLOGY ..................................................................... 42
Introduction ................................................................................ 42
Rationale for Qualitative Research ................................................. 42
Narrative Analysis ...................................................................... 44
Population Sampling Technique .................................................. 45
Participants .................................................................................. 48
Kristen ..................................................................................... 48
Sierra ....................................................................................... 49
Tamara ....................................................................................... 49
Alicia ......................................................................................... 50
Eva ............................................................................................ 50
Kekie ......................................................................................... 51
Evelyn ....................................................................................... 52
Erin ............................................................................................ 53
Patricia ....................................................................................... 53
Summary Demographic Data on Participants ................................ 54
Summary Academic Data on Participants .................................... 57
Data Collection Procedures ....................................................... 59
Individual Interviews ................................................................. 62
Focus Group .................................................................................. 62
Data Analysis .................................................................................. 64
Researcher’s Background ............................................................... 70
Credibility and Trustworthiness ..................................................... 72
Triangulation .................................................................................. 72
Research Audit Trail ....................................................................... 73
Reflexivity ...................................................................................... 73
Member Checking .......................................................................... 75
Delimitations of the Research ......................................................... 75

IV. RESULTS ...................................................................................... 77

Barriers .......................................................................................... 77

Academic Related Barriers ............................................................ 78
Situational Barriers ......................................................................... 84
Dispositional Barriers ..................................................................... 96
Intra-Institutional Barriers ............................................................... 106

Conclusion ..................................................................................... 110

V. DISCUSSION ............................................................................... 111

Introduction ................................................................................... 111
Conclusions .................................................................................... 112
Practice and Policy ......................................................................... 128
Implications for Additional Research ............................................. 131
Conclusion................................................................................................................. 134
Limitations of the Research....................................................................................... 134

APPENDICES ............................................................................................................. 137
APPENDIX A. BACKGROUND DATA QUESTIONNAIRE........................................ 138
APPENDIX B. CONSENT FORM ................................................................................ 140
APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL ..................................................................... 143
REFERENCES............................................................................................................. 146
LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Percentages Represent 3-Year Averages of Data</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Participant Informational Background</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Participant Financial Demographics</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Participant Work Load</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Academic Data</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Example of Respondent Barriers, Classification, and Coding</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Example of Respondent Strategies Classification, and Coding</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Living well in America in the 21st century requires higher education. A report released by the Women’s Policy Institute (Jones-DeWeever, 2007) indicated that “a college education, and particularly the completion of a four-year degree provides the best opportunity—especially for women—to acquire good jobs, with good wages, and good benefits” (p. 5). The report, entitled “Resilient and reaching for more: Challenges and benefits of higher education for welfare participants and their children,” concluded that single mothers who complete a four-year degree program earn 75% more in wages than their counterparts without a four-year degree. For every three households in the United States, one is headed by a single mother (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). Yet, the 2000 U.S. Census indicated that only 10% of all single mothers held a degree, whereas 62% had only a high school education or never graduated from high school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). In an American society that places an increased demand on individuals to be college educated and workforce ready, single mothers struggle to attain the good life.

Several challenges confront single parents, young mothers in particular, as they try to gain access to and persist in higher education. One challenge is finding time for self while managing multiple roles (Christie, 2002; Darby-Watson, 2001; Vann-Johnson, 2004). Single parents in higher education often find themselves faced with the logistical
and emotional difficulty of balancing multiple roles as parent, student, employee, caregiver, and responsible head of the household. The demands of these roles create additional stress on this population as they attempt to enroll in and persist in college (Christie, 2002; Vann-Johnson, 2004).

Childcare and medical costs are other challenges that young single parents face. The lack of available and affordable childcare during late hours, study sessions, sick days, or holidays creates problems for many single parents because there are few if any emergency childcare services provided in higher education settings. Additionally, single mother college students are forced to arrange and schedule time for studying, employment, household chores, and class schedules around the care of their children (Branscomb, 2006; Christie, 2002; Dorris, 1995).

As the cost of medical care continues to skyrocket, single parents view self-care and health care as an unnecessary luxury (DiNitto & McNeece, 1997). Time constraints are a major reason why single mothers may be negligent with their health care. Single mothers may find it difficult to access health care facilities that operate on a 9:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. schedule because of conflicts with other obligations in their lives. Single parents must juggle limitations in scheduling appointments as they attempt to adhere to university attendance policies and at the same time try to navigate class schedules, childcare, medical appointments, and study time, during their college careers (Christie, 2002; Coccia, 1997).

Finally, the challenge presented by the inability to break the cycle of poverty prevents many single parents from accessing and persisting in higher education (Astin &
McDermott, 2003-2004). The U.S. Census report indicates that many single households tend to be headed by women who themselves are first generation and low income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). For these individuals, the dream of obtaining a college education appears to be far beyond their grasp (Goldrick-Rab & Shaw, 2006). A first-generation, low-income, single mother student must contend with the rising cost of tuition books and fees, transportation issues, household and childcare expenses, and the need to adapt to changes in technology that many college students who are not parents take for granted.

The challenges faced by low-income, single parents have been further influenced in the past decade by a major federal social policy shift that stresses a “work first” philosophy. Enacted in 1996, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) was intended to use low paying entry-level jobs as a strategy to move low-income adults to stable employment and out of poverty (Goldrick-Rab & Shaw, 2006). This policy, in fact, has created a movement away from self-sufficiency and particularly away from access to various forms of education and training (Golonka & Matus-Grossman, 2001). Goldrick-Rab and Shaw (2006) further detailed how WIA has created a gap in college access and become a barrier to college attendance for low-income single parents who rely on public support.

The WIA stipulates that federal welfare state dollars, known as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) block grants used by some states to cover expenses associated with vocational training, be classified as “work” or work-related training experience. The decision to accept the use of TANF funds for postsecondary education expenses differs on a state-by-state basis. According to Lacy McGlothlin,
Portage County Department of Human Services (personal communication, April 2007), in the state of Ohio childcare is only covered for welfare participants for activities listed on a college student official class schedule; therefore, childcare costs for group work, study time, academic advising, tutoring, and service learning are likely not to be covered. Thus the door of opportunity for low-income single parents to utilize TANF dollars to cover expenses related to postsecondary education is sometimes closed, creating additional financial hardships for single parents in postsecondary education (Jones-DeWeever, 2007; TANF, 2006).

The road to college access for low-income single parents seems narrow and paved with significant barriers that create stress and require fortitude and adaptability by single mothers to successfully enter higher education, much less persist in it. In order for higher education institutions to better assist low-income, single parents to use education to break the cycle of poverty, it is necessary to study the persistence of this population in the first three years of college.

Purpose of the Study

The overall purpose of this study was to uncover and describe the barriers that low-income, single mothers between the ages of 18 and 24 experience and the strategies they adopt in their efforts to persist through year one to year three of college at a four-year public university. Adult education scholarship has shed light on the obstacles to college enrollment and persistence for adult students. For example, Cross (1981) classified obstacles that have an impact on the persistence and retention of adult students under three categories: situational, institutional, and dispositional. Non-traditional age
adult students are challenged by these barriers as they attempt to enroll and persist in college. Less well known is whether these barriers also pertain directly to single mothers who are traditional age students with adult responsibilities.

Research indicates that a number of universities and colleges have developed initiatives and programs to aid single mother persistence in college (Christie, 2002). Tinto’s (1993) classic student integration model on persistence suggests that institutional retention initiatives and programs frequently have common themes that must be addressed in understanding the issues that influence a student’s departure from college. Accordingly, these initiatives involve the need for academic support and services, the need for strong mentoring and/or faculty support, and the critical role of faculty/staff in the academic success of students (Tinto, 2005).

Research on traditional age single mother adult students has focused on specific programming and services provided to this population. Findings from these studies indicate the need for traditional age single parents to be immersed in the cultural and social activities of university life, but that this immersion becomes difficult as participation in the college environment is hindered by the varied responsibilities and time constraints (Christie, 2002; Vann-Johnson, 2004). There remains the need to investigate the barriers and strategies that facilitate the integration of single mother adult learners into the college environment as related to persistence (Terrell, 1990).

Statement of Research Problem

Findings from a number of studies on single mothers and their participation in college provide a context for understanding how institutions of higher education address
the enrollment and persistence of this population. For example, a descriptive study of a program at a four-year private institution reiterated the need for establishing such programs and discovered that some support services for single mothers in the first year became barriers to the same students in the second year due to developmental maturation and changed perceived needs (Christie, 2002). Another study examined seven single mother college students who were enrolled at a small commuter college (Dorris, 1995). Finally, McMillan (2003) found that older, non-traditional age single-parent students’ persistence was influenced by their motivation to return to school for better employment and increased job opportunities. McMillan also called for additional studies to explore the notion that only high achieving adult single mothers should enroll or be encouraged to enroll in college whereas poor, low-income mothers are discouraged from continuing their education. Despite the results of these studies, there remains a critical need to understand the barriers to single mother success in college and the strategies used by single mothers as they persist in college.

There is a relative lack of literature explaining exactly how single parents persist in college, especially in the first three years of college. In addition, the literature mostly reports results from the institutional programming perspective rather than the perspective of the students, especially with regard to integration within the institution. Reports of these programs also tend to focus on the first year or the year(s) prior to college attendance. Few, if any, studies have examined the sophomore and junior years with respect to single parents as adult learners. Finally, there is a need for further research and replication of earlier studies on programs and supportive services targeted to meet the
needs of single mothers developed to address characteristics such as race, age, and income (Vann-Johnson, 2004). This study attempted to fill the void in the literature by identifying the barriers experienced and strategies used by low-income, single mothers in their efforts to persist in public higher education.

Barriers and strategies influencing persistence must be understood from the perspective of the single mother adult learner in order for colleges to improve access, enrollment, and persistence of this vulnerable group. This study provided an examination of traditional age, first generation, low-income single mothers’ persistence in college from entry to third year at a four-year public institution. In addition, the study examined multiple barriers and strategies concerning students’ employment and residential status, relationships of students with parents, and academic/college preparedness. The qualitative inquiry method used in this study allowed for an examination of student and persistence from year to year.

Research Questions

The questions guiding this research study are the following:

1. What are the barriers that low-income traditional age single mothers encounter that negatively influence the first, second, and third year persistence in higher education?

2. What are the strategies used by low-income traditional age single mothers that positively influence the first, second, and third year persistence in higher education?
Assumptions

The following assumptions are relevant to this study:

1. The interview process as the tool of inquiry yields a deep understanding of socially constructed phenomena (Riessman, 1993).

2. Low-income, single parents can provide detailed, insightful, and realistic account of their experiences of persistence at a four-year public institution.

Significance of the Study

This study provided an understanding, from their perspective, of how low-income, single parents persist in higher education. This research is critical to understanding the role of postsecondary education as a bridge out of poverty for low-income, single parents. The welfare policies that were created to help move individuals from the welfare rolls do not go far enough to alleviate the hidden barriers to higher education. Reports indicate that some institutions of higher learning will continue to experience an increase in the percentage of enrolled low-income, single mother college students (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). This current study was needed to gain a better understanding of college persistence from the experiences of low-income single parents, which will inform government agencies, public policy, and higher education institutions on strategies to support these students.

The changes in welfare reform policies discussed in this study and the findings from this study provide a framework to assess and identify barriers and strategies to college success from the perspective of low-income, traditional age single mothers. This study also provided an understanding of inadequately addressed issues related to the
unique cultural, social, psychological, economic, and academic preparedness of this population. As a researcher and practitioner, this study has deepened my understanding of the role of higher education, adult education, and public policy regarding barriers to persistence of low-income single parents at a four-year public institution of higher education.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were used in this study:

*Attrition:* Refers to the process of students dropping out of college, usually during the first or second year, and failing to reenroll at an institution in subsequent terms.

*Adult Learner:* Any student who has experienced at least one of the following: being a parent, attending college part-time, being a high school drop-out, or delaying college enrollment for at least one year (Hensley & Kinser, 2001).

*Degree completion:* Refers to completion of the baccalaureate degree.

*Dismissal:* A student who is not permitted by the institution to continue enrollment due to academic or personal factors, or violations or infractions of institution policies and procedures.

*Early College:* A range of programs that permit students to engage in college level work while still enrolled in high school.

*First generation college student:* An individual where neither of the students’ natural or adoptive parents received a baccalaureate degree; or a student who, prior to the age of 18, regularly resided with and received support from only one natural or adoptive
mother and whose supporting mother did not receive a baccalaureate degree (U.S. Department of Education, Federal Register, 2003).

First year college student: A student who has earned between 1 and 30 semester credit hours.

Integration: Tinto’s (1995) theory that examines the interactions between the student and his or her higher educational experience. Students undergo three stages to become integrated into the campus: separation, transition, and incorporation.

Low-income: An individual whose family’s taxable income did not exceed 150% of the poverty level amount in the calendar year proceeding the year of enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, Federal Register, 2003).

Persistence: The desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from the beginning through degree completion (Seidman, 2006).

Retention: Ability of an institution to retain a student from semester to semester until a student graduates or otherwise leaves the institution.

Second year college student: A student who has successfully completed between 31 and 60 semester credit hours.

Single mother: Traditional age student (17-24 years of age) who became pregnant and gave birth, and has not married or resided at home with family member(s) during the college years.

Third year college student: A student who has successfully completed between 61 and 90 semester credit hours and who has fully committed to a major area of study.
Traditional Age College Student: Enrolled college students aged 17-24 years of age.

Transition: A period of passage between the old and the new, before full adoption of new norms and patterns of behavior and after the onset of separation from old ones (Tinto, 1993).

Summary

This introductory chapter presented the background for this study that examined the barriers that low-income, single mothers between the ages of 17-24 experience and the strategies they adopt in their efforts to persist through year one to year three of college at a four-year public university. The nature of the research questions required a qualitative methodology that included individual interviews, focus group interviews, and document analysis. In the next chapter, the scholarship related to the purpose of this is reviewed. The third chapter details the methodology for this study including the collection and analysis of data. Using the research questions as a framework, Chapter 4 presents the findings of this study. The final chapter discusses the implications of this study for practice and further research.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Although few, if any, researchers have attempted to study low-income, single mother student persistence during the first three years of college from the student perspective, a number of related literature bases inform this study. This review of the literature is organized into five sections: (a) student persistence in higher education, (b) barriers for single mothers in higher education, (c) single parents’ strategies for college success, (d) first year college students, and (e) the adult learner in higher education.

Student Persistence in Higher Education

Student persistence is described as the process by which students adapt to the culture and climate of the institution, leading to successful transition, meaningful involvement, and a positive connection to the institution (Billson & Terry, 1982; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini, 2003; Terenzini et al., 1996; Tinto, 1998). Today, institutions struggle to maintain healthy student enrollment numbers as the pot of potential enrollees continues to shrink. Institutions of higher education must be creative in recruiting and retaining the best qualified students in this highly competitive market. There has been a vast array of research in the field of persistence and student departure. Some researchers support the notion that most students are not retained in college because they lack the needed academic skills to persist successfully while others propose
that the educational level of parents has a significant impact on students’ persistence and retention in college (Billson & Terry, 1982; Mortenson, 2000; Oldfield, 2007).

Although many institutions have placed great emphasis on high stakes test scores to measure students’ ability to successfully enroll in and persist in postsecondary education, the reality is that many institutions struggle each year to retain these students. Various factors affect the successful retention of students. Despite many efforts to address the concern of persistence, the problem of attrition and retention of students past the first year continues to plague higher education (McGrath, 1997).

Academic preparedness is an important factor in measuring the rate of first year student persistence in college. Some researchers have identified student academic preparedness not only as a measure of college entry, but also a predictor of student ability to persist in college (Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Tinto, 1987). Many students struggle with the change from a highly structured high school learning environment to one in which they have to take greater personal responsibility for learning. In addition to the academic experience, students often underestimate the impact of critical college adjustment factors such as accommodation, time management, family and cultural dissonance, living away from home, and social integration when considering their expectations of the university. If these factors do not meet students’ expectations, the negative effects on students can include feelings of loss of control, isolation, and disenchantment with higher education, ultimately resulting in withdrawal from school (Fisher & Hood, 1987; Freeman, 1997; Tinto, 1993).
Additional literature indicates that academic preparedness is a strong predictor in measuring a student’s success in college (Adelman, 1999; Astin & Oseguera, 2005). In contrast, Kenneth Oldfield (2007), in an article entitled “Welcoming First Generation Poor and Working-Class Students to College,” offered his perception of the cultural journey students from low social economic status (SES) encounter as they attempt to enroll in and persist in college. Although more institutions are opening the doors to high achieving, low-income students, Oldfield contended that the understanding must go beyond opening doors and expanding learning opportunities. It is more important for institutions to understand that, “surviving the social challenges of higher learning can be at least as demanding as achieving a high grade point average” (Oldfield, p. 3). It is critical that first generation, low-income students are provided “adequate social support systems” to aid in their ability to successful enroll in and persist in college.

The Federal Higher Education Act of 1965 was passed to increase low-income and first generation student enrollment and persistence in education beyond high school. Through the efforts of the Federal TRIO Programs, such as Upward Bound (targeting high schools), Talent Search (targeting middle school and families), Student Support Services (targeting undergraduates), Ronald E. McNair Program (targeting placement into graduate education), and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP, targeting middle school districts), there has been an increase in the participation rates of low-income and first generation students in higher education (USDOE, 2007). The first TRIO program, Upward Bound, was created by the Economic Development Act of 1964 to assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds with
completing high school, and enrolling and persisting in higher education. Talent Search and Student Support Services were added soon after. GEAR UP was created in 1998 by the Amendments of Higher Education Act to deliver programming to help low-income, middle school students improve academic preparedness and develop the necessary skills to enter and succeed in college. The creation and support of public policy around these national efforts acknowledged the disparity that exists between first generation, low-income families and their educationally and income-advantaged counterparts regarding college attendance and success. However, despite these and similar efforts to address the needs of first generation, low-income students, the national college persistence rate for low-income students was 59%, compared to 71% for their counterparts (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2006).

A growing body of literature identifies, details, and discusses from various viewpoints the barriers that exist for traditional age, first generation, low-income college students as they make the transition to enroll and persist in higher education. Vincent Tinto’s theory (1993) of student persistence identifies several variables that impact first generation, low-income students’ ability to persist in college. Tinto noted the need for students to integrate with the academic and social systems (both formal and informal) of the institution as vital keys to persistence. Another concept that Tinto discussed is the term ‘congruence’ or the degree to which there is a match between the needs and interests of the students and the institutions of higher education. This concept holds true particularly for students from underrepresented and minority groups who must also address the issue of cultural identity in efforts to integrate into the academic and social
systems within the college climate (Tinto, 1993). It is important for institutions to create systems that assist students with fully integrating into the college climate. As pointed out by a number of scholars, a critical step in the retention of students is to create avenues that develop a sense of “belongingness” within the institution (Adelman, 1999; Astin & Sax, 1998, Tinto, 1993).

Student centered cultural activities also play a significant role in the creation of a cultural conclave of security for underrepresented and minority students, particularly those enrolled at predominately White institutions (Tinto, 1993). Astin and Sax (1998) placed great emphasis on the need for students’ involvement in the academic experience as a predictor of persistence. Not only does the involvement in cultural and academic experiences impact a student’s ability to persist, the basic establishment of “kinship and friendship” plays an important role for this population. Mitchell (1997) indicated the difficulties and challenges for first generation, low-income students in establishing peer friendships and support groups.

Choosing the college path can also create distance from family members as first generation, low-income college students are forced on some occasions to renegotiate relationships of support. This happens as a result of the newly acquired philosophies, interests, or manner of dress or speech that create dissonance between first generation students and their families. For first generation students, this newly acquired element of dissension with family creates undue stress and pressure that impacts the student’s ability to focus and persist in college (London, 1992).
Barriers for Single Mothers in Higher Education

Although a young single mother’s path from poverty to empowerment via education may be filled with hope, she must address critical barriers to that education due to her low-income status (Oldfield, 2007). Despite the many negative outcomes associated with single parenthood, over the years the number of single mother households in American society continues to grow. The National Center for Education Statistics (2007) reported that 7% of full time undergraduates are single parents. This increase in single mothers on college campuses remains a challenge for higher education (Huff & Thorpe, 1997). Huff and Thorpe contended that single mother students in the first year of college face persistence issues common to low-income students, with additional challenges to persistence that are created by having the responsibility of young children for whom they must care.

For the 25 and older group of single mother students, the primary reason for enrollment in college is divorce (Glass & Rose, 1994). The enrollment and persistence of younger single mothers in higher education in comparison to their older peers is more of a challenge as the younger population navigates multiple roles and at the same time wrestles with issues related to making the transition into adulthood (Branscomb, 2006). This same population may have experienced high absenteeism during high school leading to insurmountable academic hurdles that created tension in their ability to mother effectively putting them at a disadvantage in pursuing postsecondary education (Woods et al., 2003). A 2007 Newsweek article by Sarah Kliff summarized a NCES report that noted that only a quarter of single parents enroll in college because the dual role as
student and mother has a potentially negative impact on the single student’s ability to succeed and persist in higher education.

The role of single motherhood is one of seven factors that place students who begin an undergraduate degree at risk for successful persistence and graduation. Single parents are more prone to dropping out of college than their undergraduate peers (Kliff, 2007). The dual role of student and mother places a significant barrier in the path for single parents as they are faced with the challenge of financial exigencies and multiple time commitments while attempting to persist in postsecondary education. This population is dependent upon available and affordable childcare, dependable transportation, access to health care, available advising and academic transition systems, and a multi-layered system of financial aid and support (Branscomb, 2006; Christie, 2002; Darby-Watson, 2001).

Single mother students identify a feeling of isolation from the university community as another barrier to their persistence in college. Incidents of what occurs outside of the classroom weigh on their shoulders, and they also face the challenge of fending for themselves as they attempt to find their “fit” within the institutional fabric. Many are overwhelmed with the demands of obligations that they may feel unable to perform (Dill, 1998). Findings from another study on single parents in college revealed that participants felt their role as mother was dominant over their role as a student as they contended with the issues and concerns created by their college studies (McMillan, 2003). This study also indicated a gap in the financial assistance needed to facilitate their enrollment and persistence in college. This gap included cash assistance from the
Department of Social Services, child support payments or the lack thereof, and unplanned financial needs and emergencies (McMillan, 2003).

In summary, the literature indicates that first generation, low-income traditional age students who are single mothers face a number of barriers to college persistence. There needs to be further exploration of challenges and barriers that have an impact on the college persistence of traditional age, single mother students in higher education.

Retention research has identified various barriers that impact a student’s ability to persist in college. Whereas these identified barriers are usually associated with first generation, low-income students, this study seeks to identify how single mothers overcome self identified barriers. The following section more closely examines the following barriers: (a) financial barriers, (b) logistics – duality of roles, and (c) ethnicity issues.

Financial Barriers

More than half of the nation’s households are headed by a single mother (Walker, 1999), and this single, female, head of household represents the vast majority of low-income single parents who rely on public assistance (Peterson, Song, & Jones-DeWeever, 2005). Low-income, single mothers must overcome numerous obstacles as they attempt to make the transition into and persist in higher education. The first barrier for a single mother as head of household is the inequality of income compared to two parent families, or single wage earners without children (Howard & Levine, 2004). This disparity in income perpetuates the downward spiral of poverty for single mother households posing an additional challenge for an already challenged population.
The erosion of two major federal policies has had an impact on the successful transition and enrollment of low-income young single parents into higher education (Goldrick-Rab & Shaw, 2006). The federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA) was initially developed to stress the importance of building educational skills of low-income parents in an effort to enable individuals to become economically self-sufficient. However, the WIA instead has forced disadvantaged parents into entry-level low-paying career tracks. This early entry of low-income parents into low-paying careers and entry level jobs clouds the pathway to a college education for low-income students because it is difficult to break free of these subsistence jobs and sustain the motivation to begin higher education. Thus, the WIA has created a financial barrier to college access for many low-income families by implementing work first policies and requiring short-term training for welfare recipients that on many occasions could not lead to an academic degree (Peterson et al., 2005).

Many college students have financial difficulties and hold part-time jobs. Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda (1992) concluded in their study that financial problems themselves had no direct effect on persistence; the indirect result of financial problems might affect students’ academic and social integration and resolve to persist in college. Traditional age single mother students are challenged with balancing workplace demands and the dual role of student and parent, which has an indirect impact on their ability to persist in college. These students are further challenged by having to work more hours or not being able to afford the cost associated with time away from the workplace or loss of wages, resulting in less time spent on studies than their peers (PELL Institute, 2007; Terenzini,
Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1995). Furthermore, low-income, single mother students have limited financial resources and are less likely to apply or qualify for additional support in the form of student loans. It is important to address the disparity of financial aid for low-income, single mother students by providing meaningful financial aid packages.

According to Tinto (1987), many college students do not persist in college due to financial constraints, lack of academic preparedness, or social barriers. The degree of low-income as a barrier may be different from state to state. A report issued by The Children’s Defense Fund of Ohio (2002) stated, “Poor students are more likely to repeat a grade” (p. 2). In Ohio, this fact means that low-income students fall behind educationally in their pursuit of high school graduation and college.

Data (see Table 1) from the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2006) on families headed by single, unwed mothers (living with one or more of her own children under age 18) receiving child support payments during the previous calendar year draw the link between low-income and single parenthood in Ohio.

As illustrated in Table 1, Ohio has a higher percentage of single mothers than the national average and surrounding states, ranking 16th among the 50 states. Because of the high percentage of single parents in the state, it is important to understand how they enroll in and persist in higher education in order to increase their enrollment on college campuses.
Table 1

Percentages Represent 3-Year Averages of Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Rank (among 50 states)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*Logistics—Duality of Roles*

In an effort to address the increased numbers of teen pregnancies, in 1980 the state of Ohio initiated the Graduation, Reality, and Dual-Role Skills (GRADS) Program, a public school intervention program for pregnant teens. This program was an attempt to address the dual role of student and mother during high school, a duality whose resolution is critical to high school completion and college success.

Webster’s Dictionary (1989) described the word “logistics” as the planning and implementation of a complex task. This implementation includes the flow of goods, resources, and materials. The dispositional barrier of juggling multiple roles, time demands, and resulting conflicts creates for many first generation, low-income single parents the feeling that the logistics associated with college enrollment and attendance are
too difficult to navigate (Carney-Crompton, & Tan, 2002). Single mother students who themselves were raised in single mother homes face many barriers to college access due to their limited understanding of the college access process, financial aid processes, and lack of support within the family and community structure to enroll and persist in college. This population must learn to function in two different worlds. The logistics of “fitting” in for low-income single mother students are frequently tremendous burdens. Single mother college students have to perform several roles: single parent, college student, and employee (Taylor & Dukes, 2004).

Many single mother students find juggling these multiple roles to be challenging, in particular if they are in a college setting that is not sensitive to their unique needs (Dorris, 1995). The management of time and students’ knowledge of time management strategies are factors that deter the continued college persistence of this population. Other logistics that may impede graduation completion for this population include dependable childcare, health care, and transportation. When any of these structures go awry, a student’s ability to succeed in school is affected. This holds true for low-income parents with school age children; and if any family member is enrolled in an educational setting or program with set or limited finances, the impact is much greater.

For the low-income college student, school frequently becomes a secondary priority, and the role of parenting and life issues takes precedence (Howard & Levine, 2004). Traditional age (ages 17-24 years), single parents, who became a parent while enrolled in high school, have a greater challenge than their single mother counterparts who are older and more mature. The traditional age, low-income single mother student
lacks social support, has limited academic preparation, and may have limited knowledge of community resources (Jones-DeWeever, 2007). Many single parents are faced with the challenge of being the sole-provider and caregiver for their child. Students who were parents in high school may lose the family emotional and shared support of parenting upon enrollment in college which in turn may have a negative psychological impact on their well being. One study indicated that the absence of psychological distress is the best predictor of academic persistence for nontraditional students (Chartrand, 1992).

This change in support systems is also related to integration into the campus system. Tinto (1998) developed a theory on reasons for student departure that emphasizes the notion of integration. The theory contends that given students’ demographic characteristics and their pre-entry intentions, goals, and commitments, the decision to persist is a function of the extent to which the student has become academically and socially integrated into the institution. Tinto suggested that where there is poor academic and social integration, the student’s experience at the institution is negative which affects the decision to withdraw and exit from the institution. A recent study on single parent college students also supports the need for this population to integrate into the campus climate and community, but there remain challenges as they attempt to fulfill their commitment to persist in college (Christie, 2002).

Ethnicity Issues

According to a report from The Education Resources Institute (TERI), in 1995-96 (Pathways to College, 2006) more than 47% of enrolled undergraduates in the United States had less than $20,000 in annual family income; during this same time frame almost
30% of all undergraduates were minorities. Many first generation, low-income single mother students are members of minority groups and come from the working class (Padron, 1992). In working class families there is an increased percentage of teen pregnancy and high school dropouts.

According to the United States Department of Education (2006), recent data and enrollment trends indicated three critical factors that affect a student’s successful transition into postsecondary education: first generation status, low-income, and parental divorce or single headed household. Inasmuch as students are challenged by these factors, the challenge is greater if the student is a minority student. It is important to assist minority students, particularly if they are first generation, low-income single parents, in developing positive relationships with faculty mentors (Astin, 1999; Guiffrida, 2005).

Guiffrida (2004) pointed to the significance of the perception held by minority students that White faculty at predominantly White institutions are not sensitive or understanding of their needs. For these reasons, African American students do not seek assistance from White academic advisors or faculty; rather they utilize their friends and family members who are also minorities. Results from a qualitative study conducted by Guiffrida (2005) also indicated that more steps must be taken to support African American students as they persist in higher education. The aforementioned findings demonstrate the significant challenge for single mothers if they are minority, first generation, and low-income.

The path to college is complex and unique for each single mother student, and it demands a strong system of emotional, academic, and financial support. Students must be
provided with comprehensive academic career and personal advising, interaction and creative avenues of advocacy, systems of support for college and family related issues, and a belief and mission to respect and expect that all students possess academic potential and abilities (Guiffrida, 2005). As pointed out in the findings from research on the “Dream Deferred Project” conducted by Terenzini and Cabrera (2006), the gap in services and support is wide-ranging for minority, low-income, single parents. If institutions are to meet the challenges of retaining low-income minority students in college, they must fully address this gap.

Single Parents’ Strategies for College Success

As detailed in earlier sections, the enrollment and persistence of single mothers in higher education is an important area of concern. A recently released ACT policy report found that there is a direct positive correlation between student persistence in college and institutional fit, financial support, networking, and social involvement (Lotkrowski, Bobbins, & Noeth, 2004). The literature on support systems and strategies used by traditional age, single mother college students as they persist in higher education varies. Some studies point to the influence of peers as an important factor to persistence; others indicate that interaction with faculty, administrators, or staff often plays a critical role in persistence (Astin, 1975; Cabrera et al., 1992; Tinto, 1993).

Additional studies identify the importance of traditional age students having a sense of belonging to the institution, or “institutional fit” (Tinto, 1993). Two recent studies indicate that for single parents in college this sense of institutional fit is an important element that has an impact on their ability to persist in college. Traditional age
single mother college students describe the importance of having a sense of belonging to the institution as a factor that facilitated their continued enrollment in college (Christie, 2002; McMillan, 2003). Research also supports the importance of social integration into the institution as a factor in college persistence. According to Bean and Metzer (1985), support systems and the feeling of available assistance contribute to the successful enrollment and retention of single mothers at institutions of higher education. It is important for single mother students to be able to lessen “crisis situations” or at least be able to seek advice on time management, academic support, unplanned family emergencies, and knowledge of services of support within the university community. In this study, obtaining basic information on programs and services were strategies that single mother students employed as they navigate the postsecondary environment.

Research indicates that students from low-income communities can benefit from a mentoring relationship. Typically, this population lacks the needed social support framework that creates a sense of belonging and assists in the bonding to the institution. As students develop a sense of belonging, they are more likely to be academically successful (Gandara & Bial, 2001). Identifying adult mentors and role models is an essential strategy that empowers single mother students in academe and engages them as responsible learners. Tinto’s (1998) integration theory supports this notion of the need for a fostered relationship between the student and mentor. Some single mother college students have devised ways to share responsibilities such as transportation to and from childcare, preparation of meals, note taking in class, and studying. A study of the single mother college student reflects additional strategies that assist single mothers in higher
education including having someone to hold the single mother student accountable and
having someone to listen and provide an understanding ear (Christie, 2002).

Single mothers can benefit greatly from support systems that connect them to the
institution, particularly those that promote social integration into the university
community. Many institutions create programming to meet the needs of traditional age
college students who are parents residing on or near campus (Levine, 1993) to help them
handle their studies, to make the transition into college, to continue to advance the onset
of adulthood and emerging developmental stages, to assimilate socially, and to work
responsibly in the dual role of student and parent. Clearly the needs of traditional age
single mothers are numerous and require a wide variety of services that promote success
and persistence.

In a 2004 article, Howard and Levine identified the importance of institutions
understanding the differences of the two worlds of reality for poor students. He noted the
difficulty of low-income students entering college and feeling like they belong to neither
their home community or to the new university community. Single parent low-income
students need support systems in place to assist in their socialization to college and to
address basic issues related to their transition and persistence in college. These issues
could include the need for counseling to address emotions that may emerge, or the
language differences or colloquialisms, the identification of relevant resources, and others
(Howard & Levine, 2004).

Single parents faced with limited finances indicated that if adequate financial
support is in place, they are less stressed and are faced with less pressure (Coccia, 1997).
It is important for single parents to be able to secure necessary childcare, to address unplanned emergencies, and to afford their day-to-day living expenses. It is important for traditional age single mothers in college to be financially secure and not have to feel pressured to work exorbitant hours in order to financially survive college. Limited or lack of financial support leads to single mothers feeling pressure to work, and can lead single mothers to make unsound decisions that could have a negative impact on their ability to persist in college (Mercer, 1993).

First Year College Students

With the onset of the Internet, the need for a highly educated workforce, and the demand for all citizens to pursue education beyond high school, institutions of higher education have been forced to change their approaches to educating the masses. The literature consistently identifies the first year of college as the most critical in shaping persistence decisions and playing a formative role in influencing student attitudes and approaches to learning (Johnson, 1994; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1996). It is commonly understood that the first few weeks of the first semester at an institution are considered a crucial period in determining retention and persistence towards graduation (Allen, 1999; Tinto, 1988). This first year transition is also important in the successful persistence of the single mother college student.

Making the transition to a university is a major life event and is associated with problems of separation, transition, and incorporation (Tinto, 1988). Tinto further pointed out the need for public universities to meet the broad needs of the public. If the university is willing to accept larger numbers of students from a variety of backgrounds, then the
university experience must provide enough support for students to cope with this diversity, a support designed to increase to student persistence in college. Although universities offer an array of support including First Year Experience Programming, Freshmen Summer Reading Projects, Early College Programs and experiences for middle and high school students, tiered residential hall packages, and/or Learning Communities, many institutions are still faced with the problem of retaining first year students.

Students bring many factors to higher education that influence retention. The literature indicates that student pre-college academic ability plays a significant role in student retention (Allen, 1999; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). National college retention data imply that many students who are not adequately prepared for college find themselves beginning to suffer from low self-esteem and low self-confidence as a result of not being adequately prepared (Hardy & Karathanos, 1992). The literature on first year college persistence also notes an emphasis on the significant role that availability of course offerings and course selection supplied by colleges and universities play in student decisions to persist in college.(need reference) In particular retention scholar Vincent Tinto (1987) noted the importance and impact of high school course selection and offering and academic rigors of the high school. The student’s overall family educational background can predict the successful matriculation of low-income freshmen students’ persistence in higher education (Tinto, 1987; USDOE, 2006). Thus, it is critical that all institutions of higher learning assume a share of the responsibility to ensure that every accepted and enrolled student has an equal opportunity to succeed.
The first year of college is a daunting experience for many students. A report released in 2000 by Noel-Levitz indicated that institutions successful in retaining first year students focused on the importance of student satisfaction and worked to improve the quality of the educational experience by gathering data related to the first year experience program design and service (Low, 2000). If students are satisfied with their first year educational experience, they are more likely to be retained. Many universities and colleges today have implemented first year experience programs, but the larger issue is “if” and “how” students are engaged during their first year. Students who experience the most difficulty in adjusting to college typically do not participate or respond to programs offered to the general student body (Baker & Nisenbaum, 1979; Kirshner, 1974; Lindquist & Lowe, 1978). College student adjustment is an area that is as individual as each student enrolled in the incoming freshman class. Consequently, institutions must be willing to adjust first year programs to reach out and engage as much as possible through selective programming various subcategories of first year students. Institutions must be committed to the development of relevant programming that is ingrained within and throughout the fiber of the academy in an effort to increase retention and institutional fit for all students (Tinto, 1988).

*Academic Preparedness of First year Minority Students*

As indicated in a report by The Pathways to College Network (2006), 50% of current high school students are not academically prepared for postsecondary education. This same report indicated that of the students who enroll, a large percentage require some type of remedial work in reading/writing, science, and mathematics. A 2007 article
in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* emphasized that although there is an increase in the national ACT scores, many students are still unprepared for college level coursework (Smith, 2007). That same article pointed out the following:

> Among students who took the ACT in 2007 after taking Algebra I and II and geometry—the minimum core courses in mathematics, only 15 percent met or surpassed a “college-readiness benchmark” established by the organization that administers the ACT tests. (p. 1)

In the science area, only 20% of those students who took the minimum core courses in science were academically prepared for college biology. The U.S. Department of Education has struggled for years to increase the academic preparedness of America’s public high school students with the development of accountability measures such as national school report cards. These efforts have yielded an increase in more students taking college placement tests such as ACT and SAT. However, more than half of the test takers are still falling short of the benchmark of “college preparedness” prompting U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spelling to pronounce: “This is unacceptable when 90 percent of the fastest-growing jobs require at least some postsecondary education” (p. 2). Spellings concluded that “the lack of academic preparedness for college appears to be most pronounced for minority students” (p. 2).

American public education today has a strong commitment to creating pathways to postsecondary education for all American citizens. Despite this commitment, national college-going rates for African American (38% college-going rate) and Hispanic (29.5% college-going rate) students were significantly lower than their White (45% college-going rate)
rate) counterparts in public school systems (Thomas, 2001). In addition, although the reading scores of both African American and White students have both increased incrementally, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data revealed that the scores indicated a significant widening gap between African American and White students (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). The disparity in academic performance of minority students compared to their White counterparts is the beginning of the unleveled pathway that has an impact on whether or not students gain access to higher education. Also, as indicated in the literature, college participation for low-income minority students is greatly affected by a delay in exposure to college readiness and academic strategies that assist students in the transition into higher education (Tinto, 1993). This delay in exposure to the building blocks to college readiness and the limited academic preparedness are factors that widen the gap of successful entry of low-income minority students into postsecondary education. Although many educators believe that minority students do not persist at the same rate as their White counterparts due to inadequate academic preparation for college, there are those who challenge this mindset. This challenge is particularly true for those minority students enrolled at predominately White institutions. However, first year minority students enrolling at large predominately White institutions can also benefit from focused and intentional programming that is creatively and culturally sensitive to first year minority student needs (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999).

Other studies comparing White and African American students’ SAT scores and prediction of college success noted that African American students perform at a lower
level than their White counterparts (Bowen & Bok, 1998). While there may be various reasons for this lower academic performance, The Pathways to College Network (2003), which consists of national organizations and various funding agencies that promote college access and success for all individuals, suggests that more instruction must be provided to high school counselors as they seek to assist minority families in understanding the transition from high school into postsecondary education.

Society and educational institutions continue to face the challenges of the ever widening achievement gap between low-income, minority students and their White counterparts (ACT, 2004). Some educators (need reference) believe that this achievement gap is the single most important reason for the under-representation of minority and low-income groups in higher education. This disparity in academic achievement is also a potential factor affecting the successful persistence of low-income single mothers in higher education.

First Generation, Low-Income First Year Students

According to Choy (2001), “studies indicate that students whose parents did not go to college are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to postsecondary educational access” (p. 2). Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (1999) also suggest that college enrollment rates vary considerably with the parents’ educational attainment. Eighty-two percent of students whose parents held a bachelor’s degree or higher enrolled in postsecondary education, whereas 54% of students whose parents completed only a high school education enrolled in college. Only 34% of students
enrolled into college if their parents had less than a high school diploma (U.S. Census, 2000).

Historically, there have been several significant challenges and barriers to first generation, low-income students’ ability to successfully enroll in college. Some educators suggest that socioeconomic status has an impact on the ability of first generation students to enroll and persist in higher education settings. In a recent article, Oldfield (2007) contended that “students who are the first in their family to enter higher education join a rarified and often mystifying culture of rules, rites, and rituals” (p. 1). Oldfield pointed out how his experience of being from a low socioeconomic status created a barrier and lack of cultural capital as a first generation student in college. He described cultural capital as the “knowledge, skills, education, and other advantages a person has that make the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily” (p. 1). In her book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, Ruby Payne (1996) focused on the inherent dangers and impact of poverty or social economic class on educational opportunities. She urged public school administrators and teachers to understand the mindset of low-income families and the impact of poverty on these families as they plan and implement support services within their educational settings. Without intervention and targeted services by public schools, first generation low-income students will likely continue to struggle with pre-college preparedness issues and enter college at a disadvantage.

First generation students find themselves more at risk for failure and transition because of their lack of adequate preparedness for postsecondary education (Mitchell,
1997; Terenzini et al., 1995). Although several national studies address and identify successful strategies for overcoming this challenge, there remains a high college dropout and stop out rate for first generation college students. The lack of academic achievement of “at risk” populations remains an area of concern within all levels of the educational process (Freeman, 1997). The opportunity for equal college access in national and local arenas is an area of open debate and discussion among educators. Overall, the nation has undergone several changes in curriculum, increased reliance on high stakes testing, assessment, and overall local accountability in attempts to increase the academic achievement and college preparedness of all American students.

Adelman (1999) argued that no single factor influences or predicts college enrollment and completion more than the ‘rigors’ of the student’s high school coursework. For many first generation families there is limited exposure to the college application process, less knowledge of postsecondary admissions criteria, and an overall lack of support from family, peers, and community institutions (Pathways to College, 2006; The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2006).

The absence of proactive guidance and counseling is another critical challenge for college-bound high school students and is even more critical for first generation, low-income students. Many first generation high school families are not proactive in scheduling their children in the appropriate coursework that leads to college readiness (Padron, 1992). There must be a direct connection to proactive high school guidance and support for this population. However, high school counselors are hard pressed to provide quality support because the majority of their time is devoted to higher priority tasks such
as scheduling, disciplining, and interacting with community agencies on behalf of students. The outcome of this reality is reflected in the following statement:

With increased job complexity and the multitasking required of guidance counselors today, the students that lose out the most are those students who are low-income and higher risk, leading to a higher achievement gap in an already astoundingly large difference in achievement and college enrollment and completion. (Whiston, 2001, p. 2)

Many first generation students are also faced with the profound effects of growing up in poverty and living on fixed incomes. Padron (1992) noted that poor families have great difficulty investing sufficient resources to help their children during their critical developmental stages before high school graduation. Thus, low-income students are more likely than their counterparts to delay college enrollment. Only 29% enroll in college after high school graduation, compared to 73% of students whose parents have earned a college degree (Pathways to College, 2006).

With an increasingly diverse student body enrolling in college, certain social groups have little or no experience in higher education. First generation students may not be familiar with the rigors of academic life (Thomas, 2001). First generation students are also at a greater risk of being academically, socially, and economically left behind (Pasacarella, Pierson, Woniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Given the critical need for first generation, low-income students to be validated and integrated into the campus community (Rendon, 1994), more studies of how this process occurs for first generation, low-income single mother students are needed.
Adult Learners in Higher Education

In her work on undergraduate adult students, Carol Kasworm (2003) concluded that there are clear differences between adult learners and traditional age learners with regard to the college experience. Adult learners in higher education are usually defined as 25 years of age or older. Although they are of traditional age (i.e., 17-24), young single mother college students can be related to the area of adult learners since they share some characteristic of adults, particularly that of bearing parenting responsibility. However, traditional age single mother students usually have a difference in maturity level, financial independence, and their acquired knowledge through life experiences brought to the learning process. Another area of difference is marked by the distinctive individual motivation of adult students who participate in college versus the rationale and motivation of traditional age students who enroll and participate in college (Kasworm, 2003). Some of the key motivating factors for adult students include personal life transitions; proactive life planning that includes future planning, seeking new opportunities in the workplace, or external life transitions, such as divorce, empty nest, change in job status, and the influx of technology and a global economy (Kasworm, p. 6). These factors may not be present for traditional age students.

Although there may be differences between nontraditional adult students and young single mothers aged 17-24, there are also similarities between these two groups as they navigate the college landscape. The adult student’s view of higher education is affected by age, financial security, life experiences, family configurations, and the specific motivation that propelled the desire for enrollment (Villela & Hu, 1991), as is the
view of young single mothers. Barriers to college success may also be similar for the two groups. As noted by Cross (1981), some barriers impact the successful enrollment and persistence of adult learners in college. The dual roles of parent and student may affect the adult learner and young single mothers in similar ways. According to Cross, institutions of higher education struggle to understand the needs of adults who enter college and the institutional barriers and constraints that these students must mediate. Cross divided barriers to college persistence into three categories: situational (family, job, financial and civic commitment), dispositional (interpersonal, includes dissonance in roles and duality of role demands), and institutional (systematic barriers that can impede and obstruct the progress of adult students and make it difficult for their successful navigation of the system). These barriers still hold true for adult learners as well as young single mothers today (Howard & Levine, 2004).

The role of single parenting in college as an ‘adult’ responsibility separates the needs of single mothers from other traditional age students and the pre-set role distinction of their peers. The situational barriers for adult students and young single parents are as varied and individual as each individual student. It is suggested that something as simple as the age of the child can affect college persistence for young single parents, as well as adult students (Darby-Watson, 2001). Studies indicate that women with younger children under the age of 12 years are more likely to interrupt or place their education on hold (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). Another related situational barrier is the financial stability of the student. Limited availability of finances for college related expenses,
childcare expenses, or financial aid limitations are all situational barriers that impact adult learners’ persistence in college (Cross, 1981).

In the area of learning, the andragogical theory of adult learning may provide some perspective on transitional barriers for traditional aged first year low-income single parents in college. Knowles (1973) described the concept of “andragogy” as a humanistic understanding of the complex dynamics of growth and development of individuals in interaction with their environments. Knowles pointed out that as the student matures, “his learning around life problems increases steadily from infancy to pre-adolescence, and then increases rapidly during adolescence” (Knowles, p. 43). Knowles made some basic assumptions concerning traditional pedagogy and the movement to a differentiation between youth and adult learners, by noting the following:

I am differentiating between the assumptions about learners that have traditionally been made by those who practice pedagogy in contrast to the assumptions made in andragogy. I believe that the assumptions of andragogy apply to children and youth as they mature, and that they, too, will come to be taught more and more andragogically. (p. 43)

The pioneer of adult learning, Malcolm Knowles (1973), has provided a backdrop that is used in the field today. Some basic principles of adult learning may provide a platform to understand how to establish systems of support for the single mother adult learner. Stephen Lieb identified the following principles of adult learning: (a) autonomous and self directed; (b) accumulated life experiences, knowledge and previous educational experiences; (c) goal oriented; (e) must see the relevancy in the learning
experience, are practical and focused on the aspects of a learning experience that are most useful to them; (e) must be respected for what they bring to the learning experience (Lieb, 1991). Support programs grounded in these principles have the potential of helping traditional age first generation, low-income single mother students persist in college.

Conclusion

As more first generation, low-income single parents enroll in higher education, a greater effort must be made to identify the barriers this population faces as they persist in college. This effort must lead to a better understanding of how traditional age single parents who are students overcome barriers as they mature and develop while seeking to complete their college degrees (Christie, 2002). Current research provides little understanding of the barriers that might negatively influence these students during first, second, and third year persistence in higher education. There is also a need to gain greater insight into strategies used by traditional age, first generation, low-income single mothers that positively influence the first, second, and third year persistence in college. By understanding the barriers and effective strategies institutions may gain insight into providing relevant services, flexibility in programming and service delivery to single parent adult learners in year one, year two, and year three as they persist in college. Whereas an understanding of the issues of barriers and strategies for this population is important, equally important is increasing the opportunities for single parent enrollment and persistence in college. This principle is at the core of this research study (Howard & Levine, 2004).
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical rationale for the methodology used in this study. The chapter also describes the research design, conceptual framework, population sampling technique, and interview guide used by the researcher. The data collection, management, analysis, and reporting processes used in this study are also described along with the delimitation and limitations of the study.

Rationale for Qualitative Research

The overall purpose of this study is to uncover and describe the barriers that traditional age, first generation low-income, single mothers between the ages of 17-24 experience and the strategies they adopt in their efforts to persist through year one to year three of college. Traditional age first generation, low-income single parents are faced with important barriers that they must overcome as they persist in a higher education setting. This study examines how single mothers at a large Midwestern public university identified and addressed these barriers as well as the strategies, support systems they used to persist in college.

In examining more closely how traditional age, single mother students persist in their first three years of college from the perspectives of the students themselves, qualitative inquiry is the appropriate method to use. Qualitative inquiry provides a
framework to add to and build “rather than to test concepts, hypotheses, and theories” (Merriman, 1998, p. 43). “A qualitative study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a phenomenon, or social unit within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly defined” (Merriman, 1998, p. 21). Use of a qualitative method promotes an understanding of the complex issues associated with persistence of traditional age single mothers in higher education. A qualitative study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon. By examining real-life situations, qualitative study results in a rich and holistic account of the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam, 1998).

In understanding the philosophy behind qualitative methodology, researchers point out the intent to look at practical real-life instances in order to provide a total picture of the actual interactions of variables or events (Yin, 1994). The researcher uses a qualitative method to concentrate on specific instances in an attempt to identify interactive processes that may be crucial but are critical to understanding the phenomena. Qualitative research provides a three-dimensional snapshot of the issue under examination and illustrates relationships and patterns within a given context (Lubbe, 2007; Merriam, 1998).

Because an in-depth investigation is needed to gain a better understanding of the barriers and strategies used by traditional age single mothers as they persist in higher education, qualitative methodology adds meaning and understanding to the existing body of research in this area. This type of inquiry also identifies and describes phenomena and
context and contributes to a “holistic” understanding of the topic. Studies in the literature related to single parent persistence in college primarily reflect a program perspective and not the perspective of the individual single parent. There needs to be a more emic understanding of how barriers impact the persistence of traditional age, low income single mothers enrolled at a large Midwestern public university and what strategies these students use as they persist to degree completion.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis was used in this study to inductively answer the research questions. Narrative analysis uses individual stories as the object of investigation (Riessman, 1993). Riessman describes the life-story method of narrative analysis as an avenue to incorporate particular events adding analytical elements which, in this study, illuminated the pattern of single mothers persisting in college. This process required the researcher to be as judgment-free as possible in the process to gain a better understanding of how events and life experiences shaped and influenced the persistence of participants. The researcher in the study used narrative analysis because this approach was an “empowering” social science methodology that gave voice to the participants to articulate their own viewpoints (Riessman, 1993). Narrative analysis assisted the researcher in stitching together the stories from the perspectives of the participants. The researcher teased out the consequential sequencing of events (Riessman). This research method provided insight in gaining a better understanding of the barriers and strategies used by traditional age, first generation low-income single mothers as they persist in college.
The research design in this study used open-ended inductive questions to study
the process of persistence. Process questions focused on how things happened rather than
on whether there was a particular relationship between variables or the impact among or
by other variables (Maxwell, 2005). After review of the research, the researcher
consulted with the director of the pre college teen mother program in piloting selected
process questions for the study. The use of open-ended process questions provided an
avenue to guide students in the telling of their stories and added meaning to the
occurrences in their daily lives of the barriers and supports that had an impact on their
college persistence. This inductive approach gave voice to these students and added
credibility to the research in the field of persistence in higher education. It is for these
reasons that narrative analysis was chosen for the research design.

Population Sampling Technique

A typical purposeful sampling technique was used to generate information-rich
narratives that enlightened aspects of the proposed study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the
literature, some researchers discuss different types of purposeful sampling (Goetz &
LaCompte, 1984; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). Merriam (1998) notes that,
“A typical sample would be one that is selected because it reflects the average person,
situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest” (p. 62). The Office of Student
Financial Aid at the Midwestern public university where this study occurred generated a
list of enrolled single mothers fitting the criteria of the study. The list was generated from
a pool of Pell-grant eligible female students enrolled at university in the fall semester of
2007. Announcements of the potential need for study participants generated a secondary
list of candidates from the Adult Student Services and Life Program. In a third recruitment strategy, young mothers who were students housed in the university’s family housing complex were made aware of the need for participants for the study via announcements during selected programming for them. The Assistant Director of one of the university’s academic support programs assisted the researcher in the early stages of identifying and recruiting potential participants.

Participants were selected by purposeful sampling according to the following criteria: (a) single mother enrolled at KSU; (b) age 24 or less; (c) has one or more dependant(s); (d) has always parented as a single parent; (e) freshman, sophomore, or junior status; (f) resides on or off campus; (g) primary caretaker and custodial mother of child(ren); (h) first generation student; (i) low-income student; and (j) willing to participate in the study. Once the participant pool was developed, a final list of 20 single parents who were in their first, second, and third year were identified. From the final 20 respondents the researcher made preliminary contact for participation in the study. (See Figure 1.)

Of the 20 respondents, 9 subjects who met the criteria were selected as study participants. From the initial pool of the 20 respondents, three students elected not to participate, two were removed from the university community, two students were not enrolled in college during the semester in which the study was conducted, and four of the potential pool did not respond to the solicitation for participation. The researcher
Figure 1. Research framework
continued to screen the list for single parents who met the criterion of (3) first, (3) second, and (3) third year first generation, low-income traditional age single mothers enrolled at Kent State University. Hence, this process continued until nine participants needed for the study were obtained. All students completed a background questionnaire (see Appendix A) as part of the research process in this study.

Participants

The recruitment process resulted in the identification of nine single parent participants who met the criteria for participation in the study. Below is a summary description of each participant using an assigned pseudonym. None of the participants’ real names or the names of their children or other family members was used in this study. Each of the nine participants met the criteria for participation in the study. All of the participants are from the greater northeast Ohio area. All attended public high schools.

Kristen

Kristen is an African American first generation college student. Kristen is a freshman. She resides on campus. She is also from a large urban school district. She has three other siblings who enrolled in college as single parents, but only the oldest sibling remained enrolled, and recently graduated from college. She has the support of her mom and dad. She has a cousin who is also enrolled in at the same institution. She struggles academically and has the desire to become a nurse. She seeks the assistance of various individuals as she attempts to maintain her college enrollment. She visits the university’s pre-college programs office on a regular basis. Kristen participated in a university pre-college program funded by the federal government during her high school years. She has
a 20-month-old daughter, and works 15 hours on the weekends. She returns home every weekend, and the child’s father assists with childcare for the weekend. Kristen is 30 minutes from home.

Sierra

Sierra is an African American first generation student. Sierra is a freshman. Sierra has been enrolled for two years, but remains at freshman status due to having to exit the university for one semester and her part-time attendance. She became a mother during her junior year of high school. Her younger sister is a junior in high school and is pregnant with her first child. During her high school years, Sierra resided with her family in a subsidized income based housing project. During her senior year of high school, she moved into her own apartment. She was not willing to share why she made the decision to move out during her senior year, but she indicated that she had to do what was in her best interest. Although, she has been enrolled in college for two years, she still maintains freshman status due to her excessive withdrawals from courses. She is maintains a high level of family contact, and is often distracted with family concerns beyond her control. She attended high school in a large urban school district. She is currently pregnant with her second child. She resides off campus in income-based housing and receives child support. She is 45 minutes from her home community.

Tamara

Tamara is an African American first generation college student. Tamara is a freshman. She resides on campus. She has a 21-month-old daughter. She was recruited to the institution through a special program for minority students, and she is a member of a
special program for students who are single parents. She attended high school in a district located in the outskirts of a large urban community. Her composite ACT score was a 17. She indicated that she was very “lonely and feels isolated from the university community. She expressed that she felt that she had no friends with the exception of the coordinator in the housing complex. She became pregnant her junior year of high school. Her child’s father recently transferred to attend college at the same institution. She is two and one-half hours from home.

_Alicia_

Alicia is a Latina American first generation college student. Alicia is a sophomore in terms of years spent in college and has completed a total of 54 hours. Alicia has progressed due to her early start in the summer semester and continued summer enrollment. Alicia resides in the on-campus family housing complex. She also participated in a pre-college program. She maintains a 3.0 grade point average. She is very active in campus based support programs for single parents who are first generation and low-income. She is respected and regarded by her peers. She is bilingual. She graduated in the top 15% (85th percentile) of her high school class. She is from a blue-collar family, and she works ten hours per week. She has been accepted into the College of Nursing beginning spring semester 2009, and will begin her clinical experience fall of 2010. She is two hours from her home community.

_Eva_

Eva is a Latina American first generation college student. Eva is a sophomore according to her completed credit hours although she has attended college for more than
two years. Eva graduated from a predominantly White high school and transferred to the current institution from another in-state four-year public university. During the interview, she expressed her pride in her Latin roots. She described her upbringing as being very strong within the Latino cultural foundation. In the early stages of her life, she resided in New York City, and during her middle school years her family moved to northeast Ohio with other family members. She described her upbringing in New York as being very difficult. She discussed having to fight her way through life because of constant teasing and “put-downs” because of her dark complexion. She shared how difficult it was to be a dark skinned Puerto Rican with “kinky hair”. She stated that she is now proud of her clear identification with her Latin roots. Eva noted that her early struggles in life provided her with a set of values and a strong cultural foundation. She appears to have a very strong personality; she is bilingual and identifies herself as an Afro-Latina. Her father is an ordained minister. She struggles with the guilt of being a pastor’s kid and becoming pregnant and having a child outside of marriage. She felt that she disappointed her parents, but she is dealing with this much better than she has in the past. She has dreams of becoming a gynecologist. She has a three-year-old daughter. She is two hours from home.

*Kekie*

Kekie is an African American first generation college student. Kekie is a sophomore. She is from a large urban metropolitan school district. She openly shared her disappointment in her academic preparedness from the district. She indicated she felt she was “cheated,” and now she understands the importance of quality education. She is
striving to get ahead by completing her education in hopes of providing her son with a quality education. Her community was plagued with all the issues and concerns that are created by years of poverty and continued unemployment. She has a two year old son. She is enrolled in a university program that supports young parents in college with resources and enrollment in an orientation class for young mothers. She entered the institution with the lowest ACT score of all study participants. She has a positive outlook and receives financial and emotional support from her immediate family. Kekie resides off campus, and is one hour and 15 minutes from home.

*Evelyn*

Evelyn is an African American first generation college student. She is a junior in college. She graduated number one in her high school class. Evelyn was very involved in high school extracurricular activities. Her high school was very sports centered and was an urban district plagued with all the conditions found in poor urban communities. She was a cheerleader, member of the track team, actively involved in leadership activities, and was President of the senior class. Her parents were very involved in her life and very supportive. She is from a working class family, and both parents are gainfully employed. She is the oldest of her three siblings. She does not reside on campus, and works 25-30 hours per week to pay her living expenses. Her mother is employed at the local hospital in the housekeeping department. Evelyn shared her dream and desire to become a nurse, but she has not been able to gain admission into the nursing program. She has not been able to successfully pass the entry class and maintain the needed grade point average for
acceptance. Evelyn indicated that she is attempting to change her major to Nutrition. She has a three year old daughter and she is 30 minutes from her parents’ home.

_Erin_

Erin is an African American first generation college student. Erin is a junior. She graduated from a large urban school district and transferred to the university from a community college. Erin voiced her concern regarding the inadequate academic preparation that she received during high school. She is a pre-med major with a concentration in molecular biology. She is a recipient of a scholarship from her home town. She indicated that she received early information and assistance with the college application process during high school. Because of her high school participation in the scholarship program, she was entitled to last dollar scholarship funds. She struggles academically and maintains that she will gain acceptance into a health care field. She is focused and her day is detailed in 30 minutes increments. She resides on campus. She has her own transportation, but takes advantage of on and off campus bus service. Her daughter is three and one-half years old. Erin seems very mature for her age, and is 45 minutes from her home community.

_Patricia_

Patricia is an African American first generation college student. Patricia has junior class status. She attended an inner city high school. She graduated with a strong high school grade point average. During high school, she participated in a program entitled “Healthcare in Progress. This was a program designed to facilitate the transition of students from high school into a healthcare career in college. She has earned enough
credit hours to qualify for an associate’s degree in general studies. She resides 35 minutes from campus and receives public assistance for her housing. Of all the study participants, she had the highest ACT score of 24. She discussed the challenges of being a first generation college student and having the responsibility of caring for her three younger siblings and her mother. Her mother suffers from mental health issues and currently resides with Patricia and her three children. She is 45 minutes from her home community.

Summary Demographic Data on Participants

The ages of the participants in this study range from 19 to 23 years. Seven of the participants were enrolled as full-time students during the time of this study while two were enrolled as part-time students. Of the two enrolled part time, one was expecting her second child and the second student decreased her hours of enrollment in an effort to raise her grade point average by allowing herself more time for her studies and to seek counseling services that centered on family concerns at home. She was also experiencing difficulty because the father of her child was called to full time duty in Iraq.

Table 2 provides additional information on the backgrounds of participants. Of the nine participants, five reside off campus, and four reside on campus in residential housing. With the exception of Sierra and Kekie, all single mothers in this study were responsible for one child. Six participants reported maintaining contact with the fathers of their children while three indicated no contact with the father of their child. The majority of participants maintained positive relationships with at least one of their own parents and relied on these relationships for support.
Table 2

Participant Informational Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Reside on Campus</th>
<th>Age of child(ren)</th>
<th>Cohabitating</th>
<th>Receives Academic Support</th>
<th>Maintain + relationship with child’s father</th>
<th>Maintain + Relationship with own father</th>
<th>Maintain + Relationship with own mother</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sierra</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3 yrs 8 mos.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes, negative</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3 ½ yrs.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3 yrs</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes, positive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>4 yrs</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, negative</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristen</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2 yrs</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, negative</td>
<td>Yes, Negative</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>7, 5, 2 yrs</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes, negative</td>
<td>Yes, Negative</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kekie</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2 yrs</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, positive</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3 yrs</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, positive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamara</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>21 mos.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of the participants in this study were members of ethnic groups traditionally underrepresented in college attendance. The annual incomes of participants varied, but all qualified for Pell grants and loans. As indicated in Table 3, all used some form of public assistance to subsidize their income while attending college.

With one exception, all participants in this study worked in order to supplement income. As indicated in Table 4, they maintained a workload of 10 to 30 plus hours per week to pay related expenses. Eight of the study participants discussed the need for
Table 3

**Participant Financial Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Work Study</th>
<th>Child Support</th>
<th>Food Stamps</th>
<th>WIC</th>
<th>HUD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sierra</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristen</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kekie</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>Afro-Latina</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamara</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Employment during college to offset the cost of basic needs for themselves, their child, and basic household needs. All voiced concern with the struggle to maintain the balance of needing to work and wanting to be totally committed to their studies. Five of the participants were employed off campus; participants indicated that off campus jobs tended to pay more money, compared to on campus employment where the typical level of pay is minimum wage. Two of the participants work 30 plus hours per week.
Table 4

Participant Work Load

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Does not work</th>
<th>Works 0-10 hours</th>
<th>Works 11-20 hours</th>
<th>Works 21-30 hours</th>
<th>Works over 30 hours</th>
<th>Works off Campus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sierra</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristen</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kekie</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamara</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One student, who was unemployed, indicated that she recently quit her job in order to attend counseling sessions and receive academic support.

Summary Academic Data on Participants

The ACT score is one measure of college readiness. Within the state of Ohio many public and private institutions of higher education use ACT test scores for the purpose of college admissions. The American College Testing (ACT) test assesses high school students' general educational development and their ability to complete college-level work. The highest score attainable is 36 and a score of 21 is the national average (www.act.org/). Typically students who have a composite ACT score of 21 and above are
considered admissible to many of the four-year state institutions in Ohio. Yet, many students are still enrolled with lower ACT scores, based on high grade point averages, or pre-selected criterion determined by the institution.

The ACT Assessment was designed for the following purposes:

- to help students make better decisions about which colleges to attend;
- to assist students in deciding which programs to study (major);
- provide information helpful to colleges in the process of admitting and to measure college readiness.

Academic advisors at the campus where this study occurred use ACT scores and scores on COMPASS to place students in below college-level developmental education courses. Typically, students scoring below an 18 ACT composite are placed into developmental courses for reading and study strategies. Typically, students scoring below a 21 on the ACT mathematics subscore are placed into below college-level developmental mathematics courses.

As indicated in Table 5, ACT scores for participants in this study ranged from a low 11 to a high of 24. The average cumulative college grade point average in fall 2008 was 2.3 with participants ranging from a low 1.72 to a high of 3.05 on a four-point scale. Eight of the nine participants in this study had been required to enroll in developmental education courses in reading strategies, study strategies, and or mathematics. Five of the participants were still Exploratory majors meaning they had not yet declared a major in a degree-granting program. The remaining four students were focused on health
Table 5

Academic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>ACT Score Composite</th>
<th>College GPA</th>
<th>Developmental Course Placement</th>
<th>College Major</th>
<th>Total Hours Completed (As of August 2008)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Pre Nursing</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KeKie</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Exploratory</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristen</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Exploratory</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td></td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamara</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Exploratory</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Exploratory</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Pre Med</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Exploratory</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Science or social science majors. Finally, the number of completed credit hours ranged from 21 to 67 semester hours.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained approval to conduct the study from the university’s Institutional Review Board. The primary data collection method consisted of individual, semi-structured interviews using the interview guide that comprised of open-ended questions. The use of interviews created a narrative tapestry of
single mothers’ understanding of their role as students and an examination of their transition as they uncovered and described the barriers and identified strategies and supports that helped them persist in college. In depth interviewing, as described by Minichiello, Arioni, Timewell, and Alexander (1995), was used in gathering the data for this study. Minichiello et al. describe in depth interviewing as having a conversation with a specific purpose, “focusing on the informant’s perception of self, life and experience, and expressed in his or her own words.” (p. 61)

The role of the researcher in the interview process was to remain neutral and create an environment free of distractions, which facilitates an open conversation space for the participant to tell their story (Riessman, 1993). The researcher gathered background information on potential participants with the assistance of university staff identified earlier in this chapter. Before the interview began, each participant received a consent form (see Appendix B) detailing their rights as a participant in the study and the manner in which data records will be used and discarded. Nine (9) participants who agreed and signed consent forms had their interviews audio taped.

The taped interviews followed the interview protocol found in Appendix C. During the interview process, the participants responded to open-ended inductive questions, followed by probing questions. The dialogue between the researcher and the participants illuminated successful strategies that aided in their ability to overcome barriers and persist in college. Process questions provided the impetus in guiding the discussion and assisted the researcher in an understanding of identified barriers and support in the interactive processes, and made for a translucent understanding of the
phenomenon of college persistence for the traditional age single mothers. This framework provided a depiction from the perspective of the participants of how specific instances led to their resiliency and ability to persist in college.

Bogdan and Biklen (1998) indicated that qualitative research serves to verify or establish the validity of individuals’ perceptions using multiple sources and multiple data gathering techniques in the compilation of research. Information from interviews became the initial data source in the development of baseline data. The researcher clarified data using demographic information and academic records. The second data set used to review participants’ data included participants’ pre-college academic records, such as high school grade point average, their perception of their college preparation, along with ACT/SAT pre-college test scores. The researcher reviewed students’ individualized DARS (Degree Audit Reporting System) reports provided through a computerized analysis of students’ progress and degree completion requirements. Additionally participants’ current academic records, grade point averages in major, available advising notes, reports, participants’ individual course withdrawals, and current academic progress were reviewed.

The third data set involved information gathered from focus groups. Focus groups provided an informal discussion and interaction between participants and facilitated sharing from participant’s perspective of the barriers and support systems in a permissive and caring environment (Krueger, 1988). The purpose was not to seek consensus, but rather to identify the emerging patterns and themes from the viewpoints of the participants. Through individual conversations between the participants and researcher,
additional conversation was conducted relative to the research question from the initial interviews to add clarity of emerging themes, and provide a better understanding from the traditional age single mother perspective (Krueger, 1988).

Individual Interviews

The interview guide provided the researcher with topic areas that assisted the unveiling of emerging themes from the participants’ perspective of barriers and strategies that aided in their persistence in college. A list of the interview questions were provided to each participant to facilitate open discussions of the barriers, and the adopted strategies that facilitated or impeded their persistence. Of the nine interviews, eight were conducted on campus and one was conducted in a student’s home.

The interview protocol list of questions (see Appendix C) served as a guide to the interview process. Participants were permitted to review questions prior to the actual questioning to ensure that they understood the questions being asked. Participants were permitted to answer questions in their own words; the researcher used probing questions to clarify or ascertain a clear understanding of the single mother’s perspective. During the interviews, the researcher took written notes and all interviews were taped recorded. The interviews ranged from 1 hour to 2 hours and 30 minutes in duration. The researcher conducted 30 minute follow-up sessions with participants to identify any inconsistencies or questions that arose within transcribed interviews.

Focus Group

In this study, one focus group session was conducted with six of the nine study participants. The focus group session provided an opportunity for each participant to
share experiences and perspectives with other study participants. Data from the focus group provided another format by which the researcher was able to gain a deeper level of understanding from the participants’ perspectives and capture the voices of single mothers and their lived experiences.

The focus group session provided a vehicle to facilitate active participation, inquiry, and reflection to assist the researcher in an examination of the frequency of emerging themes. The session assisted the researcher in further examination of the identified emergent themes from the individual interviews of the strategies and barriers to persistence for single mothers, and the opportunity to look for the “connections.” The process was also a follow-up for member checking and giving clarity to the voice of study participants (Krueger, 1988).

The analysis of the data was systematic, and field notes were used to compare incongruent non-verbal clues and the overall mood of the session. The examination of the data provided a vehicle to allow for clarification, follow-up, and probing questions to tease out recurring forms or patterns, also referred to as “themes,” that are discerned in narrative transcripts. As pointed out by one researcher, it is critical that the researchers look for and identify sequences of core phrases that are repeated across interviews as indicators of themes (Labov, 1972).

The telling of the stories or first person accounts of the experiences of enrolled traditional age first generation, low-income single mothers formed the narrative “text” of this research approach. The researcher employed an inductive method to “tease out” the
common themes and patterns across and within the participants’ interview data, academic records, program documents, and focus group interaction.

Data Analysis

Narrative analysis was utilized in this study to assist the researcher in creating a written detail of the phenomenon of single parent persistence towards college completion and to investigate and identify barriers and support systems identified by single-parent students. Data obtained through the taped interviews and focus group were transcribed and served as the basis for data analysis. The researcher read all transcriptions in order to recapture the tone of the interviews and to check for data accuracy. Three study participants, Tamara, Kekie, and Kristen, were selected and asked to review their transcripts for accuracy. Based on their responses, the researcher made minor modifications to the transcribed data. The researcher coded the transcriptions using the psychobiographical method developed by I.E. Alexander (1988). This method of psychobiographical analysis focused on the creation of meaning through the words of participants. The researcher used this process of coding to provide an unbiased framework for coding the data. Seven of Alexander’s nine psychobiographical categories were used to code the analysis of each narrative. The coding categories include the following:

• Primacy—the first theme or idea mentioned;
• Frequency—the number of times a theme or idea is mentioned;
• Uniqueness—a statement is when it is a stand alone statement;
• Emphasis—additional stress placed on a theme or idea by the participant;
• Omission—the participant’s neglect to mention a feeling or reaction to an event;
• Isolation—a phrase or series of phrases that do not fit within the emerging set of themes; and
• Incompletion—is demonstrated by a story that does not have closure.

Coded data were sorted and assigned to interview questions. The final step was to analyze and sort data into themes or sets of patterns that emerged. As emerging themes were identified, the researcher consulted the original context of the transcribed interviews to corroborate the themes that emerged from the process.

A variety of documents were also analyzed in this study. These included high school transcripts (when available), college transcripts, and personal data sheets. In addition, researcher notes provided useful information about the nonverbal behavior during individual interviews (for example, “Tamara became very distracted during the interview by the crying of her child by pausing in between her responses). Data sets were organized around the predominant strategies and barriers that emerged. The researcher classification and coded data descriptions (see Tables 6 and 7 for examples).

Specific techniques were used including placing coded data in charts and matrices of categories, and the creation of a flow chart of data sets and emerging themes identified by participants. From the various emerging themes, barriers and effective strategies were extrapolated from the data. The researcher concurs with the statement, “The life story method of narrative analysis involves interviewing a subject and then retelling their story as if written by them” (Riessman, 1993, p. 5). The researcher employed a retelling of the
Table 6

Example of Respondent Barriers, Classification, and Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Response</th>
<th>Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question:</strong> Do you feel that your high school adequately prepared you for college?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kekie: I cried one day all day because I was so mad – like ahh I thought that my</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school had prepared me – I always wondered why they always talking about</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloverdale (pseudonym) Public Schools system, it's not that bad – you know but</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when I got here and as far as academically – I wasn’t prepared. My grades was</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>terrible. I went into that class and I was clueless. And I was hurt because I'm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>like they did not prepare me for this – when you go to college it’s a review - your</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>first year is a review so that’s what your professors teach you, but it wasn’t a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>review for me – it was learning it for the first time. So, no they didn’t prepare</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>me at all.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question:</strong> What challenges were you faced with, and how did you overcome it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kekie: I wake up at 6:30 in the morning. I have structure and function, which is</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anatomy at 7:45. So when I wake up at like 6 – 6:30 I have to wake up my son and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he does not want to get dressed so I have to hassle that …… drop him off at</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>daycare by 7:20 and get to structure and function by 7:45. And after Structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Function I juggle back and forth. I am preparing for my math exam today</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and so I was at tutoring all the way up to 5 o’ clock until my math class and then</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had math class from 5:30 to 7 – well the daycare closes at 6 so now I have to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>figure out who is going to watch my son…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva: Ya know, it’s little things we get our grocery shopping done, but we are also</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>multi-tasking and we have a big production. Instead of just going to Target (alone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>) with our kids in the cart crying and screaming, we have someone else to talk to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and so do they (the children).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia: Yeah, I took care of my sister, little brother, my little sister ‘til I</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sent my little sister and my little brother to Tennessee. And my sister just moved</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>out of town and got her own place which I wish she would have stayed with me. Yep,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my mom has been living with me—the first time she moved in with me was in 2006—</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>okay my mom moved in with me in August 2006 because she lost her house. My landlord</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had an open house in 2006, yeah because I was still pregnant with Phoenix—she lost</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that house in May 2007—so she has been with me since May 2007. So she has been with</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>me a little over a year now.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(table continues)*
Table 6 (continued)

Example of Respondent Barriers, Classification, and Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Response</th>
<th>Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question:</strong> DN: What challenges were you faced with, and how did you overcome it?</td>
<td><strong>Frequency</strong> The number of times a theme or idea is mentioned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristen: ... I know the benefits of staying on campus — .. you are right here — the only bad thing is that is it expensive to stay on campus — it’s really, really expensive.</td>
<td>Situational-finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia: I wasn’t eligible for cash assistance but I had still had the food stamps. I had medical.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia: I didn’t make it through my first year (of college)—honestly. Cause I had to go to work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamara: It’s okay, it’s kinda hard—I don’t drive. I have to take three buses to get her to day care with her and three buses back. So six buses a day.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7

Example of Respondent Strategies, Classification, and Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Response</th>
<th>Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question:</strong> DN: Describe what a typical day was like for you?</td>
<td><strong>Primacy</strong> (first theme or idea mentioned or discussed) <strong>Time management</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamara: I run on a schedule. And it is hard—I am trying but it is hard if something goes wrong with my schedule or something interferes or changes in my schedule—it is really hard to get back on track. But, that is what I am working on right now.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristen: Classes, I schedule them around my class times. If I have to schedule a month in advance then I will call and cancel and reschedule if it interferes with my class time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
Table 7 (continued)

*Example of Respondent Strategies, Classification, and Coding*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Response</th>
<th>Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question:</strong> Who has contributed to your success? Or what has contributed to your</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>success? … So what do you contribute that to?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn: My mother is like a big help, she helps me through things—I like to talk</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to her—she gives me advice—ya know—older people have been there before they can</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kinda guide you—so—my mother helps me a lot.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kekie: I feel like the people at [this university]. Like you said. They help me</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make it. If I didn’t have Upward Bound even though I wasn’t an Upward Bound student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you all took me in - so it was like if I knocked on you alls door and I was</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crying you just gave me a hug and that got me through my day – if you know the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Program and you know Adult Services and they was just there and they</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stopped and they opened their door. And so I would say me having those real bad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>today’s like today - you guys would say “Kekie you can do it – you got through</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>this year you can do it.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question:</strong> Tell me about your experience as a young parent enrolled at this</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia: Well I am a very determined person. If I am going to be here for four</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>years with these opportunities, I am going to take advantage of it. And there’s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people paying for me to be here then I want to be here and I want to get my</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>degree within that four years in nursing. Because you have to have a 3.0 GPA or</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>higher so I know have to work really hard to get A’s and B’s – in order to do that</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have to study so it is something like – I’m determined – I am not going to waste</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my time being here and not doing anything.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva: I am so happy—I have never been happier—just facing the … it’s the reality of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being a single mother but also I think you have to be okay with yourself—you have</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to love yourself before someone is going to come and love you and don’t settle for</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anything less—ya know—I think I am a prize so I want someone to work towards this</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prize!!!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
Table 7 (continued)

Example of Respondent Strategies, Classification, and Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Response</th>
<th>Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Patricia:</strong> I don’t care; as messed up as I been through, as much as I have done—like I just had to submit an appeal letter to financial aid to keep my financial aid and in that letter I was just honest with it—you guys can keep denying it all you want to—I am going to keep submitting my appeals because I am not going to quit—I will do what I need to do to get to the next level.</td>
<td><strong>Frequency</strong>&lt;br&gt;The number of times a theme or idea is mentioned (time related)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question:</strong>&lt;br&gt;DN: What strategies do you use to help to help you successfully fill the roles you have? Give an example.</td>
<td><strong>Uniqueness</strong>&lt;br&gt;When a statement is a stand alone statement (Attitudes/Beliefs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kekie: It is almost like clockwork—it is like a routine. It really is like clockwork - like um I got a job—I do a 9 to 5 that is me being a student and then from 6 – 9 I am being a mom and student at the same time because you can give your child a half hour and he think you the best mom ever—I do that and at the same time I am doing my homework, but he at that age 2 he like to color so we play this game where you do your homework and I do my homework so that helps when I am doing my homework but at the same time I am playing with him too. So as far as a friend balancing that out I just when I have time I have my friends talk to me but my friends know how I am like “oh I have to do my homework” or I turn off my phone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DN: How do you overcome barriers?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva: And then I am from Lorain—even on top of that—I am telling you it’s the whole God thing—my relationship with Christ—my family—we depend on Christ—we do our devotions daily—that is another thing—we do devotions I don’t know—once you are off that relationship with Christ you kinda of end up in different areas that you didn’t think you wanted to be and you have to come back. I think that is a typical Christian based</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva: God!!! God!!! Jesus – no other way.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia: I don’t see like me personally—I don’t know if it is something that is appropriate to bring up but to me it is a spirituality—I have a high relationship with my higher being—God and if it wasn’t for that relationship—I know I wouldn’t be as successful as I am today—because that is what keeps me motivated—that’s that keeps me learning—I feel I can go through more experiences—it keeps me going—it’s what keeps me going—so its definitely that.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
struggles and strategies of the study participants as individual interviews were weaved together in the coding and discussion of the study.

Researcher’s Background

The researcher has had previous first-hand experience and knowledge of the embedded concerns related to the barriers to self-sufficiency for low income single parents. This section on the researcher’s background provides an understanding of the researcher’s emotional attachment to this issue and attempts to address and to clarify potential researcher bias, previous connection, and background experience with minority, low income single parents.

The researcher first became interested in understanding the lives of young single mothers as an administrator with the Jersey City Salvation Army Early Childhood Center from 1989-1990. The researcher worked with teen prostitutes on the streets of New York City, helping them find a home, encouraging them to take care of themselves, and persuading participants to change the course of their lives. During that time, the researcher secured an initial grant for $100,000 to develop an Infant Toddler Stimulation Program for Young Parents (ITSP Program) for infants enrolled at the Day Care Center. This newly created program opened the researcher’s eyes to this invisible population within low-income communities. The Sisters of Charity in Jersey City, a non-profit organization, made a decision to discontinue their service delivery and housing treatment facility program for young mothers. The “Home for Wayward Mothers” began to dismantle services to this needy population. A decision was made by the local funding agencies to enhance services provided by the Jersey City Salvation Army by deeding the
facility and additional remaining funds to the Jersey City Salvation Army. The researcher’s experiences in Jersey City provided insight and sensitivity to understand and identify the glaring gap in social programming and the needed educational paths that could facilitate single heads of households in becoming self-empowered and making the transition off the welfare rolls into self-sufficiency. The researcher’s experiences as the administrator of The Salvation Army Women’s Shelter in 1990-1993 in Atlantic City, New Jersey was the catalyst for the realization of the need to identify barriers and develop avenues of support that would create pathways to self-sufficiency for young single mothers.

In 1993, the researcher moved to Ohio as the director of a university-based Upward Bound (UB) Program. It was during this time of transition, coupled with previous knowledge of the myriad of barriers and challenges that these low-income first generation families endured, that the researcher decided to add “single parents” to this UB paradigm. The original funding for the UB Program did not allow for the inclusion of young parents in the scope of work. In the refunding of the UB Program 1994-1998, the service delivery was expanded to include five high school teen single mothers. This critical decision opened the door to various local and national programs focused on providing pathways of support to this population as they make the transition from high school into higher education. In 1999, the university’s pre-college unit was formed and funded for a second grant. This new grant, entitled Parents Reaching Educational Progress (PREP) Academy, was the first federally funded Upward Bound Program in the nation serving young high school parents.
In the researcher’s current role working with single mothers in a higher education setting, the researcher observes the struggles that these students endure on a daily basis. They are faced with many challenges as they attempt to balance the role of mother and student. For many single young mothers, they also must balance the role of employee along with the academic demands, and some have extensive educational deficiencies.

The researcher’s experiential knowledge focuses on the personal, economic, and social barriers that many young single mothers must overcome in order to move into a self-sufficiency mindset. Programs attempt to address this population and effectively transform their cultural norms. The issue is that many of the efforts fall short because there is a need to understand the issue from the perspective of the single mother, and to educate this population in understanding that education is the key that unlocks the doors of poverty.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, it is important to ensure uniformity in the recording and transcribing of data (Stake, 1994). Research scholars agree: “qualitative research is not a linear, step by step process” (Merriam, 1998, p. 151). The researcher employed methods to strengthen the study’s credibility and trustworthiness by adhering to research ethics protocol, maintaining a research audit trail, reflexivity, and member checking.

Triangulation

Triangulation was substantiated through multiple source data collection and processes and multiple methods to confirm identified emerging themes in the study (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Multiple records and files were used in the data collection.
for this study. Participants completed background data informational sheets; academic records, college entry records, as well as previous and current academic records were reviewed. To further strengthen the methodology employed, the research sought the assistance of a senior faculty member who was not a member of the dissertation committee. Multiple data sources included onsite audio interviews, and an examination of programmatic documents used by participants and the focus group.

Research Audit Trail

An audit trail is a systematically maintained documentation system of the research project relating to data collection, data analysis, and procedures (Schwandt, 2001). In this research, a systematic audit trail including tape recordings, notes and transcriptions of interviews, memos and emails, and written correspondence was maintained. A time line detailing all events was documented and included information pertinent to the overall study procedures. The audit trails verified firsthand records, provided conclusions, and authenticated the study and its findings (Maxwell, 2005).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to researcher consciousness of his or her biases, theoretical predispositions, preferences, and experiences. It is considered to be an important procedure for establishing validity of accounts of social phenomenon (Schwandt, 2001). Given the researcher’s experience with the subject under investigation, there existed the possibility for biases and preconceived generalizations of the findings.

Early on in the transcriptions of interview tapes, the researcher consulted with Dr. Jane David (pseudonym), a College of Education doctoral faculty member at the
university where this study occurred and provided copies of transcriptions for review. In the final stages of the study, Dr. David examined consistency in the coding and identification of themes and patterns in the data. Dr. David has expertise in qualitative inquiry of underrepresented groups and is an associate professor in Adolescent and Adult Literacy. Dr. David, an experienced researcher herself, provided support to check and cross-check analysis and protocol used. Dr. David’s research is in issues related to minority women expressions and educational experiences. She assisted the researcher by reviewing the initial categories from a portion of data from the semi-structured interviews to ensure accuracy and to verify researcher identification of themes that emerged and to check for reliability of the categories. Each participant participated in two semi-structured interviews, six of the participants participated in the focus group. Analysis of the data from the semi-structured interviews provided the researcher with emerging themes and categories. The researcher’s use of a focus group provided a greater understanding of the emerging themes related to the persistence of single mothers. The researcher made a conscious effort to consult with Dr. David in the review of data and interpretations to control for and minimize researcher bias in the study.

The researcher is fully aware of her passion, experience, and commitment to this population. The researcher’s background as a first generation college student with two sisters who themselves were teen mothers made the researcher empathic. Finally, the researcher acknowledges that previous experience with a women’s and children’s shelter may cloud the “lenses” and selectivity by the researcher in the interpretation and drawn conclusion from data.
Member Checking

Three study participants were selected at random and provided feedback to the researcher about shared data and concluding interview information to check for accuracy in the data analysis process. This member check occurred after the data were analyzed and reviewed for the intersection of the categories and how they all fit together. The researcher elicited feedback from the participants as to the accurate interpretation of data in describing their persistence as single mothers in college. Based on the participant’s responses, the researcher made adjustments and modifications of the interpretations of the data. This analysis assisted the researcher in the verification of the participants’ responses to the emerging themes. The process also facilitated the accuracy of the sharing by the participants, and decreased the likelihood of misinterpretation by the researcher. This assisted in the identification of researcher bias, adding to the trustworthiness of the study (Maxwell, 2005).

Delimitations of the Research

This study involved interviewing, observing, and examining the academic records of traditional age, first generation, single female parents’ persisting at Kent State University, a four-year public institution. The study took place from February 2007 through May 2008. Selected participants who were interviewed in this study completed their first, second, or third year of enrollment at Kent State University during spring semester 2008.
1. Only Kent State University (single site) participants were interviewed to facilitate researcher’s ready access to various data sets; use of multi-site may provide additional insights.

2. Researcher selected nine participants, three first year, three second year, and three third year students enrolled at Kent State University. Use of fourth year students and review of pre-college experience may provide additional insight on the transition of low-income single parents into college.

3. Study conducted at a four-year public institution, review of first year, second year and third year participants enrolled at a community college may provide researcher with additional strategies and barriers utilized by this population in higher education settings.

4. Single mothers between the ages of 17-24 years of age
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Chapter 4 presents the results of the study and provides a discussion of the data and findings from the individual interviews and focus groups. The data provides insight into barriers and supports that single mothers between the ages of 17-24 describe and experience as they persist during year one through year three at a four-year public institution of higher education. The results are discussed according to the research questions and the data are sorted by first, second, and third year participants’ response.

The first section examines the barriers uncovered and described from the experiences of freshman, sophomore, and junior level single mother participants; this section discusses the themes that emerged across the data of barriers to their persistence in college. The second section details the strategies identified and adopted from the perception of freshman, sophomore, and junior level study participants that aided in their ability to persist in college.

Barriers

Four recurring themes emerged in the data from the construction of the “reality” of low-income single mother students during their first, second, and third year of college perception of barriers to their persistence. From the researcher’s analysis and coding of transcriptions, the following themes emerged: (a) academic related, (b) situational, (c) dispositional, and (d) intra-institutional. The findings are listed and sorted according to
the response by participants in year one, two, and three in college. The emergent themes were examined across year one, two, and three of persistence. Each section lists the research question that guided the discussion. A summary of the findings related to the theme with supporting data were presented.

*Academic Related Barriers*

The academic barriers included the lack of academic rigor in participants’ high school curriculum, teachers were not engaged, and teachers were frequently off topic in the classroom. Additionally they indicated that they were off task and did not take their high school academics seriously. Academic barriers were consistent for first year, second year, and third year participants.

Eight of the participants in this study attended high schools where the school or district was identified as being on “Academic Watch” or in “Academic Emergency.” These titles are ratings of the individual school or district which indicate that overall the particular district does not meet state standards measured by indicators and measures of their performance according to pre-set standards. One particular district improved from “academic watch” to “continuous improvement;” the district in 2007-2008 indicated on their school report card a 79.8% graduation rate—much lower than the state requirement of 86.9% (Ohio Report Cards, n.d.).

Although these districts may indicate that students are achieving, and offer a pre-college curriculum in core course offerings, the aggregated data for selected populations illustrated that the offerings were there, but the students’ performance on tests do not line up. The results of the study also indicated that there was disparity in the academic “rigor”
of course offerings and college preparation for participants. Kristen, a freshman (F), shared how she did not feel prepared in her first semester English course.

Well, I say because of the high school that I went to I don’t believe they really prepared us for college because some of the classes that I took when I got here I was kinda lost. It was information I think I probably should have known. Well, in the summer I started with English and I recognized some of the information, but I felt there was a lot that I should have known.

Also noted by Tamara (F), another participant:

No, because I had a geometry class in high school. I didn’t know any geometry—when I got to college because, we did our homework and the teacher didn’t even bother to look at it—I know most high school teachers don’t look at your homework. We just talked about life stories—we never did much work—maybe three times through the whole school year.

A sophomore (S) participant, Kekie (S) stated the following:

I cried one day all day because I was so mad—like ahh I thought that my school had prepared me—I always wondered why they always talking about Cloverleaf Public Schools system, it’s not that bad—you know but when I got here and as far as academically—I wasn’t prepared. My grades were terrible. I went into that class and I was clueless. And I was hurt because I’m like they did not prepare me for this—when you go to college it’s a review—your first year is a review so that’s what your professors teach you, but it wasn’t a review for me—it was learning it for the first time. So, no they didn’t prepare me.
For some participants, their teachers were not on task and did not always cover the needed and necessary class material. It seems for some students that more time was spent with disciplining, managing the classroom, and sharing personal experiences, opposed to covering course material.

Tamara (F) had a misconception about college prep tracts touted in high schools that led her to believe she was college ready. During the interview she indicated that she was good in mathematics. She felt good about her math placement because she did not have to go to tutoring and she earned passing grades in all of her scheduled developmental math courses. She failed to understand that her placement in developmental mathematics sequence one through four was still an indication that she was not college ready.

My fifth one was only for five weeks, I think I passed it. I did not have to go to tutoring for math because I am good at math. I received an A, B+, and a B, for math block, one, two, and three.

Additionally, the lack of academic rigor in these students’ high schools created disharmony in the participants in their role in the learning process. Some indicated that particular core college prep courses were listed on their high school schedules and created the perception within them that they were on the track to college readiness. The perception of being on a college prep track and making good grades, without having to study, created the notion that the students were in fact college ready.

Erin, a junior (J) participant, indicated her shortcomings related to high school course offerings in the following way:
No, my high school did not prepare me for college. I came from Howard Smith High School where I never saw a Chemistry class. I never had one before coming here and taking chemistry. I was like “what is this;” it is so much more different. Evelyn (J) shared that during high school she did not have to study and graduated number two in her high school graduation class.

This is one of my biggest problems—my study skills aren’t so good. I didn’t have to study in high school—it was taught to me and I could retain it. But college is so much different than high school—it’s not like I can’t retain the information after hearing it once so I didn’t have to study, like I graduated 2nd in my class and didn’t study.

The challenge of students matriculating into college without the basic foundation of academic rigors in their high school curriculum and the lack of teacher time on task directly impacts students’ abilities to persist. Additionally, some participants indicated that their high schools had the rigor, the teachers were on task, but they themselves were not on task. As a result this had serious consequences for them related to college preparedness. Study participant Alicia (S) shared the following.

No!!! My high school—Ranchview, was a good high school but you could tell that the teaching quality was not what it should have been—the programs that they set for us was not as good quality as they should have been—and I like didn’t realize that while I was in high school.

In college I realized I had to play catch up—I looked around and saw the other students flying by in chemistry and I was like in order to catch up with them
I have to use my resources so I did a lot of tutoring my first year. You know in high school I did what I did to get by. I didn’t realize the importance of actually taking in the information that the teachers was teaching you for college.

So, like when I was in college I was taking Fundamental Chemistry—I was like I wish I would have paid attention more when I was in high school so I could get this now—because now I might have to take this over again—but in high school—it was free—I was definitely one that just did what it took to just get by with the B or whatever—I would definitely go back and pay more attention and hopefully and ask for more information if the teacher didn’t give me it.

Having good teachers, offering strong curriculum with an alignment with mandated standards, benchmarks of assessment, and accountability in high schools are all critical needs of students leading to college readiness, thusly leading to college success. Other areas identified as barriers for participants to college success included time management and study skills. Kekie (S) explained how this was a barrier for her.

Yeah, I was making very good grades in high school so when I came here—I don’t know if I thought college was a piece a cake but—it was just overwhelming I guess—like you said it was overwhelming, the barriers of trying to study. My main barrier in my first year—my main barrier was learning how to study. That was a huge barrier because when you come out of high school—you can study for a week you can get an A. But you study for a week for an exam in college you ain’t getting no “A.” That was my biggest, biggest barrier was learning how to study.
Erin (J), who transferred in from a community college, discussed the academic challenges of persisting in college and not being college ready from high school.

Well [laughing], I will tell you coming from Forrest Community College when I first got here, I was taking an art history class and on my very first exam I got a D and I about wanted to cry—I mean it really hurt me so bad—I was like if this is so “sub par” so I just really buckled down and I brought it—I got a B- in the course—which was, oh my god, for me it was something that I really tried for—I really did—so I would say that first semester I gave it my all.

Erin shared her struggles with the academics, but she also pointed to the need to be able to manage study time effectively in order to be successful in the following.

Like for me to learn how to manage my time and take my study seriously—this is not Forrest Community College, this is something completely different, I am up against a whole different demographics of people. Ya know what I mean—I came from a high school where I never saw a Chemistry class—I never had one before so coming here and taking chemistry I was like ‘what is this,’ it is so much more different; you have to really be on it to be successful—so it is definitely hard—but it can be done.

An academic related barrier was repeated with frequency by eight of the nine study participants. Three of the participants in the study enrolled hours and years of attendance reflected that these students had a high level of course withdrawals.

Recognizing their individual academic shortcomings all of the participants still remained committed to their college career.
There were no differences in described academic related barriers by the participants in year one, year two, or year three of college attendance. What was reflected was that as their academic schedules changed so did the barriers or challenges based upon the availability of tutoring and support. All junior level student participants have not been officially accepted into the participants’ desired major. There is a direct relationship to student persistence and high school performance that impacts students’ ability to persist in college.

Situational Barriers

The term “situational” in this study refers to the circumstances and conditions described by study participants as barriers related to family, job, and single parents’ financial commitments and obligations. In this study participants identified several situational barriers that impeded their persistence in college. Discussion in this study presents the current conditions describing the lives of single parent college students and their perception of difficulties, uncontrollable events, or occurrences in their daily lives. Low-income families who enroll in college continue to struggle with financial commitments and obligations. The participants in this study discussed the issue of transportation and their reliance on public transportation and how this circumstance was a barrier to their persistence in college.

One participant indicated that she was frustrated with having to take so many busses to and from her child’s daycare facility, and her not having a car posed a barrier for her family. Tamara (F) shared her frustration in the following:
It’s okay, it’s kinda hard—I don’t drive. I have to take three buses to get her to
day care with her and three buses back. So, I take six buses a day.

Yeah, I was talking to my friend Tracy about that—I just um—I don’t know—I
just felt like it was easier by catching the bus—it is not that hard now I am getting
used to it. I’m just used to it and I don’t ask people for rides to day care and all.

This same participant also voiced concern of the impact of the limited availability to
transportation and how it impacted her financially, as well as her daily and weekly
activities. When asked how much it cost to use the taxi for bi-weekly shopping, Tamara
(F) shared the following:

I spend five or six dollars to take a taxi for groceries one way. Sometimes, it
depends, I pay $15 to get to the Akron bus station, and another $75.00 to ride
Greyhound from Akron to [my hometown] Columbus, OH.

Another participant, Sierra (S), shared the difficulty she encountered because of
her reliance on public transportation during her first year as a freshman in transporting
her son to and from his childcare facility. During her first year she had to take several
busses to transport him, compared to her sophomore year of his riding a school bus.
Sierra indicated the following:

I usually get up at 6 o’clock a.m. every day. I had to take several busses, and
transfer to another bus in order to get my son to school during my freshman year.
Kenneth is now old enough to be in Head Start; he rides the school bus now, so I
put him on the school bus. And after he goes to school I go to school and I go to
class all day and then I pick him up. The school bus drops him off at day care so I just pick him up at day care.

Tamara (F) noted,

Yeah—I don’t bother people. A lot of people, I don’t know why people get mad at me because I don’t ask people for anything—but that is just me. I’m just used to it so I don’t ask people for rides to day care and all.

Participants also shared the challenge of their role in parenting in a college campus environment. Tamara (F) had this to say.

It is hard sometimes. You know I have a daughter. She is eight months—she used to cry a lot—one, she is not used to the atmosphere. There was a girl next door—but our daughters are two different ages and her daughter is more aggressive than mine so it is hard to be friends with her and she feels someone is attacking her if someone says something to her about it. I haven’t been over there. I really don’t talk to her about her little girl hitting my daughter.

Erin (J) explained:

It can be tough. Sometimes she won’t eat it [breakfast] at home; she will just eat it at the daycare because I have to have her there by 8 o’clock so that she can have the breakfast there. It is tough, but it can be done.

Study participants described the strain on relationships which create circumstances that often are stressful and painful. Kristen (F) described how she managed after an argument with her child’s father and how her emotional well being was impacted
to the point that she needed long term assistance with childcare for her child, as she prepared for tests. Kristen (F) shared the following:

Well I’d say about three weeks ago I had a big challenge. I had a lot of stuff going on in my personal life and I had three tests that I had to study for, in the same day, and it just got really hectic that week. I don’t know how I overcame that—I had a lot of help though. I know my daughter; she was able to stay at home that week. And her god mother actually kept her—and my mother—they kept her—so I could get myself together.

Another participant described a barrier that she experienced after a weekend visit by her child’s father.

No, like a situation with her dad—first we were trying to work on our relationship and everything went downhill—he takes care of her—well it’s not that often but, he goes to a private college and he has a full ride—they don’t do like here, where you get refund checks—but they do give him some money once or twice a year so whenever that comes he will buy a lot of things for her like piles of clothes, diapers, and wipes. I received a letter from the county that because I am on assistance that he has to pay child support. He doesn’t think that is fair because he does take care of her—and I mean I told him I don’t have a choice. They will take my stuff away so he was upset with me and there was a situation when he came to visit. I had to call the police on him because I didn’t like how he was treating me and there was domestic violence charges filed against him.
This same freshman participant explained the difficulty of riding the bus with her child and the struggle of parenting in a college environment without transportation.

Yeah, I had a hard time there at tutoring the other day at the Student Center. That’s another problem when I pull out her coat—she gets excited—when I’m on the bus she just screams and screams—I feel so embarrassed—I try to find out why she cries, she don’t even let me pick her up—she don’t like being on the bus. This has been happening ever since we got back from Spring break. I think she is scared that I am going to leave her somewhere again for a long time.

Tamara shared the difficulty in maintaining contact with her family at home which is a three hour ride on the bus. Again the barrier of transportation was identified.

And I have to ride the bus to Carbondale. It is a three hour ride on the Greyhound. I sent her with her dad’s family for the break, and she has been crying ever since. His mother has four kids. All types of things goes on, and what she allows her daughter to do, I don’t want my daughter around it. They watch TV all day, and they like to watch MTV. This is not good for little kids.

For this population, family and friends are critical to their survival in college. For many of the participants, the ability to maintain relationships with high school friends, family, and individuals who themselves were also parents was described as being important. Sierra (F) explained how she missed her family her first year: “Just being here by myself, with no family here, that was really the only thing that was tough for me.”

Alicia (S) shared her need for friends and family, but also explained that she had to exercise caution and selection in her friendships, and the time she spends with friends.
Some of her friends have not made good decisions, and are no longer enrolled in college. She shared her concern in the statement below.

Yeah, yeah. I did try a little—I have a group of friends that are kinda going down the wrong path—obviously they are still my friends. I am not going to follow them. Some of my friends from my first year have dropped out of college; I will try my best to talk to them about coming back to school. I am trying to stay away from the wrong people, but it’s like you have to learn how to separate that friendship and like ya know your life what you want to do and not give in.

A freshman participant detailed her struggles with relationships with depending on peers, lack of transportation, and childcare in the passage below:

Well, I was friends with Margie—she would come over and visit with me—and we would be talking with Ms. Dunkin and it was just like—I have never seen her like I seen her one day—and she was just coming to my house and all she would do was talk about Ms. Dunkin so I felt like she was basically trying to get me not to talk to Ms. Dunkin. It seems like she was jealous or something—and it caused me not to want to be friends with another girl because I couldn’t see myself being friends with her and being friends with both of them. I just couldn’t see it so I just didn’t talk to either one of them. Well, I wasn’t friends with Jessica, but she would give me rides in the morning to day care. We were friends until there was a situation with her car, and we were supposed to go to Cleveland—she wanted me to ride to Cleveland with her to get her son. I waited, and she never called. I saw her car late one night and Natilie was there. I asked her what happened to the
Cleveland trip and she said her car wasn’t working. So if I wouldn’t have seen her and she didn’t call me I wouldn’t have known the next morning that I did not have a ride for day care. I would have been waiting on her. Then when she got her car fixed she didn’t tell me. So I just said well—I just stopped calling. Ms. Dunkin talked to her about the situation and Jessica said something I didn’t like to her and Ms. Dunkin told me. So, I just stayed away from that situation and from them.

The findings also uncovered that most of the single parents struggled with long days and a short night of rest. Kristen (F) shared that she depended on family and friends to assist with childcare on a regular basis. Kristen (F) explained her daily routine as follows:

Well on the long days, she goes from—she gets picked up at 5 pm regardless every day and if I have another class or study session or something like that, well my cousin who lives on campus will watch her.

Depends on which days—some days it starts as early as 7 am, and other days around 9:30 am or 10 am. Two days out of the week my day ends around 10 pm and other days around 5:00 pm. I have to take a break every day. I have to take a nap and if I don’t schedule my time for a nap then I am really tired and I can’t be focused during class. Because, sometimes it does get pretty difficult. Especially on those long days there is just so much to do in that one day—like there is not enough hours.

Evelyn (J) described her college day as being very tough, especially for a single parent, “Yea, it’s hard especially if you are by yourself.” Evelyn also explained that she
has a long day from 8:00 am until 8:00 pm. These hours include work and two days
dedicated to school. She moved off campus after one semester on campus, closer to her
family and with her baby’s father. She has a car and shared expenses. She spends more
hours working than on her studies. She received a Nursing scholarship for
underrepresented students in nursing, and she is afraid that if she is unable to meet the
requirements for admittance into the college of nursing she will lose her funding for
school. She works long hours. This is a barrier for Evelyn (J), and she shared how she
faces the possibility of having to drop out of school in the following:

Because I am not even sure, if medicine is my destination. Because I kinda feel
like I am just stuck. Because if I want to change my major to something else, I’m
gonna lose my scholarship. If I lose my scholarship, how am I gonna pay to go to
school to change my major. Ya know? So that is where I am right now. I am
going on Wednesday to talk to my advisor in the nursing major, but I am running
out of the things to do because I have not been accepted into the College of
Nursing. I mean I am pre-nursing but I am not in the college. So, it’s like I am
stuck.

Alicia (S) described how she operates with only six hours of sleep each night in
order to fulfill her role as caregiver and provider for her child. She schedules her
employment during the day in between classes and study time. She illustrated her
circumstance in the following statement:

I work at the Student Center and I am like a secretary there. I work about 2 hours
a day in between my classes—I try to work it into my schedule. And then I get the
baby and come home, cook, clean and then I take her bath, lay her down and I stay up for about 2-3 hours a night doing whatever studying or homework if I have any and most of the time I do and then I am in bed again by like 12:00 am. I only get about 6 hours of sleep, but it has been working.

Erin (J) portrayed her duality of roles and time restrictions in the following:

Well Monday that is like the prime example—that is like starting the week off and everything. Pretty much on Sunday I get our stuff together—not for the whole week before that Monday—get her clothes pressed, get her hair which sometimes does not always happen ’cause she is kinda feisty. So then we will wake up at 6:00 am and then I’ll get her some breakfast because we wake up so early, I let her eat breakfast, but sometimes she won’t eat it at home; she will just eat it at the daycare because I have to have her there by 8 o’clock so that she can have the breakfast there.

All but one parent worked in some capacity. One participant returned home on a weekly basis to work. Kristen (F) shared the support that her family provided which enabled her to maintain employment on the weekend. Her family and friends supported her with childcare while she worked in her local community. Kristen (F) stated, “Well I go home every weekend, to work. I work Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Sometimes I work on Monday because I have only one class.”

Several of the participants pointed out that the high cost and expenses associated with housing cost prevented several from maintaining their on-campus residency. Evelyn, (J) who commutes to campus, described how she only comes to campus for class and due
to her schedule she is in and out. Evelyn is unable to take advantage of campus resources, and has limited contact with her peers on campus. Evelyn (J) shared, “I just don’t—I just figured—I guess ’cause I don’t live on campus and I am in and out—I don’t go to the student center and eat or anything.”

When questioned about her time to socialize with peers and friends on campus, Evelyn (J) indicated that she did not socialize on campus.

Well I do have this one girl—but I knew her from high school. Sometimes I will talk with her—she goes to Kent. I knew her before Kent. But other than that no, I go to class—I am in and out—I don’t really socialize.

Six of the nine study participants valued the experience of on-campus housing, and the value added to being close to university resources, and the barrier that living off campus created for single parents in college. Alicia (S) and Kristen (F) described the “value” of living on campus in the following:

I am trying my best to stay on campus—I think it is the healthiest thing for me and my child to stay on campus to have that scholastic atmosphere. So I think it is something that every teen parent or parent needs to be here—in the atmosphere—to stay focused.

Kristen (F) agreed.

Yeah, everything with living on campus is close by so you don’t really have to worry about transportation if you don’t have it and you don’t have to worry about being late for class because everything is right here so that helps out a lot.
Tinto (1993) discussed the cultural distance that students must travel as they transition into college. For the Latino students, cultural distance was a barrier. There was emphasis on the important role that their culture played in their life. Both students pointed out the barrier of being away from the family and the prejudice of the campus community towards female Latinos. Eva (S) described her feelings in the following statements:

That is another thing I had to deal with—coming into college—it was kinda hard to be a minority—with a lot of Caucasians, so it was another barrier I had to break personally—being more in a community.

And plus being Hispanic and a woman some feel that we should not be in school—we should not have a career—we should be at home having babies—so that was another thing—so it’s kinda like—and then on top of it—not to say anything bad—we are suppose to go on welfare—ya know—playing the system—the whole nine—and I don’t think that is right—something that you should be labeled as—and I don’t think we should label ourselves like that—and I don’t want to be a part of that—in any way—yea—the prejudices are there and being Afro-Latina—even worse—we have to prove it even more—even in Lancaster. They don’t see a lot of dark Latina’s—you have to prove yourself—yeah, the prejudices are there.

Alicia (S) voiced a similar barrier that she faced as she transitioned into college her first year in the words below:
From Lancaster—let me tell you—Lancaster, my family we are a very close Hispanic family. I know it is funny to say that but, we are a very close family—to go away for even an hour—it’s like my first year I had to go home every weekend—it was like I felt lonely ya know ’cause like I just wanted to be with my family I wasn’t really trying to be open to the new environment. And that was definitely a main struggle—the biggest struggle I had coming to college.

The issue of the cultural transition for the African American participants was not widely recognized as a barrier, but one freshman participant shared the following in the passage below:

Just every person that I talked to around here hasn’t been the right person to talk to—there is always some type of drama or problem so I just mainly stay to myself. The only person I really talk to is Ms. Dunkin. It’s hard meeting people on campus because I don’t drive on campus. You know, a lot people I see, they don’t mix outside of their culture. And there is a big problem here; there are not a lot of Black people on campus.

The situational barriers that participants described differed within and across the various groups. The barrier related to finance was a constant for all groups. Freshmen participants tended to value the on campus experience over residing off campus. All participants felt that the cost associated with on campus housing was a barrier, and placed them further away from university resources. Junior level participants did not regard off campus housing as a barrier. The need and ability to maintain contact with family and
culture was perceived more of a barrier for freshmen participants, and was described as a constant for the Latino students, who were both sophomores.

All participants described with frequency the need to work to cover expenses. All indicated that family was very important to them. Latino students thought their cultural beliefs and the university environment was in disharmony and on occasions was described as a barrier to their persistence. The African American participants in the study omitted the role that race or their culture impacted their ability to transition and persist in college. Two participants made reference to the lack of diversity on campus. They were more focused on the disparity of economics and funding. One junior level participant’s need to work created an imbalance in dedicated time to school and work.

Transportation was a barrier for participants. There was equal dependence on public transportation across all groups. Participants’ reliance on public transportation also impacted their finances. Some paid high fees for busses and taxis for day to day activities, thusly proving to be a barrier for the single parent. There was no pattern of consistency in the types of barriers within the groups, and across the groups.

Dispositional Barriers

The dispositional barrier of attitude and self perception is impacted with the juggling of multiple roles, time demands, and conflicts created pressure and conflict for some of the participants. It appears that the logistics of class schedules, study groups, tutoring, group work assignments, and accessible and available childcare were barriers. The limited course offerings also emerged as presenting challenges to this group as they
 juggled childcare schedules, faculty office hours, study time, and the role of parenting. This barrier was coded as “emphasis.”

Most participants pointed out the pressures they experienced on a daily basis as they struggled to manage the dual role of student and parent. Tamara (F) shared the following:

It is hard sometimes. You know I have a daughter. She is eight months—she used to cry a lot—but she is used to the atmosphere. Now if we go out of town she cries down there but when we she comes home she’s happy. But now she got to that point where she’s becoming spoiled—so she cries all the time.

Tamara (F) shared that every time she goes home to visit her family she and her child must share the same bed, and this creates additional stress in her role as a single parent. Tamara details her need to see family, as she feels lonely at times. She and her daughter travel 3 hours on a bus to her home. She pointed out the distress she endures upon each return visit from home in the statement:

I put her in her crib and let her cry herself to sleep. But when we go to visit my family she don’t have a choice but to sleep with me. So she is starting all over again.

The demands on single parents’ time places an added hardship on their ability to take advantage of academic support and spend quality time with their child; even finding the time to relax and unwind is a luxury that is not afforded to this population. Single parents in this study illustrated the hardship of time constraints and conflicting roles. Kristen (F) illustrated how she juggled appointments around her class schedule:
Classes, I schedule them around my class times. If I have to schedule a month in advance then I will call and cancel and reschedule if it interferes with my class time.

Eva (S) noted:
I have a calendar—it is by the hour—I’m not like Ebony and put everything in there. But, I kinda like I have my classes set up and I have my priority of what task I have to do each day and whatever I don’t finish I put onto the next day—it usually adds on more than what I can finish but at least I know what I have to do—and writing it down. I have to write everything down—put on Post It notes—have it organized, like something to tell me that I know what I have do—so it’s like a personal reminder. I also have a recorder, I will record stuff and then I go home and write everything down—so that is what I have to do, I am a little nervous right now.

Tamara (F) detailed how she had to make plans the night before in efforts to be out the door on time.

I get up, I have to make breakfast. I give her a bath the night before so she is already taken care of that way. I get her dressed, and you know put all of her clothes on and put her in her stroller and we get out of the door.

Tamara (F) relied on campus and public transportation to transport her daughter to daycare, which is also time consuming, and she saw this barrier as an advantage that others have over her. She described her travel in the following passage:
It’s okay, it’s kinda hard—I don’t drive. I have to take three buses to get her to day care with her and three buses back. So, six buses a day. Everybody around here has better advantages than me. They have more time than me. Anyways, I would just kinda say try and see what all help they can get and take advantage of the resources—that is something I really haven’t been doing.

Sierra (F) detailed her daily schedule in the following passage:

And after he goes to school I go to school and I go to class all day and then I pick him up. The school bus drops him off at day care so I just pick him up at day care. I usually get up at 6 o’clock am every day. Dennis, he rides the school bus now so I put him on the school bus.

One participant highlighted the difficulty she faced in managing multiple roles. For her, it not only impacted her life, but this challenge also impacted her son’s life as well. She explained how this challenge caused her to lose her inner drive and made it difficult for her, thus leading to her spending a great deal of time out of the home working, instead of tending to her family and school responsibilities. Patricia (J) said:

Life—honestly—life I have always been the one to take care of my family.

Yea, and I think Pierre suffered because of that because he has ADHD—with two other kids raising him is extremely hard—I think he suffered more because I didn’t stick to what I originally said I was gonna do—I was gonna go to college—I was going to make it—I lost that drive honestly—the drive I had before.

Patricia (J) shared how in losing her drive she totally withdrew from school responsibilities and worked long hours and spent a significant amount of time out of the
home. Another participant, Erin (J), pointed out the difficulty in taking off her mommy hat and transitioning into other roles. Erin (J) stated,

> I wear the mommy hat a lot. It encompasses everything I do. I can’t just put it aside and not think about—because when I have my student hat on I still have that mommy hat on because I am doing this for her so she can have a better life—better resources.

Additionally, study participants noted the importance of relationships with their peers and friends. One participant indicated the distance she shared with students in her age groups who were not parents. Erin (J) shared the following remarks concerning her relationship with her peers:

> I do—but mostly with parents—single parents—definitely—a lot of the times even somebody that is my age that is 24 I have nothing in common with them because I am thinking about what I am gonna cook or maybe I need to buy some cough medicine because my daughter may have developed a cough over night—ya know it’s just so different, for the single female student—it’s like, oh, “I wonder if he likes me,” like that—there is so much different stuff I have to deal with—so I really prefer to be with people that are sharing my same experience.

Some identified their interpersonal relationships as another area of conflict and discord. A freshman participant expressed her rationale for not seeking help and assistance from others because she felt that her friends tended to be unreliable. An example is illustrated in this passage how she waited for a ride that fell through. She depended on a friend for transportation to and from the daycare center for her child, but
the student did not return calls to inform her that she was unable to assist with transportation.

So if I wouldn’t have seen her and she didn’t call me I wouldn’t have known the next morning for day care. I would have been waiting on her. Then when she got her car fixed she didn’t tell me. So I just said well—I just stopped calling.

Some of the participants appeared to have very little trust of their peers and individuals outside of their circle of friends, and established friendships from home and high school. Many were not willing to step out of their comfort zone to establish friendships with their college peers. One participant identified the need to exercise boundaries in the establishment of positive friendships with peers. Alicia (S) pointed out the following:

Most of the time I become friends with people within my school—I become friends with friends that are in my dance program or my nursing program, people that are in the College Prep Program—I seem to hang around the friends that have the same expectations out of what they are doing and like ya know very determined—whereas I can help them and they can help me—ya know what I mean—we got each other’s back—I know the friends—like I won’t say oh I’m not going to be your friend because you are in this situation—I am going to be your friend to help you and I have to learn to keep that boundary so that they are not rubbing so much off on me, but more that I am rubbing off on them.

Tamara (F) struggled with maintaining relationships with her peers as stated in the following passage:
There was a girl next door—but our daughters are two different ages and her
daughter is more aggressive than mine so it is hard to be friends with her and she
feels someone is attacking her if someone says something to her about it. I
haven’t been over there. I really don’t talk to her about her little girl hitting my
daughter. Yeah—so, I don’t bother people. A lot of people, I don’t know why
people get mad at me because I don’t ask people for anything—but that is just me.
I’m just used to it so I don’t ask people for rides to day care and all.

Only one participant in the study described the difficulty that young mothers
endure in interpersonal relationships with their child’s father. This topic was always
touched upon lightly during the individual interview process, but became very apparent
and the “focus” in the focus group discussion as a barrier. Alicia (S) pointed out the
following:

I think one of the main problems [barriers] that I think that girls have and that I
had was definitely the child’s father issue.

Relationships! Even if it’s with another male, or with a boyfriend whether
it is the child’s father or not—I think that is the biggest downfall as I see teen
parent or single parenting here at Mapleton Campus Housing. I see it all the
time—it is the reason why they drop out, it’s the reason why they don’t focus and
don’t do good, the reason why they go home. It is always the child’s father. Every
time I talk to a girl—What’s the matter? Oh it’s my boyfriend, my child’s father.
Alicia continued to place emphasis on the impact of the interpersonal relationship
and single mothers’ dependence upon the males in their lives. She stated the following:
I’m like you have to come past that you have to grow as a person. I am here for my child—I am here to fulfill my purpose. Who knows 5 years from know where he will be, where he will be in 5 years. I will be here—I can’t be worrying about his, wrong? I can’t be worrying about his life—you have to really overcome and like get past that stage and it’s like—I don’t know how I did it—but I did—but I try to tell girls don’t worry about him. Who knows whether or not he is going to be in your life or not—but you and your child will always be there for each other—so it’s like I think it is something that all girls should overcome—to not feel needed or dependent on a man.

Another dispositional barrier that was identified by the participants was related to childcare. It seems that most of the participants struggled with evening and emergency childcare needs. This concern is expressed by Kekie (S) in the following:

I am preparing for my math exam today and so I was at tutoring all the way up to 5 o’clock until my math class and then I had math class from 5:30 to 7:00 pm, well the daycare closes at 6:00 pm, so now I have to figure out who is going to watch my son while I am in class. So I’m asking my friends—no one can do it because they have an exam . . . So now I am struggling to figure out who I am going to have watch him who I am really not comfortable with but I gotta go to class.

Erin (J) described how she juggles her time in the dual role of parent and student in the passage below:
So I get her there by 8 to 8:30—I wake up so early because I am a procrastinator or I have to mull around a bit—watch a little TV, which is why I get up so early. So this semester I had a class at 8:45 and I also had work here from like 8 to 9:45, then class—Chemistry at 9:55 to 10:45, then to work at The Program Office, again from 11 to 1 and then Bio Foundations from 1:10 until 2 pm then at 2:15 pm to 3:05 pm. I have Algebra Calculus tutoring and then from 3:20 to 4:10 pm, After Algebra for Calculus class I return to pick up my daughter from daycare
Evelyn (J) shared that since she has so limited time in her schedule due to school and work, her parents and various family members assist her in fulfilling the dual role as parent, provider, and student placing time constraints on her schedule. She described this barrier in the following passage:
I get up at 8:30; I have to be at school at 11:00 am. Yes I go on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I work, so I leave school, and go back to work until 8 and I work all day for 8 hours on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.
Evelyn (J) juggles her childcare arrangements amongst family and friends. She stated, “Yes. Between my family and my boyfriend, they all help me with taking care of my daughter.”
It was referenced by many of the single parents of the nonexistence of evening childcare services. The continued testimony by Kekie (S) voiced the dispositional barrier and the ongoing challenge as a student and parent as she attempted to get tutoring and the unavailability of evening childcare in the statement below:
So I rush up to Tri Towers finally and get help for the little 30 minutes I can with my math and they asking me well why you can’t be here earlier. I have to explain that I don’t have anybody to watch him from 7:00 pm-10 pm—so they have all of this stuff but you can’t take advantage of it because it’s in the evening and the day care is closed and you can’t always count on your friends.

The dispositional barriers of dual roles and time demands for study participants were shared. The challenge of multiple roles was a constant within all groups, and across the groups. Another constant was the early schedules and scheduled daily routines established by all participants that mirrored the duality of their role as student, caregiver, provider, employee, and friend. Work for all participants was viewed as necessary, and at the same time proved to be a barrier to their persistence in college.

The junior participants displayed a seamless picture of the role as parent, and placed more emphasis on the duality of parent student. The freshman participants appeared to have many areas of struggle, but portrayed themselves more as student parent, with more emphasis on school and the need to connect. The freshmen participants valued the role of friends and peers, yet there was a feeling of mistrust and unreliability on friendships. Many of the participants maintained relationships and friendships with members form their high school or their community. All groups struggled with the need to belong, and the importance of family contact and relationships. Junior participants maintained relationships with individuals who were perhaps in their age group or shared a common thread for example a class or a special program, and so forth. It was clear that
as participants matured, they reversed their role from student parent to that of parent student.

Intra-Institutional Barriers

The term intra-institutional is when two institutional structures are in place to provide support services to individuals, but creates disharmony in the actual application for the client, or practices and policies. This non-alignment of policies and practice by both institutions creates barriers for single parents in college. The intra-institutional barriers were the identified unique items that were stand alone statements shared by the participants.

For the single parent there are various institutional programs and services that are used by participants in the study. All participants in this study relied on need based financial aid, and last dollar funds from special grants and scholarships to help defray cost associated with their college attendance. All of the participants relied on the institutional government assistance provided through the Department of Human Services (DHS). Eight of the participants received childcare assistance, all received food stamps, and five received section eight rental assistance. All of the participants discussed their reliance on the University and the Department of Human Services to assist in meeting the various needs and costs associated with their college attendance.

Participants all voiced the “value added” for themselves and their family to acquiring an advanced degree. They indicated that without their college education they would place themselves and their child at risk to a continued life of food-stamps and reliance on the “system.” All participants indicated that their education was their way out
of poverty. The difficulty that all participants experienced with the public welfare system as they persisted in college was revealed throughout the analysis of the data. An area of concern that became evident was the disharmony in the institution of higher education, financial aid, and the policies and practices of the Department of Human Services. The area that was most pronounced in the study was the disharmony in their scheduled need for childcare as listed on their college schedule and the availability of approved childcare sites for reimbursement of payment. Another identified barrier was “time limits” place on assistance. The limitations of welfare benefits for this population places the single parent college student at great risk for early departure or withdrawal from college. This was identified by all participants as a critical barrier to their persistence in college. The following data provides some insight into the need for intra-institutional linkages to support single parent college students on public assistance.

One mother explained the need for expansion of benefits beyond the regulated 36 months, including expansion of assistance during the summer to provide students with the opportunity of not having to enroll in college classes in order to continue receipt of benefits. Patricia (J) shared her experience:

My assistance was up the day I turned 18 I think. I wasn’t eligible for cash assistance but I had still had the food stamps. I had medical. That’s the time limit unless you get—actually you have a two year wait if you don’t get any type of good cause, extensions where they feel like your situation is needy enough to continue giving you cash assistance for another 6 months, and 6 months after that. But if you don’t qualify for that if you wait for two years they will give you
another two year extension under the federal 60 month extension. But you have to wait the full two years and cannot go down and apply for anything.

One participant explained how she felt upon receiving notification that her benefits were depleted due to the 36-month time limit. Patricia (J) revealed this unique barrier; “And then whenever you got that letter that you have used up all of your 36 months and you’re like when, where, what, and how?”

Most of the participants were aware of the 36-month time limit for receiving benefits. Several of the participants indicated the need for Human Services benefits and financial assistance to coincide with a 5 year college plan.

Another challenge that single mothers face is that most financial aid packages cover the semester in which the students are enrolled; therefore single parents are forced to be creative in financial planning during the summer months. Students are eligible for financial aid during the summer months if they are enrolled in classes; the same holds true for cash assistance and reimbursement for childcare. This concern was voiced by the sophomore and junior level participants as they shared how they were forced to take out student loans in order to enroll in summer classes in order to maintain their benefits with the Department of Human Services. One student indicated that this caused her to “burn out” because she was not able to take time off during the summer.

Another barrier that emerged was the need for childcare reimbursement to be expanded to cover evening needs of parents. Kristen (F) shared how she is dependent upon family to supplement childcare.
Well, on the long days, she goes from—she gets picked up at 5 regardless everyday and if I have another class or study session or something like that well my cousin who lives on campus will watch her.

Evening childcare is only covered by welfare if the individual provider is an approved provider and the course section is listed on the student’s official schedule. Exceptions are made for tutoring or group project activities if the student is able to secure written documentation from a university official office. Single parents often will barter with other single parents in an effort to offset the availability and unmet cost for childcare coverage.

Another participant shared her dissatisfaction with the disconnect between universities not being more proactive in assisting single parents in securing section eight certification so that they are able to remain on campus, close to campus resources.

The intra-institutional barriers were a constant for all participants. The disharmony within the various institutional structures utilized by low-income single parents impacted all participants regardless of their status. This non-alignment of policies and practice by both institutions created barriers for single parents in college. The responsibilities of raising a family, cost associated with college, limited finances, all bear down on single parents and their ability to continue in college. Despite the barriers, this population of students shared acquired strategies that were effective as they navigated the path of student, parent, and single head of household, in their attempt to persist in college.
Conclusion

To counteract this barrage of barriers were various strategies used by the participants. Participants transitioned into college by the use of support systems and the motivation that they were told they could go college. These students had college aspirations because someone told them they were college material. College aspiration was not the only guiding strategy that aided the participants; but, their strong cultural and family belief that they deserved a better life and education was the key to a better life. Time management was the first strategy that participants described as leading to their ability to persist in college. This held constant across the groups and within each group. The strategy of time and time management emerged as the “premier” and leading effective strategy for participants. Participants also identified various systems of support that helped participants make it through the day, but it was the belief in self, self-worth, and spirituality that motivated them to stay.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to uncover and describe the barriers that low-income, single mothers between the ages of 17-24 encounter and the strategies they adopt in their efforts to persist from year one through year three of college at a four-year public university. Single mothers in this study described the following barriers to their college persistence: (a) academic related, (b) situational, (c) dispositional, and (d) intra-institutional. The academic related barriers included the lack of academic rigor in participants’ high school curricula and the lack of needed study skills to succeed in college. The situational barriers referred to the circumstances and conditions related to family, job, and single parent financial obligations. The dispositional barriers included the attitude and self perception about one’s self impacted by the juggling of multiple roles, time demands, and conflicts that created pressure and stress for some of the participants. It appears that the logistics of class schedules, study groups, tutoring, group work assignments, and accessible and available childcare were dispositional barriers to the college persistence of students in this study. The term intra-institutional barriers refers to the situation where two institutional structures are individually in place to provide support services to low-income single mothers, but their combined effect creates disharmony of practice and policy in the actual lives of participants.
Single mothers in this study described four strategies that helped them persist in college: (a) time related strategies, (b) support systems, (c) attitudes/beliefs, and (d) self-worth/efficacy. Time related strategies described by the single mothers in this study included their ability to manage their time, quality time with their child, and “me or self” time. Participants used a variety of support systems to help them persist including campus resources, campus faculty and staff, and family and friends. The attitudes/beliefs identified as strategies in this study included the importance of the father in the lives of their children and a strong religious belief or faith in God. Finally, single mothers in this study demonstrated a strong sense of self-worth and a value within themselves and a steadfast commitment to overcoming obstacles that they encountered in college. All of these strategies were effective in helping students balance the competing demands in their lives as college students.

The findings from this study yielded a number of conclusions, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Conclusions

The conclusions of the study are related to understanding the experience of low-income, minority, and traditional age single parent students and their persistence at a four-year public institution. The conclusions that emerged from the findings discussed in the fourth chapter are presented below.

1. The majority of the students in this study initially perceived that they were academically prepared for college based on their high school achievement. The average high school grade point average for the group was a 3.11, and the composite ACT scores
ranged from a low of 11 to a high of 24, with the average being 17. In reality, the students in this study came to realize that they had not been academically prepared for college success, a realization typified by the comment of Kekie (F), “My grades were terrible . . . And I was hurt because I’m like they did not prepare me for this.” Another student described how in her first week of attendance in a Chemistry class she realized that the instructor was sharing information that she had never seen before. The student indicated that when she shared with the instructor the difficulty that she was having in the class, she was surprised when the instructor shared with her that the first half of the course was simply a review of high school level curriculum. Review of the documents supported this insight on lack of academic preparation as eight of the nine participants were placed in remedial mathematic course work.

As the participants reflected on their high school experiences, they shared how during high school they had minimal homework assignments and it was not until college that they realized that they did not have the needed study skills for college. Many indicated that during their high school experience the teachers did not always teach the curriculum. The teachers spent a great deal of time with classroom management or on some occasions were off task. The consequent inflated high school grade point averages gave these students a false sense of confidence. It seems that they did not realize how underprepared they were for college until they faced the actual demands of college courses.

It appears that because these students were encouraged to go to college, it may have led them to believe that by simply being able to go to college they were indeed
prepared. Also, some of the students in this study came to the belief that because they did well in high school, they felt they could be successful in college. Yet, eight of the participants in this study attended high schools where the school or district was identified as being on “Academic Watch” or in “Academic Emergency.”

Although, these students were from struggling school districts, neither they nor their parents realized the impact that coming from low performing high schools would have on their performance in college and their ability to persist. For this group of students the challenge of not being college ready and the need for academic support created barriers to their persistence. The participants were in need of academic support, and their ability to persist was affected further as they were not able to easily gain access to tutoring or to computer labs, or did not have strong study skills prior to college.

Some of the research literature related to academic preparedness and persistence indicates that most students are not retained in college because they lack the needed academic skills to persist. Other researchers in the literature indicated that a student’s academic preparedness is a strong predictor in measuring a student’s success in college (Adelman, 1999; Astin & Oseguera, 2005). In either case, there seems to be a direct relationship between academic preparedness and college persistence. In this study, it appears that despite the academic challenges endured on a daily basis and their misperception that they were college ready, students remained committed to their academic career in college. They were able to develop and use strategies to overcome their lack of academic preparation in order to persist in college.
2. It seems that the participants in this study were able to persist successfully in college because they benefited from strong support systems. First year students used more formal systems and the individuals who worked within them. Junior year tended to use more informal support systems and the key individuals within them. However, it appears that some of these students did not easily and readily identify the support even though it was there.

Students in this study used two systems of support as strategies to persist in college: formal and informal. In this study, the term *formal support* (Miller, Olson, Lawrence, & Swanson, 2008) included institutional, governmental, and university departmental programs designed to offer assistance to students and their families. The end result of these programs is to aid, support, develop, and foster behavior and attitudes that facilitate self-empowerment leading to self sufficiency. *Informal support* (Gladow & Ray, 1986; Miller et al., 2008; Thompson & Wilkins, 1992) refers to the use of temporary solutions to address immediate needs that maintain the ability of single mothers to persist in college.

In this study, all of the participants reported that they had benefited from both formal and informal systems of support. Formal supports in this study included, but were not limited to, the Mothers’ Program, The College Prep Office, the Academic Tutoring Office, the Financial Aid Office, the Department of Human Services, and the Department of Residential Services. An example of the important role of formal support was voiced by Kristen (F):
So support is a big key in my life. Well The College Prep Program I think. The Mother’s Program, tutoring, um being able to have child care helps a lot it gives me time to study and do what I need to do, um, motivation.

All of the first year students seem to have relied more strongly on the formal support systems to ease their transition into the university as shared by one participant:

But really being a part of the Mother’s Program has made me take advantage of opportunities that I may not have had—as far as rock climbing—we did that—they have like a spring fling where we eat pizza and all with the kids. They just make us go out and take advantage of the university.

In contrast, junior year students seemed to move away from formal support systems sponsored by the university and toward informal support systems like kinship and family support, “Yea, my support system at home and my support system through my community—they pushed me—and I don’t want to give up—you can’t give up.”

The second type of support identified was informal support. Students in this study used social skills to facilitate their ability to engage with informal structures and negotiate temporarily solutions to address immediate and unmet needs. Some examples of informal supports included car pooling, childcare exchange, “play dates,” study groups, cash assistance, and joining a religious group. An example of using an informal support system is illustrated by Eva (S) in her description of a play date”

Yeah other mothers together—let the kids roll—have fun in the park or we even go to Target—it’s really silly, but we let them play in the play room—and the
games—they like it and get all of their excitement and energy out—and us mothers get to talk.

Participants in this study also identified the strategy of using supportive individuals in both formal and informal systems of support. These individuals included family members, peers from home community, neighbors, a housing manager, trusted faculty, staff and administrators, selected colleagues, childcare providers, clergy, individuals from their peer group, and other individuals who were valued and trusted by the student. For example, in the formal support system, Kristen, (F) noted the support she received from a university staff as motivating her to succeed, “What has helped me was definitely the staff, networking of course, just being motivated every day to succeed.” Sierra (F) pointed to the encouragement she received from a staff member of a formal program, someone who served as a safety net to help her persist in college,

Yeah, The College Prep Program, Alpha Pringle (admissions counselor of color), yeah . . . she always asks me you’re not going to drop out of school are you and I’m like—no Mrs. Alpha —laughing—I am not going anywhere.

Finally, another participant noted the importance of an individual within an informal support system, “I guess I would have to say Ms. Dunkin—because I wanted to quit because it has been a hard year for me—not just because of having a child but there have been other situations that have happened.”

In the initial stage of this study, at least two of the single mothers in this study did not feel that they used any systems of support within the institution. Yet, later in the study, they named and shared how individuals had helped them to resolve issues or
concerns persist. For example, Patricia (J) explained the support and guidance that she received from a faculty member,

I was gonna do it and I did it—I did it was a 3.4 even though I dropped two classes because Pierre had pneumonia and my professor said she would rather I drop than get a failing grade because I explained my situation.

It seems that some participants in this study did not initially view their contact with faculty and staff as using support services within the university because they had to go out and find the support individually rather than through a structured system. They valued the use of personal support from individuals that seemed to facilitate a better connection with the institution as a whole. Therefore, it appears that single parents in college stand to benefit greatly from formal support systems, informal support systems, and supportive individuals as they attempt to persist in college.

3. Barriers for first year students in this study were not identified as barriers by junior year students and students needed less help in overcoming barriers. Erin, a junior status participant shared her experience from her first year,

So I would say that first semester I gave it my all and I had the support that semester of the Mother’s Program, Brenda Anderson, Rhonda Higgins, Joyce Wall—Julie, and Marion—they really were like a good support system for me. They really got me through. They really did.

This same student indicated that when she moved off campus as college progressed, she obtained assistance from faculty and staff occasionally on an as needed basis.
The following description by Eva (S) is another example of the gradual movement to independence described by study participants. Eva indicated that she shares information concerning her role as a student parent with faculty only when she feels it is needed.

Going back to the professors—it’s bittersweet—you just have to feel out the professor—I don’t want to have to deny that I am a mother—so if something comes up if my daughter is sick—I have to tell—my daughter’s sick—so I don’t have a note for me being sick—so I have to kinda tell them rather than keeping it from them—so I tell them when I have to tell them.

The traditional age first generation, low-income college age single mother lacks social support, has limited academic preparation, and may have limited knowledge of community resources (Jones-DeWeever, 2007). This held true for the freshman and sophomore students in this study as their shared experiences indicated that they were impacted by a lack of support at a higher level than the junior level participants. By the time these students reached the junior year in college, they had identified and used strategies to foster their college persistence. It appears that as study participants progressed in college they become more comfortable with making choices and decisions as they navigated and identified the resources of the institution. Upper level students were able to make distinctions in their schedules and initiate access to desired services leading to less dependence on intrusive services and programs.

Students in this study were challenged with the multiple roles; however, they developed a greater sense of stability more at ease with the dual role of parent and student
as they moved from first year to junior years in college. The first year students felt it was important for university staff and faculty to be informed of their role as a student and mother and wanted assistance in addressing the struggles they encountered. They needed a greater amount of individual support. It seems that juniors were able to think and make independent choices in the sharing of their parent student role with potential individual supports whereas first year students were not. It seems that first year students might require more one-to-one intervention by university staff to provide them with a knowledge base of services and how to gain access to them. One possible explanation for this change is that first year students feel their role as student takes precedence over their role as mother whereas junior year participants in the study stated that their role as mother was dominant over their role as a student (McMillan, 2003).

4. Participants in the study appeared to have integrated with the academic systems within the institution, but they did not appear to be able to integrate with the social systems within the institution. Vincent Tinto’s theory (1993) of persistence identifies several variables that impact first generation, low-income students’ ability to persist in college. Tinto’s classic theory on persistence points out the need for students to integrate with the academic and social systems (both formal and informal) of the institution as vital keys to persistence (Tinto). This concept holds true particularly for students from underrepresented and minority groups who must travel a great cultural distance (Tinto).

Tinto’s model of integration describes three stages that students undergo as they integrate into the academic and social systems of college. Separation is the students’ ability to disassociate to some degree from the set norms of past communities; transition
is the second stage which involves the student being able to successfully negotiate the separation of past norms and patterns of behavioral, but have no full adoption of norms and behavior from the new environment. Thirdly, incorporation is when students are integrated and they fully adopt and adapt to the prevailing norms and behavioral patterns of the university community. It seems that the young mothers in this study were able to successfully integrate into the academic system of the university. They appeared to have an understanding of the norms and behavioral patterns leading to their successful integration into the academic systems that aided in their ability to persist in college.

However, it seems that the young mothers in this study did not appear to successfully integrate into the social systems of the institution. Students in this study did not integrate socially in the way that traditional undergraduates integrate within the institution. It seems that the students in this study were more like adult learners and used informal systems of support to address immediate and emergency needs. They did not adopt or adapt to the formal or informal social systems within the institution to address the socialization needs in the same way that a traditional student would. It seems for these young mothers they developed and integrated within their own sub-group through the informal social networks that they developed on their own. Some of the students discussed the difficulty in feeling a part of the university community. One student shared the following, “I just don’t—I just figured—I guess cause I don’t live on campus and I am in and out—I don’t go to the student center and eat or anything,” she also indicated that she does not socialize on campus.
Participants shared their feelings of disconnect because of their culture and close family ties to their need for social integration in college. It is important for institutions to understand that minority students struggle with fully integrating into the college climate. As pointed out by many, a critical step in the retention of students is to assist students in identifying social systems of support that create avenues and develop a sense of “belongingness” within the institution (Adelman, 1999; Astin & Sax, 1998; Tinto, 1993). Three of the students indicated that their ability to fully integrate at the university was related to the low numbers of enrolled minority students and the cultural barrier of kinship and close family ties. Some students pointed out the barrier of being away from the family. One of the Hispanic students described her feelings,

That is another thing I had to deal with—coming into college—it was kinda hard to be a minority—with a lot of Caucasians so it was another barrier I had to break personally—being more in a community.

Another student indicated

My family we are a very close Hispanic family. I know it is funny to say that but, we are a very close family—it’s like my first year I had to go home every weekend. I just wanted to be with my family. I wasn’t really trying to be open to the new environment. And that was definitely a main struggle—the biggest struggle I had coming to college.

Another student discussed how she returned home on a weekly basis to work. She also shared the importance of the support provided by her family. Her family and friends supported her by assisting with childcare while she worked in her local community.
Another shared the following, “and there is a big problem here; there are not a lot of Black people on campus.”

It seems that the need to belong was important to all the single mothers in this study. They all struggled with the need to belong, and the importance of family contact and relationships, but it seems that they were not successful in the social integration within the university. Perhaps the assistance that the single mothers in the study need in order to persist in college is an understanding of the systems of support, both formal and informal so that they are empowered to develop their own personal socialization and system of integration. It seems social integration for these students was to personalize, develop, and maintain relationships with individuals who were perhaps in their age group or shared a common thread. Other forms of social integration were on an as needed basis and personally developed and identified by the single mothers. These students engaged with the institution as adult students, and they were selective in their identification of social support. Stephen Lieb (1991) identified that adult learners are autonomous and self-directed.

It this holds true for the single mothers in this study, their actions and behavior is in line with the research on students as adult learners, and their ability to be autonomous and self-directed.

Tinto’s (1993) theory of integration appears to hold true in one area for the single mothers in this study as it related to their ability to academically integrate with the academic systems. It seems that these single mothers were able to integrate academically within the institution. They were able to identify connectors and ways to connect as they
transitioned into college. Erin (J) provided an example of how single parents are in need of “connectors” and programming that encourage this population to transition into the services of the institution. “But really being a part of the Mother’s Program has made me take advantage of opportunities that I may not have had—I would have never gone rock climbing at the student recreation center.” It seems that support for this population plays a critical role in their need to connect in. Eva (S) indicated that there is a need for support; otherwise it is easy to feel lost or not connected to the community. “That’s it—this is my life. I try to get some phone calls in for my social calls, but other than that—that is my life. I try to do things with other mothers—play dates and such.” It was also clear in the findings that the study participants utilized various avenues of support, but did not participate in campus wide programming and student organizations. Only two of the single mothers discussed taking advantage of the social networks and resources of the institution. Many stressed that they were too busy or did not feel a part of the campus environment.

5. The barrier of intra-institutional disconnection appeared to have created frustration and tension in the lives of participants in this study. The term intra-institutional refers to a situation when two separate institutional structures are in place to provide support services to individuals but the interaction of their policies and practices creates disharmony in the lives of these individuals. It appears that the non-alignment of policies and practice by both institutions created barriers to college persistence for these traditional age first generation, low-income single mothers.
It is important for institutions of higher learning to understand how single mothers’ federal financial aid policies and their external financial assistance from local agencies can best address and meet their needs. Because of their dependence on external financial assistance, such as aid for dependent child (ADFC), the local and state guidelines can sometimes prohibit single mothers from gaining full access to university services. Universities can assist single parent students by providing meaningful financial aid packages that address the expenses associated with college attendance that cannot be covered by the Department of Human Services. Cabrera et al. (1992) concluded that financial problems themselves had no direct effect on persistence; but, the indirect result of financial problems might affect students’ academic and social integration and resolve to persist in college.

For some of the participants in this study, it seems that limited funds for assistance with utilities or late rent fees as expenses not covered by Human Services posed a financial barrier to college persistence. Also, the limited number of Section Eight Vouchers to reduce the cost of rent was another area that participants in this study described as a barrier to persistence. It seems that students were concerned that the policies and practices of both the university and social service agency were sometimes in conflict with one another. Students described needing to pay for additional childcare due to study and group work not being considered eligible covered expenses because they were not listed on the students’ schedule at the time the original paperwork was submitted to the social service agency. It seems these non-reimbursable expenses created tension for these single mother college students.
In this study, two institutions that were in place to support this group of single mother students did not work cohesively. It appeared that when the lives of the students came in contact with the institutions’ systems and when the two institutions needed to interact on behalf of the students, there was not good articulation between the institutions or among systems within the same institution.

There appeared to be confusion by all parties as the researcher attempted to gather information on services for young mothers in college and written communication of how college students in particular could access services. It seemed that the time delay in response to communications, low staffing, and having to communicate with selected case managers who had responsibility for selected services served as a barrier for study participants accessing needed services. A different office handled childcare, another for medical, and another office handled Section Eight Housing. This disconnection of services often resulted in extended visits and waiting in long lines. The barriers associated with the services and paperwork or approved documentation of need, and documentation that students provided from the university did not always align. For example, the university eliminated its past practice of using students’ social security numbers on documents, but the Department of Human Services required schedules and supporting documentation from the university to have students’ social security numbers as verification on documents. It seemed that expenses such as childcare and the nonexistence of evening childcare provided by approved childcare facilities were only a partial list of the barriers that may prevent young single mothers from gaining access to and persisting in higher education (Goldrick-Rab & Shaw, 2006).
6. It seems that traditional age first generation, low-income single mother students in this study needed assistance in their transition to college and exposure to the institutional structures of support during their first year in college. The literature indicates that all first generation students might experience difficulty in navigating the various structures and this could serve as a barrier to persistence. But it appears for the traditional age single mother students, these barriers are difficult and very complex.

Institutions can gain from the assistance provided to single mothers as they are made aware of university, community, and administrative services available to single mothers. By providing single parents with the needed information, offices of support, as well as key individuals that can assist single mothers as they purposefully develop critical and needed informal systems of support in their efforts to foster and maintain relationships. For this group, support and services can be in the form of pre-identified individuals and selected programs that promote peer, one to one relationships, knowledge of the university structures, and information on how to access the services for single parents in college.

Care should be afforded in by institutions in the overall planning, development, and implementation of services for this population. Institutions and the greater local community stand to benefit by providing single mothers with a seamless engagement to the campus, local and university community, and administrative services in place to support students.
Practice and Policy

This study has contributed to the knowledge base on the barriers and strategies identified by traditional age first generation, low-income single mothers as they persist from year one to year three of college. The results and conclusions of this study yield the following important implications for practice and policy.

1. Institutions can benefit if they are able to provide and identify the informal and formal systems of support for single parent students. Single mothers in college would benefit from the identification of mechanisms that foster within the student an understanding of how to navigate the formal and informal systems within the institution. These support systems could include intrusive advising, identification of an office to address problems or concerns, or the identification of an advocate or a problem solver or go to person. In understanding the needs of adult learners, another implication may be the use of curriculum (orientation to services) designed to inform single mothers as to how they may successfully navigate, explore, and access university resources. This fluid curriculum could be in the form of a web site that single mothers can access on an “as needed” basis. This system can be helpful by providing immediate assistance or information on acquiring needed assistance for single mothers to address their individual needs as they transition into college and connect to services for student adult learners and parents.

Institutions could benefit from the identification of mechanisms, not just support programs, but individuals at the institution whose job it is to assist students in problem solving. Single mothers in this study could benefit from the sharing and knowledge of
targeted programs of mentoring, tutoring, study skills workshops, focus groups, in place to assist the adult learner in addressing barriers endured as they attempt to persist in college. These students would benefit from an alignment of services and practices within the institution. It seems that without these things in place it is unfair to expect that that single parents can solve these issues, if left to fend for themselves.

2. There is a need to address the intra-institutional discord in the practices of state institutions’ policies and practices and the service delivery to traditional age first generation, low-income single mothers enrolled at four-year colleges. The literature indicates that more than half of the nation’s households are headed by a single mother (Walker, 1999) and that the changing landscape of loss of jobs and the large percentage of low-income mothers who rely on public assistance has a direct impact on the successful enrollment and persistence of single mothers in college. This dependence on public assistance, and the disparity of income for a single parent wage earner compared to that of a two-parent household, or a single wage earner without children remains a barrier for low-income single parents (Howard & Levine, 2004).

In this study, participants described their experiences as first generation low-income college students and their families’ struggles with financial commitments and obligations. The participants in this study described the experience of the limitations that time placed on their eligibility to receive cash assistance. Research studies indicate that the average nonparent student takes approximately five to six years to complete a baccalaureate degree (Howard & Levine, 2004) yet these mothers may only have two to three years of cash assistance provided to them. Participants expressed that circumstances
and conditions such as family, job, and financial commitments and obligations were challenges, and the disconnection between the agencies added to the tension in their college experience.

Governor Ted Strickland in 2008 established the Ohio Anti-Poverty Task Force to develop recommendations aimed at assisting families living at or below 200% of the federal poverty level. The Ohio Anti-Poverty Task Force was charged with providing practical and pragmatic shorter and long-term strategic recommendations on reducing poverty in Ohio. As a result of various meetings across the state in 2009 the task force created the shorter-term recommendations. The long-term recommendations will be delivered to the Governor on or before May 2009 and can include a list of suggested strategies for the state as it develops multi-year initiatives on reducing poverty. Armed with these recommendations and strategies, this committee could assist the state in some efforts to address the difficulty that single parents are faced with as they attempt to persist in college. Hopefully, these recommendations will address the intra-institutional challenges of connecting the state agencies services to meet the needs of the single parent student enrolled at a four-year college.

Implications for policy changes from this study suggest that a long-term recommendation be developed and submitted to the Ohio Anti Poverty Task Force via the Portage County Department of Human Services, The Community Action Council of Portage County, and Kent State University who conducted “A Conversation on Poverty” in Portage County. A short-term implication could permit representatives from the agencies the latitude to meet and review current practices to uncover the barriers and
challenges to connecting the needs of the students within the guidelines of both institutional systems, and a review of the practices of the state agencies. A long-term recommendation is the need for the state to review current practices and policies that impact single parents across the state and to begin to change practice to alleviate the barriers associated with the disconnect between higher education institutions and The Department of Human Services. The recommendation is to explore the feasibility of establishing a liaison within both administrations focused on the needs of parents in college, particularly the single parents to encourage collaboration in the delivery of services.

Implications for Additional Research

This study on traditional age first-generation, low-income single mothers at a four-year public university yielded the following implications for additional research:

1. This study examined students at different stages, first year, second year, and third year of college. One of the conclusions drawn in this study was that first year students perceived barriers to college persistence differently than third year students. Another conclusion was that first year students seemed more in need of “hands on” and formal “intrusive systems of support” whereas third year students appeared to be more confident and less in need of formal systems of support. The formal services that were helpful during the participants’ first year seemed to be by informal support systems as participants progressed in their academic career. Additional research is needed to reveal or identify how this change happened. As such, additional research could be a longitudinal case study of tracking single mother’s persistence in college over a period of
time to more closely examine how this change in need of support occurs and how third year single mothers developed their confidence.

2. Participants in this study described having to renegotiate their previous relationships with family members. There needs to be an understanding of how single mothers’ relationships with other family members change over a period of time and how this change in relationships affects the single mother’s ability to persist in college. This knowledge is critical for all pre-college programs that work with first generation, low-income students who need to understand from the perspective of the student how relationships with family members change as students enter and progress through college.

It is possible that choosing the college path can create distance from family members as first-generation, low-income college students are forced on some occasions to renegotiate relationships of support. This happens as a result of newly acquired philosophies, interests, or manners of dress or speech that create dissonance between first generation students and their families. For first generation students this dissonance with family creates undue stress and pressure that has an impact on their ability to focus and persist in college (London, 1992).

Participants in the current study indicated the existence of the dissonance as demonstrated by Alicia (S),

You have to learn to become independent to, you know, do what is best for you and your child . . . you have to let go of your ties with family and friends just to find who you are really and what you want to do.
At the same time, they also indicated the important need to maintain relationships with high school friends, family, and individuals who themselves were also parents as described by Sierra (F), “Just being here by myself, with no family here that was really the only thing that was tough for me.” All participants valued and respected the role of families in their ability to persist in college, and some discussed how they had to develop strategies and form new “families” to aid in their survival away from home. Additional research could investigate in detail the complexity of a single mother’s relationships with supportive family and friends and how these relationships change over time.

3. In this study, participants did not explicitly discuss the subject of “fathers” in individual interviews, but the subject did emerge in the focus group discussion, sometimes in a heated fashion. Only three of the nine single mothers in this study maintained a positive relationship with their own father (that is, the child’s grandfather). Six of the nine participants maintained a relationship with her child’s father; however, two of these relationships were reported as negative.

The focus group discussion revealed that having their own father absent from the home, or a negative relationship with their own father seemed to lead these single mother students to seek nurturance from other male figures. This nurturance resulted in early sexual intimacy and adolescent pregnancy. A negative relationship with their own fathers also seemed to have an effect on the participant’s relationship with her child’s father. Some were willing to remain in abusive relationships or continued negative contact with their child’s father because they felt it was important for their children to have any type of contact with their fathers. Given the potential importance of fathers as a significant
barrier or strategy in the college persistence of single mothers, additional research that focuses on student-own father and student-child’s father relationships as well the process of co-parenting are needed.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a discussion of conclusions drawn from the findings and a discussion of the implications of this study for policy and practice. This chapter also provided a presentation of the implications for further research. The conclusions drawn from this study will hopefully add to the existing body of research on the high school preparation, high school to college transition, and college persistence of traditional age first generation, low-income single mother students. The chapter concludes with the following discussion on the limitations of this research study.

Limitations of the Research

This study presented a number of limitations that must be taken into consideration when reviewing the findings. The first limitation is that participants’ memories can be limited or they may have difficulty in recalling past experiences; time may have clouded their memory. Although the students in this study were only one or two years removed from their high schools, there are times when unpleasant memories are difficult to share and may be unconsciously buried in the minds of the individual. Although the intent of this study was to have participants describe and uncover barriers to college persistence, they may not have been able to recall hurtful or painful memories.

The second limitation is that of researcher bias. The researcher’s previous role of advocacy for this population and her educational values, respect for participants, and
concerns related to persistence of this population may have clouded the researcher’s interpretive lens. The researcher made an effort to control for and minimize bias in the study through use of a focus group, member checking, and by making a conscious effort to consult with doctoral faculty in the review of data and interpretations. The researcher used an unbiased process of coding of the data that was grounded in the literature. As emerging themes were identified in the study, the researcher consulted the original context of the transcribed interviews to corroborate the themes. A variety of documents were also analyzed. The researcher was fully aware of her passion, experience, and commitment to this population. The researcher’s background as a first generation college student with two sisters who themselves were teen mothers may have contributed to the researcher’s empathy for these women. Finally, the researcher acknowledges that previous experience with a women’s and children’s shelter may have affected selectivity by the researcher in the interpretation and conclusions drawn from data. To the greatest extent possible, the researcher used the combination of the aforementioned strategies to control for the concern of researcher bias in the study.

Finally, the study may have been limited by participants’ inhibitions to openly share important feelings or fears that sharing and revealing information might reflect negatively on them. For this population of students, it may be difficult to share. As a double minority on campus (single parent + underrepresented ethnicity), they may feel that they would not have an empathetic ear when sharing. The researcher in the study tried to be empathetic and not sympathetic to the sharing and revealing of information as the participants described their experiences of persisting in college.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

BACKGROUND DATA QUESTIONNAIRE
Single Parents at Kent State University

Background Data Questionnaire

Name__________________________________________________________ Age_____

Address_________________________________________________________________

City________________ State______ E-mail Address________________________________

Telephone (Home)__________________ Telephone (Work)_______________________

Telephone (cell)_____________________

Race: (Check one)
   _____ African-American
   _____ White
   _____ Hispanic
   _____ Asian-Pacific
   _____ Other (please specify)____________

Gender: Male_____ Female_____

Classification: (Check one)
   _____ Freshman _____ Sophomore _____ Junior _____ Senior

Are you a single parent? _____ Yes _____ No Number of children________

Have you always been a single parent? _____ Yes _____ No

Have you been in a dual parenting relationship, with live in support? ____ Yes _____ No

How long have you been a single parent? ___________

Are you the primary caretaker of your child(ren)? _____ Yes _____ No

Enrollment Status: Check one:
   Part time: (less than twelve hours)_______
   Full-time: (twelve to eighteen hours)_____

Are you employed? _____ Yes _____ No
   If yes, number hours worked per week_______

Are you willing to be interviewed as part of this study? _____ Yes _____ No
APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM
Consent Form:
A Study of Single Mother Student Persistence at a Four-year Public Institution

Dear Student:

I want to do research on what obstacles single mothers have had to overcome and what support they have had in college. I want to do this because I would like to make improvements in pre college programs for teen parents for which I am involved, and in retaining single parents in college. I would like you to take part in this project. If you decide to do this, you will be interviewed about your college experience. The interviews will be audio taped and will last one hour. The audio tapes will be destroyed after they are transcribed. As part of this research, I will be getting some information from your academic records. I will also request your participation in a focus group.

There are no risks involved in this study beyond those encountered in everyday life, and I will protect your anonymity. For example, your real name will not be used in writing about the project. You will have the opportunity to review the transcribed materials, and no information will be shared without your consent. Confidentiality will be maintained to the limits of the law.

If you take part in this project, retention programs for single parents might be improved for students who are still enrolled, and more single parents will be able to attend and graduate from college. Taking part in this project is entirely up to you, and no one will hold it against you if you decide not to do it. If you do take part, you may stop at any time.

If you want to know more about this research project, please call me at 330-672-2920 or contact me by email at ghnelson@kent.edu. The project has been approved by Kent State University. If you have questions about Kent State University’s rules for research, please call my advisor, Dr. Steve Michael (330-672-2442) or Dr. Peter C. Tandy, Acting Vice President and Dean, Division of Research and Graduate Studies (Tel. 330.672.2704).

You will get a copy of this consent form.

Sincerely,

Geraldine Hayes Nelson
Associate Dean, Undergraduate Studies

CONSENT STATEMENT

I agree to take part in this project. I know what I will have to do and that I can stop at any time.

____________________________________________________________________________
Signature Date
AUDIO TAPE CONSENT FORM

I agree to audio taping at ______________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________

Signature

Date

I have been told that I have the right to hear the audio tapes before they are used. I have decided that I:

_____ want to hear the tapes  ______ do not want to hear the tapes

Sign now below if you do not want to hear the tapes. If you want to hear the tapes, you will be asked to sign after hearing them.

Geraldine Hayes Nelson and other researchers approved by Kent State University may / may not use the tapes made of me. The original tapes or copies may be used for:

____X____ this research project  ____X____ teacher education  ____X____ presentation at professional meetings


_________________________________________

Signature  Date

Address: ____________________________________________

Interview Protocol

THE STUDY OF SINGLE MOTHER STUDENT PERSISTENCE
AT A FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTION

Introduction: Thank you for taking the time to talk to me about your experiences, and sharing your thoughts about your first year of college as a single parent.

Explanation of the purpose of the study: I am going to ask you to share with me how you were successful in making it through your first year of college. I would like to know what you found to be helpful. What where some of the obstacles that you were faced with during your first year? What strategies, or what influenced you to keep going, and not to give up.

Record the interview: May I record this interview. In order for me to fully capture your ideas and perceptions I will need to be able to document your thoughts. This will help me to gain a better understanding of support, barriers, and challenges that you encountered in your first year of college. I will also interview other single parents, and then I will compare it with perceptions of others whom I interview to see if there are any commonalities.

Disclaimer: I will not use your name or anything that would directly or indirectly reveal your identity to the reader in my writing. If at any point you wish for me to not tape something you wish to share privately, I will honor your request.

Interview Guide:

1. What is your enrollment status in school? How many credits have you earned?
2. Describe what a typical day was like for you.
3. Tell me about your experiences as a young single minority mother enrolled at Kent State University.
4. Tell me about how you relate to your peers or your interpersonal relationships with friends/peers at the university.
5. How would you describe your relationship with your professors at the university?
6. How would you describe your relationships with staff at the university?
7. Who has contributed to your success at the university?
8. How has faculty/staff/peers contributed to your success at the university?
9. How do you overcome barriers?
10. What strategies do you use to help you successfully fill the roles you have, such as mother, college student, etc.?
11. Can you give an example?
12. Is there anything else that you feel is important that would help me understand the barriers or supports you had?
13. What challenges were you faced with, and how did you overcome it?
14. Do you feel you were academically successful in your first year of college?
15. Were you adequately prepared for your first year of college? Why or why not?
16. What do you feel has aided in your being successful in college?
17. Is there anything that you would like to share in the telling of your college experience that others would benefit from knowing?

Thank you for taking the time to talk and share with me. I wish you continued success in your college career, and your input has been very valuable.
REFERENCES
REFERENCES

ACT. (2004). *Crisis at the core; preparing all students for college and work*. Iowa City, IA: Author.


Miller, E., Olson, C., Lawrence, F., & Swanson, J. (2008). *Rural mothers’ use of formal programs and informal social supports to meet family food needs: A mixed methods study*. Ithaca, NY: Springer Science and Business Media, LLC.


