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# Creating Supportive Educational Communities for Non-Traditional Women in Student Affairs Preparation Programs

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*The image of a master's degree student in a student affairs preparation program (SAPP) is not likely a woman over 30 with children. This constructivist qualitative study explored the deficits faced and navigation strategies of 13 non-traditional-aged women from two SAPPs to improve program access, recruitment, experiences, and retention. The findings include the (re)negotiating and (re)prioritizing of roles and successful support mechanisms. The study provides recommendations for SAPP faculty and administrators.*

## Introduction

Student affairs preparation programs (SAPPs) have been educating students since 1914 (Nuss, 2003), and more than a century later, there are over 200 SAPP in the United States (NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2017). Many SAPPs employ the traditional student affairs graduate education approach of admitting students who pursue their degree full time with part-time assistantships usually within one to three years after completing a bachelor's degree. Higher education in general, and graduate education specifically, is transitioning from a solely traditional approach of course delivery with the expectation of full-time, traditional-aged students to a system that demands that programs offer wider inclusiveness for students who do not fit the traditional graduate student mold.

One increasing population with differing needs from traditional graduate students is non-traditional-aged women, many with dependents. For graduate education, students are considered non-traditional if they meet any of the following characteristics: over 30 years old, from underrepresented racial, ethnic, or gender populations, from a lower socio-economic background, parent of dependent children, supporting their parents emotionally or financially, and working more hours than traditional students (Brus, 2006). When considering all master's degree-granting programs in the United States since 1986, women have received more master's degrees than men (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES),

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2012) and women older than 25 have enrolled in higher education at disproportionately higher rates than men of the same age (NCES, 2012). Even with the last 35 years of growth in women's master's degree recipients in the United States (NCES, 2013), women with family responsibilities continue to be the most vulnerable in terms of success and degree completion due to time demands and constant overload with role conflicts (Home, 1998). While the specific demographic distribution of non-traditional-aged women within SAPPs is unknown, it is likely the programs mirror these demographic trends. SAPPs must consider this shift as the population of students interested in pursuing a career in student affairs after obtaining professional experience, seeking a career change, or starting their families, increases.

In response to changing demographics in higher education and the growth of technological advancements, SAPPs started offering online degrees (approximately 10% of programs) or low-residency programs (approximately 14% of programs) (NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2017). Many students, particularly non-traditional-aged digital immigrants who grew up without the technological advances currently used in higher education to facilitate learning, may not feel confident pursuing an online degree but may be attracted to programs that offer flexibility in their structure.

The design and requirements of traditional SAPPs create a privileged-based system for students without dependents. As many professional positions in student affairs have shifted from preferring a master's degree to requiring one, SAPPs should examine the inclusiveness of their degree structure, expectations, and program culture. While many of the traditional programs continue to thrive, other programs are finding ways to meet the needs of a broader student population by providing graduate preparation in various formats, including evening, weekend, distance, hybrid, and fully online structures. The intention of this research is to disrupt traditional ways of thinking about SAPPs' structures given the increase in non-traditional individuals enrolling in these programs.

The pathway to student affairs work can be circuitous, as many student affairs professionals do not recognize the career possibilities in higher education upon completing their undergraduate degree. As a result, seeking a graduate degree in the field of student affairs can be an academic endeavor people often choose to pursue only after beginning a full-time position and/or starting a family. Non-traditional-aged students also are typically place-bound because of employment and/or family, but only 25% of the 231 student affairs master's degree preparation programs listed in the Graduate Program Directory (NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2017) offer online or low-residency options. Additionally, the search functions of the Directory do not allow prospective students to search by course delivery modes of on-campus programs. Since most SAPPs continue to rely on the structure of enrolling full-time students working in graduate assistantships, there is a dearth of graduate programs designed to meet the needs of non-traditional students. The lack of accessible programs limits access to potential leaders in the field of student affairs.

This constructivist qualitative study sought to understand the educational experiences of 13 non-traditional women's pursuit of and experiences in their SAPPs in order to better inform the structure and policies of SAPPs to maximize access and success. The following research questions guided the exploration of their experiences:

1. What are the deficits non-traditional-aged women face when attending SAPPs?
2. What are the navigation strategies employed by non-traditional-aged women in SAPPs?
3. How do non-traditional-aged women in SAPPs make meaning of their educational experience?

## Review of the Literature

Being a woman in a graduate program is confounded when one is non-traditional aged, simultaneously caring for dependents, from a marginalized identity, and/or a first generation student (Ramirez, 2017). While the current literature has not explored the specific experiences of non-traditional-aged women in SAPPs, their experiences in graduate education has been explored broadly. Generally, women in graduate education face stress due to work–life balance issues (Bates, 2015; Ramirez, 2017; Slack, 2016; Stimpson & Filer, 2011; Trepal, Stinchfield, & Haiyasoso, 2014) and challenges with negotiation of multiple roles, also known as role conflict (Anderson & Mieзитis, 1999; Lynch, 2008; Younes & Asay, 1998). Other research identifies strengths through women’s educational influences on their family (Gang & Zimmerman, 2000; Ramirez, 2017; Schliebner, 1990) and how they engage support as they navigate academic and professional environments for career mobility (Brus, 2006; Haynes et al., 2012; Slack, 2016).

### Role Conflict

Role conflict, defined as varying roles competing for a person’s time, can have both positive and negative connotations for women who juggle multiple roles (Haynes et al., 2012; Macionis & Gerber, 2010; Trepal et al., 2014). Negotiating multiple roles or identities of partner, mother, professional, graduate student, and others offer both rewards and demands (Elman & Gilbert, 1984; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Sallee, 2015; Slack, 2016). Many women successfully develop strategies to balance their roles while pursuing a degree, whether it be compartmentalization, delegation, elimination, or role extension (Goode, 1960). Student affairs graduate students who are women must contend with what it means to be a good student on top of how “[w]omen must cope with societal values and with their own internalized beliefs about what is required of the ‘competent professional’ and ‘good mother’—values which are sometimes incompatible” (Elman & Gilbert, 1984, p. 317).

### Family Influences

As the number of older students in graduate education grows, the support of family structures becomes critical to degree completion for all students but even more for women often due to added social and familial expectations. Brus (2006) asserted “the increased responsibility for family, both physically and financially, that is associated with an older, less traditional graduate student” is a significant component of the student’s overall graduate school experience (p. 33). Adult students may be the sole contributor to a household, which can add to the challenge of meeting the demands of graduate education, work, and family. Many studies highlight the lack of family support as the number one reason women graduate students did not complete a degree (Brown & Watson, 2010; Brus, 2006; Kulp, 2016; Lynch, 2008; Ramirez, 2017; Schliebner, 1990).

For graduate students who are mothers, their degree attainment has the potential to benefit their dependents. As research has shown, the higher a family’s economic status, the more likely the children will experience educational success and degree completion (Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Gang & Zimmermann, 2000; Krein & Beller, 1988; Mercy & Steelman, 1982; Ramirez, 2017; Scarr & Weinberg, 1978). Because of this correlation, the educational attainment of the mother becomes critical to her career mobility, ability to contribute to the economic standing of the family, and her children’s educational pursuits.

## Successful Support

Moving from the internal and personal considerations of women graduate students to programmatic structures, support needs for students in SAPPs begin with the students' transition into graduate school and continue throughout (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). The term "support" refers to the various social and institutional resources available to students during their educational pursuits (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Because non-traditional-aged women with dependents juggle multiple roles, they report higher levels of stress than those without dependents while pursuing graduate degrees (Haynes et al., 2012; Ramirez, 2017; Trepal et al., 2014). Upwards of 30% of graduate students reported utilizing counseling services during their academic programs (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2006). This statistic demonstrates the continuing trend of graduate student usage of counseling services, as more than 25 years ago graduate students were found to be the second largest group after first-year undergraduate students to utilize counseling services (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992).

Faculty and peers in academic environments are two of the most likely sources of support for non-traditional female graduate students (Goplerud, 1980; Sallee, 2016; Slack, 2016). Studies on stressors for female graduate students who balance multiple roles showed the participants valued curriculum flexibility (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Sallee, 2016; Slack, 2016). To meet the needs of non-traditional-aged women students, several studies recommended revising course offerings to increase program flexibility (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Sallee, 2016; Slack, 2016).

## Research Approach

Because of the limited exploration of the lived experiences of non-traditional women graduate students in SAPPs, as well as our desire to understand the meaning making of the participants, the tenets of constructivism guided the research (Crotty, 1998). Constructivism is utilized to understand complex human phenomenon (Broido & Manning, 2002), such as the unique experiences of an underrepresented population. The purpose of the study was to provide an alternative perspective to the basis of the structure of traditional SAPPs by exploring the lives of participants who have experienced master's degree programs. This study attempts to give voice to an underrepresented graduate student population in SAPPs as it makes meaning of its educational experiences.

The approach taken in this study sought to understand multiple perspectives of non-traditional-aged women graduate students. Constructivists believe that multiple realities exist because reality is socially constructed (Mertens, 1998). Therefore, the experiences of non-traditional-aged women graduate students will not reveal one experience, truth, or reality but rather multiple meanings held in the specific context of their educational experiences (Mertens, 1998).

Constructivists also state that it is impossible for researchers to separate from the research and research participants because the researchers' values and biases are present throughout the research process (Mertens, 1998). In this study, the participants and researchers co-constructed the research through the data collection and analysis process. In accordance with constructivist research, this study employed interviews to obtain data from participants, which allowed for interaction between the participant and researcher to influence the study's findings (Crotty, 1998; Mertens, 1998). The structure of the interview questions encouraged participants to make meaning of their experience as non-traditional-aged women in a SAPP, and the findings provide a snapshot of their lived experiences as graduate students in structures not necessarily created for non-traditional-aged women.

## Setting

A purposeful selection of two SAPPs at mid-sized regional comprehensive institutions in the same Mountain West state allowed for the inclusion of programs that shared similarities, such as both enrolling students who are traditional-aged and non-traditional-aged, allowing for flexibility in terms of time to degree completion, and offering non-traditional course delivery structures, such as evening, weekend, distance, and hybrid courses. In order to gain an understanding into how SAPPs can support the educational experiences of non-traditional-aged women, the study sought participants from programs with a greater concentration of non-traditional-aged women in order to obtain a sample who met the study criteria. Drawing from approaches used in appreciative inquiry research (Reed, 2007), this study purposefully selected programs with flexible delivery methods that are effectively recruiting, retaining, and graduating non-traditional-aged women students. Specifically, one program offered course work only on weekends while the other program had multiple delivery methods, both though creating more accessibility to non-traditional-aged students than a more traditional format of weekday courses only. This approach contributed to the study's ability to uncover the value in these practices and build upon their success of increasing non-traditional-aged women's access to SAPPs. Table 1 provides an overview of each program's characteristics.

## Participants and Recruitment Process

Using a criterion-based sampling procedure (Patton, 2015), participants were identified through the researchers' professional networks from two SAPPs. Participants were all self-identifying women and met at least one of the two main criteria:

- 30 years or older during their program and/or,
- Primary care givers of dependents during their program.

The participants interviewed included current students and new alumni (one to three years since graduation) from the two SAPPs. The one-to-three-year range was determined appropriate because entry-level professionals are those working in the field of higher education for that timeframe. Current students and recent alumnae of the graduate programs served as

Table 1.

### Site overview

	Institution N	Institution C
Undergraduate population	11,936	12,000+
Graduate student population	2,542	1,808
Program credit hours required	39	30
Approximate student population in program each year	45	40
Faculty	5 full-time faculty	2 full-time faculty and 4 adjunct lecturers
Delivery options	Evening, weekend, afternoons, hybrid	Accelerated weekend-only format
Time-to-degree	2–5 years	2-year cohort structure; 5-year maximum time limit

information-rich (Patton, 2015) participants who could share their experiences relevant to the focus of the inquiry, non-traditional-aged women in SAPPs.

Researchers contacted 30 total students and alumni via e-mail who met the study criteria; from these, 13 students agreed to participate. Eleven of the 13 met both of the criteria. Participants received a \$20 gift card in exchange for their involvement in the study. The reason that other eligible participants declined to participate is unknown, but the sample obtained was diverse in terms of age, race/ethnicity, number of dependents, student or alumna status, and institution represented. Table 2 provides an overview of the participant demographic characteristics.

**Methods**

Following participant recruitment, members of the research team interviewed the participants twice about their educational experience using a semi-structured interview protocol (Fontana & Frey, 1994). A semi-structured interview protocol provided insight into participants’ experiences as non-traditional-aged women in SAPPs and provided flexibility to allow the researchers to develop relationships with the participants, as is customary in constructivist research. Fontana and Frey (1994) supported the use of a semi-structured interview approach, as it allows for both the structure needed to achieve the goal of the research and provides opportunities for conversation with participants as the relationships develop.

Table 2.

**Participant demographics**

Pseudonym	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Dependents and Marital Status	Work Status while Enrolled (FT or PT); * = on the campus where they were enrolled	Student or Alumna at Time of Data Collection	Institution
Anna	48	Latina	2 (married)	FT*	Alumna	Institution C
Melissa	40	Caucasian	2 (married)	FT*	Student	Institution N
Amelia	36	Caucasian	Step Children not at home (married)	PT*	Student	Institution C
Carol	49	Caucasian	3 (married)	FT to PT* Selling business	Alumna	Institution N
Carrie	32	Caucasian	1 (married)	FT*	Alumna	Institution N
Jessica	30	Latina	4 (married)	FT*	Student	Institution C
Betty	40	Caucasian	2 (married)	FT*	Student	Institution C
Sally	34	Caucasian	1 (married)	FT*	Student	Institution C
Monica	33	Caucasian	0 (married)	FT*	Student	Institution N
Jane	37	Caucasian	2 (married)	FT	Alumna	Institution C
Mary	42	Latina	1 (married)	FT*	Student	Institution C
Karla	40	Caucasian	3 (married)	FT*	Student	Institution N
Stephanie	44	African American	2 (married)	PT*	Alumna	Institution N

Participants were asked 20 questions in the first interviews, which were conducted in person in a mutually agreed upon location. Sample questions included:

1. How was your graduate program structured?
2. How did the pieces of the structure contribute or detract from your success?
3. How did or how are you negotiate(ing) graduate school with your family or dependents?
4. What has been successful and what have the challenges been?
5. How could your faculty or graduate program have supported you with this negotiation?

The researchers reviewed the transcripts following the first interviews, generated initial themes through a process of open coding, and developed eight follow-up questions for the second interviews, which were conducted remotely using a web-based conversation software tool that allowed for real-time, face-to-face interaction mediated by a computer. The follow-up questions sought to further explore the themes that emerged during the first round of data collection and probed further into the experiences of the participants around the initial themes collaboratively generated by the research team.

### **Trustworthiness**

Member checks of the interview transcripts supported the study's trustworthiness, as well as discussion and confirmation with participants of initial themes generated during the first interviews. Additionally, the multiple researchers who collaborated to generate salient themes from the research data supported the study's trustworthiness, as multiple perspectives contributed to the development of initial and final themes from the data. Finally, by interviewing participants twice, researchers obtained triangulation as they recounted their experiences and provided further expansion to important components of their educational story.

### **Data Analysis**

The research team transcribed and reviewed all interview data, totaling over 150 pages. The lived experiences of the participants emerged with the use of an open-coding data analysis approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Researchers reviewed transcripts from both interviews and identified themes independently using NVivo to categorize and organize the data based on the emerging themes (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007). After individually reviewing transcripts, the research team met to discuss emergent themes using a comparative method (Patton, 2015).

## **Findings**

The findings reveal how non-traditional-aged women's multiple roles as graduate students, parents and caregivers, and staff members in higher education impact their SAPP experience. From analyzing the participants' lived experiences, two themes emerged: the (Re)Negotiating and (Re)Prioritizing of Roles and Successful Support Mechanisms.

### **(Re)Negotiating and (Re)Prioritizing Roles: Managing Education, Career, and Family**

All but one participant shared that they received support from their families, partners, and children as they pursued their degree, but they were also intentional about managing the effect of their student responsibilities on their families' well-being and day-to-day functioning. For example, part of Jane's role renegotiation with her supervisor as well as her partner involved work schedules and caregiving because of her children. In many instances, family members living with



the participants accepted new roles to support a participant in her degree pursuit. Monica's experience highlighted how her family redistributed housework:

My husband is 100% on board and picks up, you know does most of the housework and really has stepped up and wants to help make it happen for me. That's really kind of made the difference, I'd say for me. Just the daily support from him.

Many of the participants felt they needed to make sacrifices in all areas of their lives in order to meet the demands of being a mother, partner, student, and professional. The decision to pursue a master's degree impacted how they spent their time away from work and their involvement with their families as they determined when to fulfill the academic demands of their program. Concerns about their mother-child relationships led participants to be strategic in their actions and words to ensure they were fulfilling their parenting role effectively; participants' children and familial responsibilities remained at the forefront of the daily and long-term decisions related to completing academic requirements. Anna decided to alter the timeline of her program to extend beyond her original two-year plan because of the needs of her family:

I was starting to sacrifice time with my family because of school. Sometimes I couldn't go with my family if the kids had a field trip or they had tae kwon do testing or a piano recital. I don't remember exactly, but I couldn't go because I had school or homework. When I realized that, I'm like that's not ok because my family comes first and I'm missing out on some really important things. That's when I started thinking about slowing the pace.

Anna's concerns about not being able to fulfill the mother role as well as she wanted while pursuing her degree were common. Jane shared, "I was able to be with the kids or able to just do school but trying to like do both, I felt like I was either being short tempered with the kiddos or I wasn't able to focus [academically]." Like Anna, Jane also broke from the cohort model, and pursued her degree over a longer time. Their strategies were a result of the perceived negative impact of their education pursuit on their children. These decisions highlight the importance for academic programs to support role negotiation by providing alternative time-lines for degree completion. Program flexibility kept these participants pursuing their education, where a traditional program structure may have forced them to make more choices between their roles.

### Successful Support Mechanisms

Because of the confounding roles and responsibilities participants described, support mechanisms were key to their overall success in managing their academic, professional, and familial responsibilities. The women noted four distinct support structures: program faculty and structure, academic peers, supervisors and work colleagues, and finally their partners and family.

**Program-Based.** The women in the study appreciated the support they received from their faculty and through the program structure. The participants found their faculty members to be understanding of their needs, able to provide advice on program navigation, and made them feel comfortable to advocate for needs when program or classroom policies were challenging their ability to manage multiple roles. Carrie shared an experience with a faculty member who did not allow cell phones in the classroom.

When people have a family, you can't do that. I have my cell phone on me almost all the time because if something happens, I want whoever has [my daughter] to be able to get a hold of me. So we've had conversations about being respectful on my phone, if it goes off and if it's something that I need to attend to, I can do that.

Because Carrie advocated for her needs, the faculty member altered expectations around cell phone presence and usage in the classroom. Program faculty were also supportive by providing advice on navigating the program in terms of course sequencing insight, students' desired involvement levels outside of the classroom, and the various ways other non-traditional-aged alumna of the programs completed their degrees.

**Program Structure.** The variety of when and how courses were offered in the participants' programs ensured access to the SAPP for these non-traditional-aged women. Jessica appreciated the structure and flexibility within it to make the course sequence work with her other responsibilities: "having the actual ability to make decisions within the program myself without being kind of forced to adhere to specific strict guidelines was good." Monica appreciated communication about course schedules several semesters in advance and the flexibility of the course offerings:

I feel like they were really good at telling us that. Some would be during the day, some would be at night, so if I couldn't do it because of my work schedule, they would tell me, well next spring it will be offered in the evening. It turned out it makes a huge difference.

Jane appreciated being able to choose which days to do presentations so that she could manage other areas of her life:

Like that one semester when I had the scheduling issue, they were able to work with me. Like presentations, you can choose this day or this day. And you can look at your schedule and be like ok it's my son's birthday so I'm going to have to do party planning, so I'm going to choose this day and then it gave me options within my own schedule to be ok, I need to do this now because this is going to be worse later. So, they really worked and that was nice that they aren't so hardnosed like, this is your day!

Flexibility in both course scheduling and course options was a support to many participants. Without the Saturday-based courses at Institution C or the evening, hybrid, and weekend-intensive courses at Institution N, many of the participants would not have been able to pursue their degree. While Institution N held required courses during the afternoon time slot, the faculty intentionally rotates them each year between evening and afternoon to increase student access.

**Practical Experience.** Practical experience courses are often required in SAPPs but can be a challenge for professionals working full-time. Allowing completion of these experiences over multiple semesters contributed to the ability for students working full-time to fulfill the requirement. Melissa shared, "I can't do 40 hours field experience this week and try to work full time. [The faculty] said you can break it up." In this example, faculty supported Melissa doing one credit, of the total required three credits, each semester over the course of a year in order to minimize the amount of contact hours in one semester.

Jessica was also struggling with how to complete one of her last requirements, the practicum, during the course of this study. "I have to find out where I work in my practicum, which is a struggle for me as a full-time employee with kids." Program faculty worked with students to find options outside of the traditional eight-to-five work hours, which allowed students to complete the requirements on their time based on when they could accommodate it. Because of Jessica's experience as a full-time staff member, she sought out the opportunity to serve as a teaching assistant for a course in the program related to the functional area of her full-time position at the institution. Her schedule supported the teaching assistant role because it was a weekend-based course, which did not interfere with her workweek and she was accustomed to completing academic requirements on the weekends. Faculty also encourage students to explore orientation

programs, which operate in the evenings or on the weekends during the summer and would work for a student who works full time. Others who had dependents were encouraged to find opportunities that included more individual, non-office-based work such as designing assessment programs, conducting assessment or evaluation, or writing training manuals and policies for offices.

**Being a Student and Staff Member on the Same Campus.** Key to the ability to be successful in their programs was professional support from work supervisors and colleagues. For the women who continued to work in full-time administrative positions during their programs, the type of support they needed was flexibility within their work hours and encouragement from their work supervisors. When students were working on the campus where they were pursuing their degree, not only did the tuition remission contribute to their motivation to continue, but they found their work supervisors supportive as well. In some instances (Betty, Carrie, Monica), the participants were, in essence, required to achieve their master's degree as part of their professional position on campus, and in other cases (Anna, Jessica, Jane), participants were highly encouraged to pursue their degrees to be prepared for anticipated career mobility opportunities. Supervisors provided flexibility for students to attend courses and complete assignments because the academic coursework directly related to the participants' professional responsibilities.

As Melissa continued working full time during her master's degree, her supervisor's support was critical in terms of scheduling needs to attend class and complete her field experience. Her supervisor recognized the value of her increased education levels: "my boss is amazing. She is so understanding when I have a [weekday] class that runs all afternoon. Right now I'm doing my field experience and she's like, 'whatever you need.'" Her supervisor showed support for Melissa's degree by giving her the flexibility to attend classes during the regular workweek when needed. This support received from Melissa's full-time supervisor created a sense of loyalty that she feels to her position and supervisor, which makes her less interested in changing jobs after completing her degree. "[My full-time supervisor] knows I'm getting the degree so that I can keep my job; that's my plan." For Carrie, encouragement from her work environment and pursuing a master's degree on the same campus kept her engaged and retained.

My work environment was super supportive as far as needing time off to finish a paper or fussing a little bit for time for school or class or whatever that might be. So I think it really helped that I was in such a supportive environment; I never had to consider not finishing.

Sally had a similar experience to Carrie where the coursework was viewed as professional development and thus supported: "and it's nice to be able to do some of your school work at work. It's really nice because you know your boss still considers it professional development at the end of the day."

Non-traditional-aged work colleagues and program peers served as additional resources as friends, role models, and/or collaborators on group projects. When participants could work in groups with women of similar identities, they would because they had a mutual understanding of each other's needs. Anna utilized classmates both in and out of the classroom because "with group presentations, it was always helpful to have other students come up with ideas or complement each other." Both Melissa and Karla benefited from having a coworker who was a peer as they worked together and could easily collaborate on class assignments. Melissa and Karla took courses together to continue to support each other and try to work together on projects because of similarities in their work style. In Carol's experience:

We're good encouragers and I felt like that I could help to encourage others. I think we just had a really good understanding of, "hey, we've all got stuff going on. Let's pull together and see what we can do to make the best of this."

**Partner Support.** Time management was among the greatest challenges noted by the participants as they reflected on their SAPP. As they discussed their approaches to successfully completing their academic responsibilities, family came through as dependable supports for emotional needs as well as parental and home needs. All participants were married, and several participants discussed having a feeling of guilt for needing assistance while they completed their academic responsibilities. The guilt was internal and caused by their expectations, so when their families could find ways to assist without making them feel guilty, the participants could focus more on their schoolwork.

For Jessica, a married mother of four, managing her children's schedules with her husband's work schedule was initially challenging, but a schedule change in her husband's career allowed him to provide additional childcare support while she was in class.

My support is my family. I felt guilty, I was like, oh they're my kids. I need to take care of them, but they were totally understanding and supportive. Since my husband has switched schedules, he's been able to do a lot more so I don't feel as overwhelmed. He's totally understanding when I have to be, "okay, sorry baby I have to go do some school work, I have to get it done."

Jane also had a supportive spouse who would help with time management and offering space needed to complete coursework responsibilities.

If [my husband] knew I had something due, he would try to keep the kiddos entertained or maybe take them out of the house so I could focus on it because they would inevitably be like, "Mommy! Come over here." So, that was very helpful to be able to not feel guilty if the kids were watching a show or something. At least I know they are out playing with their friends and having fun and mommy can have fun reading!

## **Discussion and Recommendations for Research and Practice**

The participants' stories offer insights into how SAPPs can alter academic programs and their culture to increase access and inclusion for non-traditional-aged women. While the experiences of participants in this study were generally positive, they were able to choose programs that considered their multiple roles. The number of SAPPs intentionally structured to meet the demands of non-traditional women is limited or unknown as this is not a common metric used in research, assessment of programs, or as searchable field in the widely used NASPA Directory. Due to this, potential students may pursue a degree outside of student affairs or in an online format, which may not fully meet the students' career goals or learning style. While the field of student affairs as a whole values embracing diversity and meeting students where they are, our SAPPs may not be structured accordingly. For example, programs that only offer coursework during the business hours of the weekdays may not be viable options for many non-traditional students, especially those who plan to or need to continue in full time jobs and/or have dependents.

The findings highlight how this population (re)negotiated their multiple roles and found successful supports in a variety of places. Some participants found that their families or husbands attempted to take some of the responsibilities away temporarily as a form of labor or household support. Even with this, the participants expressed feelings of neglecting household needs and being the coordinator of children's activities and care even in the presence of an active and hands-on spouse. Having program faculty who can empathize with women students who have

dependents' feelings of guilt, neglect, or general juggling, may help increase program satisfaction, connection, and retention.

Traditional-aged students without dependents may place their graduate studies at the top of their priority list by devoting the majority of time into coursework and practical experiences. The experiences of non-traditional-aged students with dependents differs, as graduate work is only one of many competing responsibilities. While the participants in this study noted placing their academics lower on the priority list because of needs of their family or their full-time positions, their ability to analyze, synthesize, and apply new knowledge created an impactful learning experience. Prioritizing the parental role over the academic requirements was a similar finding in a national study of graduate student parents (men and women) in SAPPs (Sallee, 2015). The decreased time to spend with the content did not lessen participants' learning.

The two structures of the SAPPs in this study support non-traditional-aged students, while recent shifts to grow graduate student numbers has led to an increased population of traditional-aged students in the programs. The recommendations based on the themes presented in this article would support any students while focusing most on the needs of non-traditional-aged women students who have dependents. Most traditional SAPPs can adapt to meet the needs of non-traditional-aged students by adopting the recommendations as well.

- Expose students and their families during orientation to issues of (Re)Negotiating and (Re)Prioritizing of Roles as they transition into SAPPs;
- Provide a panel of former and current students who are non-traditional-aged and have dependents to offer advice for how to be successful;
- Adopt non-traditional course delivery methods and schedules that do not rely on weekday, day time hours only, or online-only delivery to provide the maximum of offerings for students' schedules;
- Plan courses for several years for students to be able to make adjustments if they choose a non-traditional course progress timeline;
- Be understanding of non-traditional-aged students' multiple priorities and needs for work timeline adjustments on occasion through policy revision and departmental culture shifts;
- Provide flexibility in the completion of fieldwork hours. Develop contacts with offices who offer flexible or off-hours work opportunities;
- Create an orientation or session or distribute a suggested recommendation manual for work supervisors of employees who are full-time on campus and are starting SAPPs to aid in their ability to provide work flexibility and professional development support to employees who are students.
- Create a peer mentor program or a campus-based mentor program where non-traditional-aged students are partnered with a program peer or a student affairs colleague on campus who shared their identities. While none of the participants discussed any formal programs, the women in this study valued having peers and colleagues whose life experiences mirrored their experiences or who could serve as role models.

Because of the importance placed on family in the lives of the women in the study, additional research from the perspectives of family members would provide further insight into the influence of the mother's pursuits of a graduate degree on her family. Understanding how, from the children's perspective, the intentional role modeling and knowledge of college student development and environment influences them, could help both students and their families place more

value on the benefits of the sacrifice as opposed to the challenges that occur while the mother in the family is in school. The intentionality of mothers pursuing higher education, whether it be undergraduate, graduate, or doctoral work, provides a guide to other parents returning to pursue their education and how to make the experience not only positive in terms of the parent's learning but also her children's.

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