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Innovations in Research and Scholarship Feature

Going at It Alone: Single-Mother Undergraduates' Experiences

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The single-parent undergraduate is an underserved student population who faces organizational barriers and negative climates. These barriers negatively impact the student's collegiate experience and could influence retention. The author used feminist-informed methodology to explore the single-parent undergraduate experience and posits suggestions for institutional change.

The undergraduate parent exists as an underserved student population on college campuses, yet over half of low-income undergraduate students are single parents (Cook & King, 2004) and one fifth of all undergraduates are parents (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). According to the American Council on Education (2005), 16% of all undergraduate women are single mothers and 28% of female undergraduates over the age of 25 are single parents. A 2002 National Center for Education Statistics longitudinal study initiated in 1995–1996 showed that 47% of the single-parent population of undergraduates aspired to earn a bachelor's degree, yet by 2001 only 7% had

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succeeded. These numbers suggest that single parents are not persisting in college at rates similar to their peers. Retention and persistence issues vary for single-mother college students and differ from other undergraduate students. This study explored some institutional and cultural barriers that prevent the single-mother college student from fully integrating into undergraduate life and posits suggestions for improved institutional policy and climate.

Institutional policies and programs should support student mothers and assist them with completing their educational degrees (Braxton, 2000). According to a report from the Institute for Women's Policy Research, attainment of a college degree gives mothers access to and increased opportunity for better wages, job prospects, and family healthcare (Lee, 2007). A college education increases women's income immediately even though the long-term wage gender gap remains (Rose & Hartmann, 2008). The economic and psychological benefits of obtaining a 2-year or 4-year degree are well documented (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2007; Goldrick-Rab, 2009, 2010; Huff & Thorpe, 1997). Often graduates gain more earning power and generally feel better about their ability to care for their families independently.

Yet the problem remains that single-parent students are not persisting in college (Goldrick-Rab, 2009; Mason, 2002) and this trend will continue unless institutions develop specific retention efforts toward this population (Fenster, 2004). To increase single parents' visibility, it is helpful to understand the experiences of single mothers on college campuses. Once higher education administrators and educators have this knowledge, campus policies and programs can be developed that are inclusive and student family friendly.

Feminist Framework

A feminist epistemological framework informs this research's methodological process and analysis. Feminist epistemology posits that traditional ways of knowing and experiencing the world have excluded women as "agents of knowledge" (Harding, 1987, p. 3). In an effort to validate and give voice to single mothers' experiences, a feminist framework argues against just adding women into a study but rather advocates using their narratives as reality so that proposals for change are based on their lived experiences. A feminist framework views organizations, including higher education, within socially constructed gender and racial categories (Acker, 1990; hooks, 1984; Ng, 2000). The application of a feminist framework argues that the gendered and racial stratification of higher education not only mediates women's access into college but also influences the different experiences between women and men (Jacobs, 1996; Tierney & Bensimon, 2000). This study expands experiential stratification to women who are single mothers.

Through a feminist framework, the racial feminization of poverty is more visible. Feminization of poverty posits that women, and specifically women of color, are more likely to be the sole head of household for a family, thus having to bear all economic and societal pressures (Adair & Dahlberg, 2003). Due to this multidecade trend (Pearce, 1978), access to and opportunity for higher education advancement is more critical to this population not only for themselves as mothers

and women but also for the next generation of children (Adair & Dahlberg, 2003; Kahn, Butler, Stromer Deprez, & Polakow, 2009). In keeping with a feminist paradigm and the commitment to social justice, a feminist perspective guides the methods, analysis, and research implications so that this research on single mothers gives back to the participants in the form of institutional and cultural change.

Single-Parent Literature: Stereotypes, Barriers, and Support

The literature on students with children or single parents frames discussions by either grouping this population with the larger issues facing the adult-learner student population (Kasworm, 2010) or discussing the role of welfare in access and retention (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Van Stone, Nelson, & Niemann, 1994). The most favorable discussions about parents on college campuses often view faculty, staff, or graduate students as the parents, not undergraduate students (see Lester & Sallee, 2009). Scholarship that does examine single-parent students shows that this targeted population has concerns different from their peers and more need for supportive programs and relationships in order to improve retention and experience (Fenster, 2004; Gasser & Gasser, 2008; Van Stone et al., 1994). The literature used to support this research includes negative stereotypes, structural barriers such as welfare, and the support of single mothers as adult learners.

Stereotypes

Single mothers experience negative stereotypes as they negotiate postsecondary institutions. They face an undue amount of pressure because the dominant discourse about family creates stereotypes that “revolved around issues of family form, welfare participation and race” (Haleman, 2004, p. 772). An ethnographic study of single mothers in higher education reveals how the rhetoric about this population negatively influences policy and public opinion. Haleman stated that “the phrase ‘single mother’ often conjures images of poor, welfare-dependent, and frequently minority women who lack adequate education and employment skills and the motivation to acquire them” (2004, p. 770). Single mothers worry that their actions and presence in higher education are unwelcomed due in part to the marginalization of class issues (Adair, 2001; Adair & Dahlberg, 2003; Mitchell, 2003). This dominant discourse creates an environment that victimizes many single mothers and sentences their children to a life at or below the poverty line.

In the midst of many challenges, postsecondary education continues to serve as “an opportunity for personal growth and an important way of modeling educational success for their children” (Haleman, 2004, p. 779). Education can affect generations by educating the mother so that education positively influences the children and the next generation’s attainment (Attewell et al., 2007; Goldrick-Rab, 2009).

Barriers

In addition to the harmful rhetoric, single mothers face structural barriers when negotiating higher education, specifically state and federal policies meant to address the perception of lazy women on welfare. Changes to the federal aid system created reforms that tied financial resources to both work and education. The federal system created a vicious cycle that requires women to be employed, enrolled in school, and parenting before they are eligible to receive federal assistance such as food stamps or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF; Austin & McDermott, 2003; Fenster, 2004; Haleman, 2004). These federal and state policies regarding welfare are a higher education issue because they become obstacles to access (Shaw, 2004).

Welfare reform prevents higher education access and serves as the largest structural barrier for single mothers' pursuit of college. In 1996, Congress implemented the TANF program as a block grant under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Each state receives the same level of federal funding, regardless of caseload, and families have a 5-year lifetime limit with a work-first policy that prevents access to and continuation in higher education. The changes in welfare federal and state policies are a call to higher education policymakers to address the retention needs of single mothers. Critics of the current welfare work-first ideology point to how these policies are presented as gender blind and yet serve to marginalize and block single mothers' access and success (Shaw, 2004). Specifically, research on undergraduate student employment shows a decrease in graduation rates when students work over 20 hours per week (King, 2002), yet welfare reform requires more hours of work under the work-first ideology.

Connected to access barriers, childcare continues to be a dominant concern for all parents, especially those who work or go to school outside of traditional 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. work hours (Szekely, 2004). Current resources meet only one tenth of the childcare demand on college campuses (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Under TANF only 24 states direct money toward subsidized childcare (National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies, 2009) and 33 states do not maintain a childcare wait list (Schulman & Blank, 2009). The other federal funding of childcare via the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program has declined since 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The CCAMPIS program is part of the federal TRIO programs and is the primary funder for campus-based childcare for low-income students. The reduced federal funding of these programs challenges single parents to work rather than focus on getting an education. The short- and long-term consequences of choosing work over higher education is that without a degree the women are limited in the ability to access increased wages, improve job prospects, gain health insurance, and provide opportunities for their children. The reduction in funding and availability of affordable childcare will continue to be a barrier for undergraduate parents.

In addition to welfare reform and policies, finances and the cost of education are obstacles. A survey of single parents on an Idaho commuter college campus identified four top concerns: lack

of time, finances, tuition and expenses, and child support (Huff & Thorpe, 1997). Huff and Thorpe (1997) stressed that earning a college degree was still the most effective strategy for "achieving economic security" (p. 298) because many single-parent students live at or below the federal poverty level.

Identity conflicts also serve as a barrier to single mothers' college access and success. These conflicts are similar to research on adult learners and how they negotiate college differently due to competing identity demands based on factors such as age, family, and employment status (Kasworm, 2010; Spanard, 1990). Women are unique in their complex identity roles, and motherhood interacts with their college experiences:

Life events are real barriers for women; the major responsibility for nurturing and home making continue to be "her" responsibility, along with career-job demand. The implication of these role demands can preclude, for most women, their taking on successfully the additional role of student. (Mohney & Anderson, 1988, p. 273)

Women's competing identities suggest that student affairs practitioners approach programming for student parents slightly differently, including developing a plan that integrates the competing roles. For example, student affairs practitioners and faculty should be aware that sometimes women's motivation to achieve diminishes because of conflicting external responsibilities "that inhibit achievement and preclude self-expression" (Mohney & Anderson, 1988, p. 273). Understanding this conflict is essential to creating policies and programs supportive of single-parent students.

Support

The increasing numbers of women and adults entering college creates the need for higher education institutions to adjust programmatic support to improve retention. The retention of women and adults improves higher education diversity, thereby positively influencing all students. As previously mentioned, this population of college students faces additional challenges of negotiating work and family demands with higher education requirements. Students are more likely to persist if they have supportive programs and networks (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Braxton, 2000; Gasser & Gasser, 2008; Huff & Thorpe, 1997; Jing & Mayer, 1995; Peltier, Laden, & Matranga, 1999).

Huff and Thorpe (1997) suggested several key recommendations for college campuses:

1. Establish a task force that addresses campus policies and programs with a specific emphasis on financial stressors identified in the study.
2. Coordinate with existing off-campus resources including financial and counseling services.
3. Extend existing on-campus resources including financial aid, counseling, academic support, and tutoring.

4. Create new services tailored for single parents including childcare, time management, healthcare, and a co-op to share textbooks, clothing, furniture, and other essentials.
5. Develop advocacy services that lobby for changes to on- and off-campus policies that impact single parents.

A range of benefits to single parents become available when Huff and Thorpe's (1997) improvements are instituted. Finally, colleges and universities should take the lead in creating programs that support single-parent families and provide targeted interventions. These changes can address the retention of student mothers and add to campus diversity.

Methodology

The desire for this research project on single-parent undergraduates developed collaboratively between higher education faculty and student affairs administrators at a midwestern university. As a former student affairs practitioner and now faculty member, I was concerned with the lack of retention of women on my current campus. In campus meetings, it became apparent that this student population was largely invisible on campus. After investigating the limited amount of scholarship on single-mother college students, I designed an exploratory project within a feminist methodological framework. As a feminist, I believed that employing a feminist methodology was the most appropriate approach to explore these women's experiences and also produce meaningful change based on their lived realities.

A feminist methodological framework requires a commitment to both process and product (Letherby, 2003). With a focus on feminist process, I asked student affairs professionals to assist and collaborate with me during the data gathering phase. First, we conducted two focus groups (Barbour, 2007) using open-ended questions to explore the students' experiences of gender, single motherhood, and undergraduate status. Once we understood more fully the women's experiences, student affairs administrators conducted a needs assessment survey to move the institution toward program development as well as honor the feminist design by using the women's voices to implement change. The student affairs administration used the data to develop a single-parent program that is still evolving within the student development division.

Site and Participant Selection

The participants in this study were undergraduates at a midwestern research institution located in a rural area more than 100 miles from any urban locale. This higher education institution has over 15,000 undergraduates enrolled and maintains the lowest number of women undergraduates compared to all other public institutions within the same state. In 2009, women undergraduates comprised only 44% compared to national averages for women ranging from 54% to 60%. The 6-year graduation rate of only 44% for the 2003 cohort on this campus is concerning. It was difficult to track single parents on campus. The only numbers available were from students

who identified dependents on their Free Application for Federal Student Aid forms. Based on this data, a minimum of 6% of the undergraduate population had dependents.

This institution is one of a few universities that offers family housing facilities as a part of the residence life departments. According to an Association of College and University Housing Officers–International (ACUHO-I) 2008 survey (Spencer, Clark & Glenn, 2008), only 39% of residence life departments responded to having “family/married/partnered housing.” The off-campus location of family housing creates transportation and physical access issues.

All research participants were women and predominately African American from urban locations. It was important to the feminist design of the project to allow self-definition of what it meant to be a “single parent.” For the majority of the women, this self-identification meant they were not married. One woman was married but identified as a single mother because her partner was serving overseas in the military.

After institutional review board approval, I gathered email addresses with the assistance of residence life staff. We first solicited participation via email to all families currently living in family housing. We also posted flyers in family housing, campus childcare centers, and classroom buildings. Our solicitation process took approximately one month. Two different focus group times were offered in two different locations detailed below.

Focus Groups

The focus groups were a feminist research design (Ramazanoglu, 2002) that followed a feminist paradigm (Guido, Chávez, & Lincoln, 2010). Focus groups are a more equalitarian approach to research compared to interviews or surveys and therefore they are more compatible with a feminist paradigm (Montell, 1999). The goal of using focus groups rather than individual interviews was so the participants could co-construct their meanings and experiences as self-identified single-mother college students rather than having the research guided too much by the researcher and moderators. The focus group design as a participatory model allowed the women to be active participants in the discussion rather than subjected to a more hierarchical relationship (Letherby, 2003).

We conducted two focus group meetings with 21 students participating. Both focus groups were held in the evenings with free insured childcare and food available for parents and children. The student affairs division covered the costs for food and location. A student affairs professional moderated the focus groups. Support staff and faculty, including myself, were on hand to help and answer questions. Each focus group lasted for a minimum of 1.5 hours.

Based on the exploratory nature of the research, we used only four structured questions, with open probing throughout the focus groups.

1. Describe your experience here at this institution from a single-parent perspective.
2. What programs and services here are you currently aware of for single-parent students?

3. As a parent, what were you looking for when choosing a college to attend?
4. What types of programs or services could we offer that would support single-parent students?

Because we used only four structured questions, the participants could take the lead in discussion and guide the process, which shifted power from the researchers to the participants. Feminists promote research methods that attempt to diminish researcher expertise status, shift power differentials, and promote consciousness-raising among the participants (Letherby, 2003; Montell, 1999). The empathic group dynamics that occurred prompted some of the women to exchange email and phone numbers at the end of the session.

We audio- and video-recorded the focus groups for the purposes of transcription and analysis. Moderators concluded both focus groups by disseminating information about campus and community resources as well as gathering participants' emails to facilitate the formation of a support group. We believed this involvement was a way to give back to the participants and attempt to create a reciprocal research relationship. In addition, it was a step in creating institutional change by connecting the women with support services.

Data analysis involved coding themes and issues from a qualitative data analysis approach (Gibbs, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). We used a two-step coding process. First, codes and themes were developed based on the previous literature and known barriers and experiences. Once the focus groups were completed, the researchers met again to analyze the transcripts in an inductive process guided by the women's shared experiences. We used a constant comparative method that allowed us to use the previous research while listening to the participants' narratives and developing codes from those shared experiences (Glaser, 1969). Throughout the coding and analysis process, we made intentional efforts to represent the women's experiences ethically and responsibly without interpreting decisions and feelings in a judgmental way but rather by focusing on the women's self-definitions and meaning. Although it is impossible to completely bracket out the researcher in any participatory research method, we made conscious efforts to maintain reflexivity throughout the research process so that this research ethically represents the women's voices (Letherby, 2003; Ramazanoglu, 2002). After we completed the initial draft, we provided the summary results to student affairs professionals to inform the creation of a single-parent program.

Findings

"I Shouldn't Have to Apologize for Being a Parent"

The women expressed anger at barriers such as financial issues with childcare and student fees, K-12 scheduling conflicts, age limit policies, faculty and staff attitudes, and the lack of family-friendly campus events. They perceived the issues as barriers to the full integration of their student and mother identities. The financial discussion involved more than childcare coverage and included a lower cost of living countered by the amount of student-related fees. Kindergarten

through Grade 12 and university schedules varied from each other, thus creating childcare and class issues. Age limits impacted technology usage and general program involvement. Finally, the participants identified the university culture as isolating due to faculty and staff attitudes or policies and lack of family-friendly activities.

Paying for College: Childcare, Housing, and Cost of Living

Childcare cost continues to be an obstacle for all single parents. The participants in this study expanded the understanding of economic needs to illustrate a more complex financial picture for single-mother students. Many of the women in this study relocated from urban environments due to the appeal of a lower cost of living and availability of campus family housing. But this relocation threatened the availability of childcare due to separation from the local childcare support of a partner or family member. The lower cost of living allowed the federal childcare subsidies to cover more of the daycare needs due to less expensive care and living. One woman from a large city explained how she

researched every state school . . . [and] this one had the best family housing of every place. I was technically homeless up in [large city]. A one-bedroom apartment was \$700 and trying to maintain and get by as a full-time student with a 12-hour day. But daycare up there was twice the cost that it is down here. It was \$1,800 a month without the subsidy where down here it's only \$500 without. It's just so much cheaper down here.

The focus groups also expressed the appeal of on-campus family housing facilities. The family housing facility operated an after-school program on site and fell in a desirable K–12 school district, which the participants touted as a strength. For a lower cost than an urban environment, the women pursued their bachelor's degrees while their children attended a higher quality public school system. Another urban woman expressed the need for this combination:

In actuality the number one thing I was looking for was a school that was going to accommodate me and the kids. I felt I could make it work because I always have. You know wherever I went that was number one. The secondary was what they had to offer in terms of my goals in education. But I really did look for who could accommodate me and the kids the best.

She further clarified that the best accommodation was a situation that could offer her some “financial relief” since she had been paying the family's bills.

Student Fees

Beyond the expected needs of more financial assistance for childcare, the participants expressed concern about minimal flexibility in the student fees. The women perceived these applied fees as useful to traditional students, but their children limited the parents' ability to participate in the activities or services (e.g., sporting events, recreation center, and student health center).

One woman explained the single-parent student perception of fees:

It seems so minor to somebody who doesn't have a family to support. But, when you are doing it by yourself, every penny counts. I'm paying for football tickets, basketball tickets, volleyball tickets. . . . I'm going to none of these events. My two-year-old is not going to sit still to watch a pigskin go up and down because she doesn't care. . . . I'm not going to this stuff but I'm paying to go to this stuff.

The women expressed desire for more family functions, such as movies and recreation usage, without extra charges for their children. Additionally, they wanted their existing student fees to cover or add services such as a family library and family-friendly computer lab space on campus. One example was offered: The campus bus charges \$1 for children over the age of 5, but as one of the women pointed out, "sometimes you can't find that dollar." The frustration over paying fees for events that the women could not participate in or paying additional fees for their children were shared themes among the focus group participants.

Health center fees were another concern because the women who were paying for student health center care were also enrolled in public health aid programs for their children's coverage. This situation resulted in a desire to use the student health center due to location because many of them lacked transportation but an inability to obtain services there for their children. As a result, they did not use campus health services for themselves or their children but paid campus health fees. Although there was a health fee refund policy in place, the women were not aware of it until the focus group discussions.

K-12 and University Scheduling

As mentioned earlier, nontraditional school and work hours are a larger concern that causes an additional burden for single parents (Szekely, 2004). Lack of coordination between university and school or daycare schedules impeded class attendance. Some students experienced resistance concerning excused absences due to sick children or K-12 systems closure.

The participants' three options for dealing with scheduling differences were missing class due to childcare, bringing children to class, or finding another mother to watch their children. Missing class was the option with the most dire results for the participants. For example, the start of the academic year schedules for the university and the K-12 school district varied by 3 weeks. Because one woman was unable to secure temporary daycare, she missed the first 3 weeks of the fall semester. The difficulty was compounded by a campus daycare policy that did not allow short-term enrollment. One woman expressed:

People who have their kids in the public school system with the national holidays that the kids have and also the mandated once-a-month teacher institutional days or whatever. . . . [So] when the school system is out, you are left with your kid and you have to try do your best to find someone who will watch them. Or for me it's miss a day because I have a three-year-old and she is not going to be quiet in that environment.

The women perceived that the option of bringing their children to class was not welcomed by professors or classmates. One woman expressed her experience as being both positive and negative:

None of them want a three-year-old in the classroom. It's too disruptive. One instructor is the most understanding and she will let me meet with her to get notes afterwards. The other one's like, it's not their problem.

One negative experience reported by a respondent came from an academic advisor. When one student was registering for classes, the course she needed ended at 5:30 p.m. The student explained that she could not take it because her childcare stopped at 5:00 p.m. The advisor responded that the student could find someone to watch the child for 30 minutes. The notion that finding someone for a short period of time was easy angered the student but also did not help change the policies that were in place that prevented continued childcare or a change in course options. Although the family housing complex presented an opportunity for shared daycare, the women expressed difficulty in developing trusting relationships with new neighbors. The lack of trustworthy networks created an increased obstacle for the single parents when the K–12 and university schedules did not align.

Age Limit Policies

One campus policy identified by these women was age limits for campus events and computer lab usage. Due to liability and health concerns, some events and facilities, such as the recreation center, do not allow children under the age of 3 in diapers. In addition, children under 13 were not allowed in many of the campus computer labs. Policies meant to protect lab equipment punish single parents and their children, especially when older children need access to computers for their homework. One woman indicated the lab monitor told her that her child needed to wait in the hallway while she used the computer center.

Faculty and Staff Barriers

The women expressed a culture of isolation stemming from faculty and staff exchanges. An example of extreme negative interaction is indicated in the following:

The majority of professors that I have come in contact with have taken the approach that you made the choice to become a single parent now deal with it. You know, "this is what you did, now deal with it."

The rhetoric of choice is a damaging notion that victimizes the women rather than supports them or creates the impetus to change the systemic barriers.

With teachers, I feel like it's this "toughen up and deal with it" approach. I don't feel like I can even say anything about my kids sometimes, because they are going to be like "what do you want me to do about it." 'Cause they feel like it's an excuse or something I used to be an honor roll student and this semester I am just totally failing all my classes.

The participants noted that faculty lacked the understanding of what it meant to be a single parent while in undergraduate school.

The professional staff presented barriers as well. For example, a journalism major applied for an on-campus job with the student newspaper. During her interview, a well-intentioned staff member advised the student not to mention she had a child because the others would not be accommodating if she needed to be flexible in her work schedule due to childcare or child illness issues. The student later dropped journalism and switched to education because she was unable to maintain the out-of-class requirements without childcare support.

Absence of Family-Friendly Events

The participants were all well aware they were not the traditional student on campus. As expressed by one woman, "as a single parent we are excluded from a lot of things. It may not be intentional, they don't deny you access but they make it difficult for you to participate." Either events were not child friendly or the parents were not comfortable putting their children in an environment full of 18- to 21-year-old nonparent students. In the end, one woman expressed the shared feeling that they "would love to be able to do more campus activities, but it's just not possible because it's not presented. It's not an option." The participants cited the absence of a support network as a barrier to their collegiate success. The focus group participants also expressed this sentiment, as one woman who moved from Chicago stated, "I don't really know anybody. It gets pretty lonely actually to be honest." Isolation from their classmates and peers intersected with a desire for inclusion in traditional student activities (e.g., sorority membership).

Discussion

Overall, the single-mother undergraduates desired a stronger sense of support from faculty, staff, and peers; more family-friendly events and campus services; more diversity in financial assistance; and more programming and daycare options for children. Although administration and faculty could address some of the issues programmatically, this approach implies a notion that the women have deficits to be addressed rather than the belief that systemic and cultural climates need to be changed. It is a significant issue that people blame this population or see them as victims rather than viewing their experiences as mediated by existing structures and culture. Victimization does not serve women's higher education success as it deemphasizes the individual's personal strengths and limits sharing of resources with other student parents (hooks, 1984). Feminist research, such as this project on the single mothers' lived college experiences, provides an opportunity to increase programs but, more significantly, to change the higher education climate. Visibility of the student parent is necessary for college campuses as they strive to be considered diverse and inclusive. As the earlier statistics highlight, college students as adult learners have multiple identities that shape their experience of higher education and ultimately could impact their persistence (Kasworm, 2010).

Historically, higher education has been an arena where women were allowed but not integrated into the culture and climate (Ng, 2000; Rich, 1979; Tierney & Bensimon, 2000). The higher education climate perpetuates the notion that students are single and parents by choice and women students who fail to fit these notions then face cultural isolation (Goldrick-Rab, 2009; Haleman, 2004; National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2009). The concept of choice is a false narrative that continues to isolate these students and to prevent the institution and faculty from creating inclusive, student family-friendly policies. When students are blamed for having a child, essentially we are saying it is their responsibility to determine how to provide for their children and get an education. Like the single mother who said, "I shouldn't have to apologize for being a parent," single mothers should not feel they need to apologize for their multiple identities. Rather, higher education should transform itself into an inclusive environment. Changing the higher education climate is necessary rather than continuing to expect all students to mold themselves into one model: the single, childless, traditionally aged, and full-time student.

The issue of single-mother students calls attention to several issues that mainstream society and higher education would prefer to avoid: poverty, sex, welfare, divorce, and child support (Adair & Dalhberg, 2003; Gasser & Gasser, 2008; Haleman, 2004; Pillow, 2006). Pillow's (2006) work on teen pregnancy identifies the absence or silencing of research on mothers' educational experiences and the predominant focus on preventing pregnancy and program evaluations. A critical look at single-parent students challenges the dominant images of both traditional families and college students. The acknowledgement that students are also mothers alters higher education's culture of historical male dominance by merging the private sphere with the public sphere. These assumptions stifle colleges' and universities' ability to create effective policies and programs that could successfully serve the single-parent student population. The paucity of scholarship on single-parent college students relates to the social resistance regarding acceptance of nontraditional students. In addition to support programs, this ideology does not allow women to be at the center of policy and campus change. Creating critical awareness of single mothers' issues on college campuses works "against the grain" to develop a more inclusive institution (Ng, 2000, p. 366).

Despite the inability to generalize this study, the problems faced by single-mother undergraduates are common ones that spread across college campuses nationwide and lead to retention issues (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Huff & Thorpe, 1997; Peltier et al., 1999). Finances, policies, and climate will continue to limit access and success in higher education until these areas are addressed by institutions (Austin & McDermott, 2003). The positive draw of family housing evidenced in this study serves as a call to other campuses to build or manage similar facilities because 61% of residence life departments do not have family accommodation (Spencer, Clark, & Glenn, 2008). The availability of on-campus family housing has the potential to provide a space for support and a diversion of programming fees to cover family-friendly activities and services. If fees are not diverted to family activities in response to these participants' complaints, universities and administrators should consider the ease and availability of student refund policies. Higher education administrators should recognize that college student parents are a population that rural

universities can recruit because of the lower cost of living in these geographic locations. There can be arrangements that are beneficial to both the institution and the student if policies and programs place women at the center of their concern and address the barriers and needs for retention of student mothers and their children.

Implications for Practitioners

This research on single-mother students demonstrates opportunities for campuses to create a more positive environment for single mothers. Under a feminist paradigm, it is necessary to create a call to action for positive change. Faculty and staff need to become student-parent advocates to change the climate and thereby affect policies and programs that integrate student families into higher education's agenda rather than marginalizing them into specific programs. Without systemic cultural change, power inequities will sustain the marginalization of single mothers on college campuses. Feminism advocates for a knowing and doing relationship; therefore, the following recommendations are based on the women's voices.

Financial Barriers

There are numerous adjustments that could be made in student affairs. One suggestion is to evaluate service and activity fees along with programming trends to determine if student parents' programmatic needs are being met. A reallocation of a portion of fees could move activities to a family-friendly area, thereby addressing campus climate feelings of exclusion. Following this study's focus groups, funds were allocated to develop a single-parent program to address the women's need to socialize with each other as well as participate in workshops on topics such as time management and nutrition. Another suggestion from a participant was to waive fees (e.g., transportation fees) or provide scholarships to cover events and services (e.g., event fees for children of students).

K-12 and University Structural Obstacles

Higher education institutions need to examine their written and implied policies regarding age limits as a way to consider reasonable accommodations. One option available on the campus under study is a computer loan program. Student affairs administrators could collaborate with corporate sponsors or academic administrators to create scholarships to purchase technology. Or if a campus has a technology fee, the students could advocate for funds to go toward family-friendly computer labs.

In order to be student-parent friendly, the culture of higher education needs to be more inclusive. Student affairs administrators should be proactive in educating undergraduate faculty and staff on the experiences of college student parents as a way to make faculty-student exchanges supportive in and out of the classroom. Workshops geared toward instructors and faculty could fo-

cus on how to teach across student differences with a subfocus on students with families. Beyond just programmatic suggestions, this culture change needs to address a positive psychological shift on campus. In addition to educating faculty and staff, faculty–student interaction can have a positive impact on persistence when understanding relationships are created (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Fenster, 2004). These established relationships can assist students when flexible course attendance policies are warranted. A systemic change is needed to encourage and reward faculty for creating and allocating time to build faculty–student relationships via holistic advising or associations with on-campus family housing.

Connections to Women's Studies

Women's studies programs are an obvious location to recognize the contributions of diverse women and their multiple identities of mother, student, scholar, and woman. Single-mother undergraduates can offer other students learning opportunities such as providing child development students' practica hours or internship credit in exchange for free childcare. Another positive way student mothers contribute to a more inclusive college environment would be through the development of babysitting co-ops and community engagement.

As stated by one participant, "As a student, my daughter is part of me. So for me to be productive, my daughter needs to be productive." The lesson from this research is that if we as student affairs administrators and faculty desire increased recruitment and retention of single parents, then we must realize we are not just educating the undergraduate student, we are educating the family unit.

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