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## At Issue

# Underserved but Undeterred: Single Mother Students' Experiences at Community Colleges

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*Single mother students represent a significant proportion of the student body at community colleges. Thus, the purpose of this article is to examine the experiences of single mother students enrolled in community colleges across the United States and identify ways that administrators, faculty, and staff can foster their academic persistence. The author provides practical applications and strategies such as inclusive student orientations, campus affinity groups, and intrusive advising that may aid in retention and degree completion for single mother students amid the challenges they may face.*

*Keywords: single mother, community college, persistence, student*

Nearly 4.3 million undergraduate students pursuing postsecondary education in the United States (U.S.) are parents of dependent children (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2019). Single mother students, specifically, represent a significant portion of the student parent population. A single mother student is defined as the primary caregiver of one or more dependent children who also identifies as never married, separated, widowed, or divorced (Miller & Gault, 2011). Community colleges have a higher proportion of single mother students than four-year institutions (Miller & Gault, 2011; Schumacher, 2013), as 19% of single mothers are enrolled at four-year institutions compared with 44% at community colleges (Kruvelis et al., 2017). Despite the growing presence of single mother students at community colleges, they remain an understudied and underserved college student population (Duquaine-Watson, 2006; Yakaboski, 2010). The purpose of this commentary article is to provide an overview of the experiences of single mother students at community colleges and factors that influence their retention and persistence.

Single mother students thrive at community colleges, although they may face unique challenges such as securing childcare, caring for other dependent family members, and balancing part- or full-time employment

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and school during their degree pursuit (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Miller & Gault, 2011; Yakaboski, 2010). Furthermore, single mother students are disproportionately represented among low-income students in post-secondary education settings (Johnson, 2008; Kim, 2012; Martin, 2012; Zhan & Pandey, 2004). As a result, they may experience increased financial difficulties during their enrollment. Students of color are especially likely to be among the single mother student subpopulation, with 40% of African American, 36% of Native American, and 2% of Latin American students raising children while attending college (Cruse et al., 2019). Community colleges serve more diverse student populations, with high numbers of low-income students of color (Cerven, 2013). Despite racial or ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses, single mothers' educational attainment affects the academic achievement of their children via intergenerational literacy (Haleman, 2004; Martin, 2012). Therefore, community college administrators, faculty, and staff must support single mother students' retention and academic persistence, as their academic endeavors influence generational educational success.

Student support services within each community college have a pivotal role in supporting student parents' intellectual and personal development (Glass, 2019). College counselors and advisors can collaborate with faculty and administrators and network with community resources to promote single mother students' success and retention. College counselors often help single mothers address difficult issues pertaining to their parental statuses, such as navigating multiple roles and responsibilities (Lovell, 2014). Matus-Grossman and Gooden's (2002) study with single mother students at community colleges reported that campus support services, such as mental health counseling services, influenced their ability to stay in college and complete their programs of study within the expected time frame.

### **Balancing Multiple Responsibilities**

Balancing the multiple roles that constitute parent and student may affect academic persistence. For example, a two-year ethnographic study of single mother students found that they faced increased time constraints, childcare issues, and unwelcome college environments (Duquaine-Watson, 2006). Financial issues were the primary challenge. Single mothers often rely on various sources of income such as scholarships and grants, and employee wages; however, student loans are reported as the primary source of income to cover college costs (Duquaine-Watson, 2006; Hayes-Nelson, 2009). Researchers found that tuition increases, the cost of additional childcare services, and the general cost of living added financial

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stress to the lives of single mother students (Duquaine-Watson, 2006; Hayes-Nelson, 2009; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Yakaboski, 2010).

Time constraint is the second most noted obstacle for single mother students (Duquaine-Watson, 2006). The academic requirements of college may require students to spend extensive time on assignments beyond the classroom. Students are often required to complete group and on-line assignments or engage in community-based service learning projects (Hayes-Nelson, 2009). Meeting academic requirements combined with the responsibilities of being the sole parent may pose difficulties for single mother college students (Duquaine-Watson, 2006; Hayes-Nelson, 2009). Single mother students have reported experiencing stress, anxiety, exhaustion, and sleep deprivation (Duquaine-Watson, 2006; Hayes-Nelson, 2009; Huff & Thorpe, 1997).

Moreover, single mother students reported that their multiple responsibilities often affect the quality of relationships with their children as well as their academic performance (Duquaine-Watson, 2006). The Community College Survey of Student Engagement indicated that single-parent students who struggle to balance multiple responsibilities with their education goals reported that they were likely to withdraw from school prematurely (Miller & Gault, 2011). However, an increased sense of belonging and inclusion on campus, streamlined student support services, and support from family and peers can increase single mother student retention at community colleges (Arcand, 2015; Cerven, 2013; Lindsay et al., 2018).

## **Institutional Climate**

Several studies have shown that the institutional environment impacts the experiences of single mother students in postsecondary education (Duquaine-Watson, 2006; Haleman, 2004; Hayes-Nelson, 2009; Yakaboski, 2010). Haleman (2004) stated, “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” (p. 770). Although this image is mainly derived from stereotypes, single mother students have continuously been affected by these views (Haleman, 2004).

Yakaboski (2010) conducted a study using focus groups with 21 single mother undergraduate students at a rural university. Women from the groups reported that they felt victimized by being single mothers. Participants reported that they were frowned upon when they approached instructors asking for flexibility in assignments. Single mothers in the study also reported feeling isolated from the other traditional-aged students

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with whom professors readily engaged. The researcher noted that student mothers' age impacted their familiarity with educational technology and involvement on campus (Yakaboski, 2010). Consequently, single mother students have reported feeling inferior to other students in the classroom (Haleman, 2004). The findings of this study are pertinent and possibly transferable to the experiences of single mothers attending other institutional types. Such negative interactions may lead to single mothers feeling devalued and disengaging from the learning environment (Cerven, 2013; Lindsay et al., 2018) or experiencing ongoing stereotype threat (fear of being judged and treated negatively), which could impact their academic performance (Steele, 1997).

### **Student Involvement**

Campus programs and services also impact the experiences of single mother students at community colleges. Involvement or engagement in campus activities is vital. The more students are engaged with peers, staff, and faculty, the more likely they will persist, especially students who have considerable obligations beyond campus, such as work and families (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Nevertheless, Yakaboski (2010) reported that single mothers felt excluded because campus activities were not family friendly or inclusive. Single mothers also reported that the college academic schedules often coincided with academic schedules in secondary education, which led to frequent inexcusable classroom absences (Yakaboski, 2010). Accordingly, student parents may be prone to enroll in online, evening, or weekend courses (Miller & Gault, 2011). Authors (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002; Yakaboski, 2010) have suggested that single mothers are often unaware of the variety of programs and support services available at community colleges that will help to appease the noted concerns.

### **Implications**

Given the growing presence of single mothers enrolled in community colleges, the students would benefit from identifying mechanisms that foster their understanding of how to navigate the formal systems within the institution. For example, new student orientations can be designed to inform single mothers about how they may successfully navigate, explore, and access on- and off-campus academic, educational, and financial resources. Strategies such as intrusive advising (Sutton, 2016) suggest that a proactive, meaningful approach to advising that attends to students' concerns may help prepare single mother students for the collegiate environment. Finally, campus affinity group meetings, comprised of student parents or single mothers, may provide a safe space for students

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to discuss common concerns through open dialogue and increase the students' sense of belonging on community college campuses (Crumb et al., 2019). Blogs and websites are also available (e.g., [singlemomsincommunitycollege.org](http://singlemomsincommunitycollege.org)) to support single mothers' educational endeavors at community colleges.

## Conclusion

There is a need to increase literature and programs that focus on single mother students' experiences at community colleges. Future researchers, community college administrators, faculty, and staff can explore additional factors that may contribute to variances in students' experiences, such as the institution's geographic location and intersecting dynamics of social class status, race, and gender. Additionally, a consideration of other factors such as students' age, number of children, age of children, and their experiences with student support services will help the overall campus community understand how to best support the academic persistence of single mother students at community colleges.

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