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**THINKING FOR YOU, THINKING FOR TWO: UNCOVERING STUDENT-
PARENT EXPERIENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

by

Brandi Blanton

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Educational Services and Leadership
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
Master of Arts in Higher Education
at
Rowan University
May 1, 2021

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my sons, Zavien Keali'i and Wyatt Jack-Karter.

Remember to be you and stay true; they'll adjust!

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my village! This degree would not be possible without you! Mom, Cheryl, Ebony, Auntie, and the rest of my family – Thank you for supporting me in my educational pursuits by helping with the boys while I attended class!

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Omar and Rachel – Thank you for being my prayer warriors! Thank you for standing on the front lines and interceding on my behalf. Philippians 4:6-7

My Grad School Divas – You ladies are AWESOME! Misery loves company, and we were in this thing together! You helped me understand that all those student development theories like the sense of community and sense of belonging are actually true. Our little “crew” helped me enjoy academic discourse, we continuously encouraged each other, and we became great professional resources for one another. THANK YOU!

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Abstract

Brandi Blanton

THINKING FOR YOU, THINKING FOR TWO: UNCOVERING STUDENT-PARENT
EXPERIENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

2020-2021

Raquel Wright-Mair, Ph.D.

Master of Arts in Higher Education Administration

The literature addressing non-traditional students in higher education is broadening; nevertheless, the experiences of non-traditional, adult students who are raising children (i.e., student-parents) in academia continue to be inadequately explored. This phenomenological study aims to explore the lived experiences of student-parents pursuing a college degree while raising children. The use of a qualitative approach in this research study presented the opportunity to gather rich data to help explain the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Specifically applying a hermeneutic phenomenological research design allowed adult non-traditional student-parents to explain their college experience in their own words through one-on-one interviews. This study adds to the limited current literature on lived experiences of student-parents in pursuit of degree attainment. Sixteen student-parents enrolled in a degree-granting program at a suburban, predominantly White, Division III institution located in New Jersey participated in this study. Their experiences of the research participants from a meaningful, first-person perspective was a vital element of this research. Findings from this study generated four emergent themes. The study also suggests that student-parents, while increasing in numbers, often are a hidden sub-set of non-traditional students who have unique challenges and require varying support.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Colleges and universities in the United States are experiencing an increase in non-traditional student enrollment in post-secondary education (Dodson, 2017; Fairchild, 2003; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Lundberg, 2008). Horn and Carroll (1996) define non-traditional students as those who hold characteristics that can leave them more susceptible to pedagogical, financial, and social difficulties due to their being enrolled part-time, experiencing delayed enrollment, being financially independent, being a (single) parent, being employed full-time, having dependents, and/or not holding a standard high school diploma, among other things. It is important to note that non-traditional students may very well experience one or more of the aforementioned challenges simultaneously. Non-traditional students often carry identities that are marginalized, causing them to navigate compounding issues occurring with little to no support balance multiple identities, such as being a parent, in addition to being a college student (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Lundberg, 2008; Turner, 2007). Due to their competing identities, adult student-parents are a subset of non-traditional students that often encounter difficulty completing their college degree (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Lovel, 2020; Lundberg, 2008; Turner, 2007). Armed with additional life experiences, non-traditional students persist towards degree completion despite many challenges they face.

During the process of developing their identity as a student, non-traditional students also cultivate the self-efficacy necessary to overcome the difficulties they experience. A student's belief in their own abilities to succeed and how motivated they are may impact their achievement and persistence in college. As stated in Albert

Bandura's self-efficacy theory, "perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997). Additional research is required to understand how colleges and universities may better serve non-traditional adult students who attend college while parenting children. Further research on this distinctive population of students will raise awareness of the differing needs of adult student-parents. By studying the lived experiences of students, institutions can provide appropriate levels of support, reducing role strain, and create a more direct pathway toward college degree completion.

Statement of the Problem

The attainment of a college degree is an important milestone that can provide economic growth, professional opportunities, and a level of security. The unsupportive campus conditions at many colleges make it difficult to retain non-traditional students. The current problem is non-traditional students are enrolling in college and universities in higher numbers, yet limited course sequence options, course time availability, types of assignments, degree requirements, or resources such as daytime office hours and events are geared towards traditional students (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019). This population is at a higher risk of dropping out or stopping out before graduating due to the many roles they serve (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019). This is concerning because these students continue to borrow student loans to help finance their college education, and they are not graduating at the same rate as their traditional-aged peers (Fairchild, 2003; Glowacki-Dudka). Non-traditional students are often not equipped with the resources that make them successful in an academic environment. Many colleges base their programs around the needs of traditional students, but non-traditional students need unique and additional support

(Glowacki-Dudka, 2019). Institutions of higher education need more information on the experiences of non-traditional adult student-parents to better understand how to support their journey towards degree completion.

Purpose of the Study

Non-traditional student-parents and their experiences on college campuses have not been at the forefront of scholarly research (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019). The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of non-traditional students pursuing a college degree at a suburban, Division III, predominantly White institution while raising children (i.e., student-parents). Non-traditional students often carry multiple, competing identities that are marginalized within institutionalized spaces. Student-parents are a subset of non-traditional students that often encounter difficulty completing their college degree (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Lovel, 2020; Lundberg, 2008; Turner, 2007). The researcher endeavored to extend the current literature with empirical research, which can be used to improve the support, resources, and programs created for this underserved population of students.

Research Questions

This research sought to provide answers to many questions that remain unknown about the student-parent experience. The research questions for the study were:

1. What motivates non-traditional student-parents to persist towards the completion of a college degree?
2. What challenges do non-traditional student-parents face while pursuing a degree?
3. What campus resources are non-traditional student-parents aware of and utilizing?

Assumptions and Limitations

The researcher assumed that all participants were truthful in their responses about their experiences as student-parents. The major limitation that influenced the study was that the participants were all adult non-traditional student-parents during the 2020-2021 academic year. During this academic year, the COVID-19 pandemic tremendously impacted student-parents since many had to manage the restrictions of virtual learning for children who were unable to attend school in person, along with their other responsibilities (i.e., work full-time, and attempt to get a degree).

Chapter II

Literature Review

The attainment of higher education continues to be held in high regard in our modern-day society. Although more diverse groups of students are entering higher education in record numbers, the current educational model is still not designed with adult learners in mind (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019). This can create additional stress and lead to increased student loan debt levels (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019). This literature review provides a look at what motivates adult non-traditional student-parents to continue their college education despite the obstacles they face and the reasons why they depend on student loans.

Non-Traditional Student Characteristics

As the numbers of traditional high school graduates attending college continue to decline, the student population profile continues to shift. The quantity of non-traditional students on college campuses is consistently rising. Many unique features describe non-traditional students. One of the most distinguishable characteristics of non-traditional students is age. Non-traditional students are usually over the age of 25. Lundberg (2008) outlined traditional college students are younger (between the ages of 18 to the early 20s) and typically continue to college shortly after the completion of high school. However, adult students are the fastest-growing student population and currently represent more than 40% of the student population enrolled in higher education today (Fairchild, 2003; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Lundberg, 2008).

Non-traditional students carry multiple identities and have numerous roles in addition to that of a student. Many adult learners are parents or married who must handle

academic work in addition to supporting children and their households (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Lundberg, 2008). Turner et al. (2007) noted that adult learners have a difficult time juggling schoolwork and family responsibilities. Due to the multiple identities they carry and other factors, adult-student learners are at a higher risk of dropping out or stopping out of college. "Adults often work full-time, are caregivers for children and aging relatives, community leaders, and volunteers" (Fairchild, 2003 p.11). Unlike traditional students, students with children are organizing classes, jobs, daycare, and finding time for studying (Dodson & Deprez, 2017). In 2017, Dodson and Deprez also stated for students who are also parents, "the climb to graduation is much steeper if you are bringing children along" (p. 2). Student-parents are often forced to choose between taking care of their children and continuing their education. Without a safe place to leave their children, student parents are more likely to discontinue their education, no matter how much they want to get a degree (Dodson & Deprez, 2017; Fairchild, 2013). Student-parents are often faced with the toilsome decision of choosing between raising their children or advancing their education. Depending on many factors, their academic aspirations are put on the back burner for a later time.

One vulnerable sub-set of adult-student learners is single parents. This quickly growing, marginalized population is primarily made up of women (Lovell & Scott, 2020). Lovell (2020) also mentioned that single parents enrolled in college require additional resources since they carry higher stress levels and have lower graduation and retention rates. Single parents require systems of support to be successful in academia to manage the many responsibilities they carry. Family and community support can be

highly beneficial since this population has a higher rate of student defaults (Ahlman & Gonzales, 2019).

Non-traditional students have differing career aspirations than those of traditional students. Adult students are more likely to be employed full-time (Fairchild, 2003; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019) since they return to college to complete a previously attempted degree, want to advance their career opportunities, desire to change careers, or are seeking personal development (Lundberg, 2008). Full-time employment will cause adult students to begin college later in life or register for a part-time course load (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019). Ulbrich & Loren (2017) warned that employed adult students should use caution not overextending themselves with work commitments because this may diminish academic progression. Although more diverse groups of students are entering higher education in record numbers, the educational model is still not designed with adult learners in mind. Lundberg (2008) and Fairchild (2003) explained that adult learners spend less time engaging with campus social networks, utilizing campus resources, and have a difficult time fitting into the college campus environment. Adults students often navigate their college experiences alone, and many do not live on campus and have social groups outside the college campus (Fairchild, 2003).

Pusser et al. (2007) inform us that the current educational models recycle successful undergraduate plans leaving adult learners as a second thought. Adult learners account for a large and diverse population. They represent different ages, ethnicities, locations, and career objectives. As adult learners attend college to complete their degree, they may need to borrow student loans as a method to finance their education.

Student Loan Debt

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, college tuition and related expenses have risen 42% in 10 years (Lim et al., 2014). In the United States, student loan debt has ballooned to a whopping \$1.6 Trillion (Winget, 2020). To account for the rising college costs, students are borrowing a more considerable amount of student loans. With higher levels of student loan debt, students are more at risk of experiencing adverse effects of carrying a high student loan balance, such as having their student loans go into default when unexpected life circumstances occur (Ahlman & Gonzales, 2019). Tuition increases in higher education played a substantial role in rising college student indebtedness. The average in-state annual tuition for schools and colleges has doubled (Ulbrich & Loren, 2017; Alban, 2019). In addition to the rise in tuition and fee costs, students are paying more for monthly rent, food expenses, transportation, textbook fees, technology, and other school-related expenses due to inflation. In professional schools, students pay as much for living expenses as they do for university tuition and fees (Ulbrich & Loren, 2017). State funding cuts also drive up the student loan debt burden, leaving students with an average loan balance of \$30,000 at graduation, contributing to higher student loan dependence (Ahlman & Gonzales, 2019; Ulbrich & Loren, 2017). Students, without other means to pay for college, are turning towards student loans to close their financial gaps. Student-parents also incur higher living costs because they also support a family.

Factors Contributing to High Student Loan Debt

Student loan debt has steadily increased in the United States drastically, with college degree costs doubling in the last decade (Alban, 2019). Higher debt amounts are

associated with spending more time completing a degree or remaining in college for a more significant amount of time (Ahlman & Gonzales, 2019). Adult learners attending part-time will pay a higher cost of taking classes later at an increased rate due to annual tuition increases each year (Pelletier, 2010). Part-time learners are better able to balance a lower credit load; however, they do not benefit from special full-time tuition pricing (Pelletier, 2010). For illustrative purposes, Rowan University charges a flat-rate tuition fee when a student is registered for 12 through 17 credits per semester (Rowan University - Profile, Rankings, and Data | US News Best Colleges, n.d.). A full-time student can essentially receive up to 2 free courses each semester, equating to a savings of over \$1,900.00 per semester per full-time student (Undergraduate | Rowan University, n.d.). This can also accelerate the completion of their degree (Pelletier, 2010). Part-time learners cannot participate in this cost-saving measure and can, therefore, end up paying more to complete a degree. Student-parents may borrow additional student loans to cover additional family living expenses.

History illustrates that college tuition will continue to rise as the demand for education grows. In 2016, the average cost for a degree was \$104,480, which is double compared to the cost of the same degree in 1989 (Alban, 2019). Therefore, students are borrowing more student loans to afford their college degrees. As a matter of fact, millennials have taken out more loans and more copious loan amounts compared to Generation X (Alban, 2019). The higher tuition cost and graduating in a post-recession economy are some of the reasons for this.

While college tuition is on the rise, employee earnings have not increased at the same rapid pace. Students have experienced college tuition increases eight times greater

than employee income used to pay that rising cost (Alban, 2019). When students graduate from college, the positions they secure do not pay enough to support the repayment of hefty loan amounts in addition to higher daily living expenses (Barr et al., 2019; Ji, 2020). Some students decide to borrow private or alternative loans, which do not offer the same benefits or protections as Federal Student Loans. Often, these "private loans carry variable interest rates, have limitations on deferment, and do not offer income-based repayment plans and loan forgiveness options like those available through the Public Student Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program" (Ulbrich & Loren, 2017, p. 2). The variable interest rate can be tied to a financial index such as the US Prime Rate. This can cause a student's monthly payments to increase significantly, and their lenders often do not offer income-driven repayment plans to support low-earning students (Barr et al., 2019; Ahlman & Gonzales, 2019).

When students are not able to come up with the money to afford their tuition costs or cannot get a loan approved, they often are forced to leave school or take time off from their education. Non-traditional students are at a higher risk of leaving school without completing a degree because of the multiple competing identities they carry. "They leave with less debt, but doing so without a completed degree increases their risk of default twofold" (Ahlman & Gonzales, 2019, p. 8). However, non-traditional adult students can borrow a higher amount of student government Stafford loans than traditional college students. According to the Department of Education's Dependency Status, adult learners are considered Independent Students after completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) (Babineau, 2017). Among other qualifications, students are deemed Independent if they are undergraduate students over the age of 24, have children

of their own, or are married (Babineau, 2017). Independent students are eligible for a higher amount of student loans annually and over their lifetime than traditional-aged, dependent students.

Reducing Student Loan Debt

The easiest way to reduce student loan debt is to avoid debt in the first place. If possible, pay for tuition with savings or make cash payments directly to your college or university. If students need to borrow loans, only borrow the lowest amount possible.

"Reducing the amount of money borrowed for the cost of living expenses may be accomplished by working, obtaining financial assistance from family members, and acquiring scholarships" (Ulbrich & Loren, 2017 p. 2). Working students should also investigate tuition assistance programs through their employers to help make their college degrees more affordable.

Race and Gender

A common recurring theme in the literature was racial and gender identity of student populations. Lim (2014) informs us that Black students attending 2-year and 4-year colleges experienced more financial burdens than White students. While Winget (2020) further clarifies, the financial burden of minority women extends after graduation because minority women earn 4% less than White women. Some institutions developed clubs or programs that supported the unique needs of students based on their race (Dodson & Deprez 2012). Winget (2020) pointed out women of color have a higher burden of student loans, owing \$11,000 more than white men and \$8,000 more than white women. This is consistent with the fact that Black borrowers face a disproportionately higher risk of going into default and at risk of dropping out before

completing their degree, as reported by Ahlman & Gonzales (2019). Ahlman & Gonzales (2019) also stated that other at-risk populations are more likely to default on student loans, including single-parents, Black students, first-generation students, independent students, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

The number of student-parents and women enrolled in college courses has increased (Dodson, 2017). Women-led single-parent households are growing in the United States, and the single-parent population is growing on college campuses (Lovell & Scott, 2020). Student loan debt and the pay gap inequality both disproportionately affect the financial outlook of women. Women owe a larger majority of the current student loan debt as women make up 56% of college attendees (Winget, 2020). Excess student loan debt can disrupt the ability to build family wealth accumulation, and this can have detrimental effects on future generations, especially the children of single mothers.

Student Wellness

Student loan debt can also affect the overall wellness of student loan borrowers. Due to the multiple identities that adult non-traditional students' shoulders, the impact can affect various aspects of their life and have life-altering ramifications if not adequately confronted.

Non-traditional students, particularly adult learners' journey toward a degree, is very different from that of a traditional student. Often, adult students get lost in the complicated matrix of university policy and regulations, which contributes to a compounded level of stress (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019). With additional requests on their limited time, non-traditional adult student-parents are at risk of overextending themselves. Over time, this overextension may have adverse effects on their academics.

The rising cost of education places this often-forgotten population at a heightened disadvantage. Many have families to support, in addition to financing their college education. Many adult students depend on student loans to cover education and living expenses, including high-interest private loans. Due to various factors, these non-traditional students have a higher out-of-pocket cost, yet financial aid offerings typically are less. Adult student-parents, for example, are at a higher risk of experiencing related financial stress while enrolled in college courses. Financial stress is proven to have a negative impact on the academic success and well-being of these students.

Student-parents, in particular, are at a higher risk of experiencing mental health challenges as they navigate balancing competing priorities. They may experience feelings of guilt associated with being away from children, pressure from academic demands, and burnout or depression as a result of no longer engaging in social activities due to limited time (Lovell, 2020). Students experiencing financial challenges may also deal with anxiety or depression associated with financial troubles. Student-parents who have borrowed student loans may wrestle with the burden of carrying significant debt or worry about managing additional bills. “As student debt has become the norm, researchers and others have paid increasing attention to the psychological consequences of persistent student debt. It is not only borrowers facing immediate and critical needs who struggle with the psychological impact of student debt” (Ahlman & Gonzales, 2019). In extreme cases, distressed borrowers accustomed to receiving harassing calls from creditors become so overwhelmed and fearful that it prevents them from reaching out to people that can help. These actions can carry over into their academic lives and have unintended unfavorable effects (Ahlman & Gonzales, 2019).

Support

Institutions have a responsibility to teach financial education, provide knowledgeable administration to counsel the student on choices, and create programming specific to the needs of non-traditional students (Fairchild, 2013; Field, 2016; Glowacki-Dudka 2019; Lim, 2014). Institutions should specifically consider assisting student-parents by offering child support (Dodson, 2017; Lovell, 2020; Lundberg, 2008). This is especially pertinent for students raising children. This resource would allow students to better focus on their degree.

Non-traditional students in college typically do not have the same level of family support as traditional college students. For this reason, support received from friends, and significant others is beneficial for non-traditional students. Since adult learners tend to have many societal roles, this creates various support systems that can be beneficial in helping them navigate the additional stressors that arise while pursuing their education (Lundberg, 2008). For adult students, socializing with classmates experiencing similar challenges allows them to stay connected to the campus environment while drawing support from each other (Lovell, E. & Scott, R., 2020). Working adults, described by Lundberg (2008), may also benefit from tangible support provided by their employer using data, office equipment, and study leave time.

Non-traditional students, specifically adult learners, can also benefit from emotional and instrumental support (Lundberg, 2008). Emotional support can be support through encouragement or reassurance during a stressful time (Lundberg, 2008). Adult programs will connect adult learning with classmates who will become future study partners, group project partners, and others they can relate to through academic tasks

(Lovell & Scott, 2020). Classmates may also take courses together, share registration tips, and support each other in reviewing internal checklists, which can save non-traditional students time and money. Managing stress in healthy manners will allow overextended students to build resiliency. Instrumental support can be support in other areas such as "help with children or household chores" (Lundberg, 2008). This type of support can be critical as it will allow non-traditional students the time necessary to complete academic responsibilities, such as attending a class, reading for class, or time to complete an assignment.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is one's belief in their own abilities to deal with various situations. (Bandura, 1997). High levels of self-efficacy will result in better personal well-being and lead to lower debt, higher financial happiness, and higher savings (Lim et al., 2014). Using the Gramble and Joo framework, Lim et al. (2014) studied self-efficacy and financial help-seeking behaviors of college students. Using a cognitive approach to increase student wellness, Lim et al. (2014) studied this area to understand how economic stress can lead to lower academic performance, poor health habits, and difficulty coping among college students. One identified strategy to improve handling financial stress is to seek professional help.

Students who develop a high sense of self-efficacy will set higher personal goals for themselves, they are able to persist through difficult times, and it allows them to achieve greater academic success (Lundberg, 2008; Fairchild, 2003). Self-efficacy is critical in adult learners because it helps them recuperate after failure (Lundberg, 2008). This higher sense of self-efficacy is gained through a variety of life experiences. Adult

learners become great additions to university committees and leadership positions, which can help them grow professionally and help them develop a sense of belonging, as expressed by Fairchild (2003). This heightened sense of self-efficacy may cause adult students to consult a professional for financial guidance, and this will help them reduce or keep student loan borrowing down.

When parents protect their children too much instead of allowing them to learn from their challenges, they grow up to become adults with a lower sense of self-efficacy and are not as confident (Field, 2016). According to Lundberg (2008), these adult students will question their non-traditional student status in a college environment, and they can decrease their confidence in academic matters. The students may benefit from advisor-initiated contact (Lim et al., 2014) and leadership roles to build confidence (Dodson & Deprez, 2017).

Attaining a college education can transform lives and is still held in high regard within the United States. Adult non-traditional student-parents have additional responsibilities and needs that differ from those of traditional students (Ahlman & Gonzales, 2019). Administrators need to learn more about the correlation of non-traditional adult student-parents and their academic experiences to understand to what extent their decision-making affects degree attainment. Providing additional support and resources early in their college experience and in an ongoing manner will increase student self-efficacy.

Chapter III

Methodology

This study was designed to understand the lived experiences of non-traditional adult students pursuing a college degree while raising children (i.e., student-parents). A qualitative methodological approach, precisely a hermeneutic phenomenological research design, was selected because it allowed for the exploration of the lived experiences of this unique population of students. The phenomenological approach employing semi-structured interviews were used to (a) understand their motivations for pursuing a college degree while raising children, (b) gain further understanding of the experiences and challenges they face, and (c) determine what campus resources were used and more importantly what resources did they need while attending college. Understanding the shared experiences of student-parents who are navigating the university setting and its resources can be used to gain additional awareness of how the participants experience support at a traditional university. The population of this research study was non-traditional student-parents who were enrolled at Rowan University in Glassboro, NJ, during the 2020-2021 academic year.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What motivates non-traditional student-parents to persist towards the completion of a college degree?
2. What challenges do non-traditional student-parents face while pursuing a degree?
3. What campus resources are non-traditional student-parents aware of and utilizing?

Context of the Study

The study was conducted at Rowan University's main campus, located in Glassboro, New Jersey. Rowan University is a Carnegie R2 classified public research institution, which was founded in 1923 (Rowan University, 2020). Rowan University also has two additional medical school campuses; in Camden, New Jersey, and another in Stratford, New Jersey. Rowan University's colleges and schools include Business, Communication & Creative Arts, Education, Engineering, Health Sciences, Humanities & Social Sciences, Performing Arts, Science & Mathematics, Graduate and Continuing Education, Graduate School of Biomedical Science, School of Biomedical Sciences, Cooper Medical School of Rowan University, and School of Osteopathic Medicine (Rowan University, 2020). The university has a total student enrollment of 19,600 and offers 85 bachelor's degree programs, 46 master's degree programs, six doctoral programs, and two professional programs (Rowan University, 2020). The average class size is 20 students and the student to faculty ratio is 17-to-1 (Rowan University, 2020).

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative methodological approach, specifically a hermeneutic phenomenological research design, which includes purposeful sampling from a pre-determined sample set. The use of a qualitative study approach sought to make sense of the world around us by finding meaning in the experiences of individuals (Creswell 2018, Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). This approach allowed adult non-traditional student-parents to explain their college experience in their own words. "A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 75). Using

qualitative research presented the opportunity to gather rich data to help explain the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Understanding the lived experiences of the research participants from a meaningful, first-person perspective was a key element of this research, so the phenomenological research method was a suitable option. (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Patton, 2015) This is an appropriate research method because the researcher wanted to understand the essence of an understudied population, specifically the experiences and decisions of student-parents.

Phenomenology is a research design that uses rich, detailed descriptions of a person's lived experiences to assist researchers in making sense of those experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1997). The researcher selected the hermeneutic phenomenological design approach because it gave equal weight to the participants' descriptions of their lived experiences, as well as their interpretations and meaning-making of such experiences. Hermeneutic phenomenology is comprised of reading text, for example text from interview transcripts, to generate and isolate themes (Van Manen, 1997). The resulting themes may be interpreted and give a voice to participant experiences. Together this revealed shared phenomena across all study participants. Virtual interviews served as a method to collect data and were transcribed to create a text transcript. The semi-structured nature of the interviews gave participants the opportunity to elaborate on the qualitative results revealed (McMillan, 2012). Common experiences or phenomena were identified after comparing students' individual college journey as a student and a parent.

Procedure

The researcher utilized the Rowan University Announcer to email current Rowan University students directly and allowed them the opportunity to express interest in participating in this study. A recruitment email was also distributed to the Rowan University Academic Advising staff and colleagues who have supported and frequently engage this population of students. The email described the study and sought after their assistance in identifying potential study participants. To be eligible for this study, participants met the following criteria:

- currently enrolled, degree-seeking college student (undergraduate or graduate),
- identify as a parent
- is supporting a dependent child (or children) while enrolled in college
- adult (18 or older)
- willing to share their experiences

Interested participants were invited to complete a pre-participation questionnaire which was used to collect basic participant information. Self-identified survey participants were then invited to participate for a one-month timeframe. Based on the number of student-parents who completed the questionnaire and identified a willingness to participate in the virtual interviews, interview participants were invited to participate in virtual interviews at a later date. The virtual interviews delve deeper into the participant's personal, lived experience as an adult non-traditional student-parent and offered the opportunity to share their motivations, difficulties, and provide explanations of their decision-making processes and choices. Potential participants were told that this was a voluntary study. Participants had the right to stop the interview at any time, for any

reason. Participants also had the right to skip certain questions or not to discuss specific topics.

Population

Rowan University's total population for the 2019-2020 school year was approximately 19,600 students, with 16,120 being undergraduate students (Rowan University, 2020). The target population of this study was non-traditional, adult students, who supported dependent children under the age of 18, while enrolled in an undergraduate degree program at Rowan University's main campus in Glassboro, NJ during the 2020-2021 academic year.

Sample

After reviewing the completed questionnaires, students that met the criterion were identified to obtain a purposeful sample. This intentionally selected sample group was used to inform the researcher about the research problem at hand (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The utilization of a phenomenological research approach required a minimum sample size of 3 participants and a maximum of 30 participants (Creswell, 2013). Since each study participant completed rich, deep interviews lasting over one hour, the researcher remained consistent with this recommendation. The purposeful sampling for the qualitative phase will result from those who self-identified as student-parents and expressed a desire to contribute to the study. Study participants had to be student-parents who had one or more dependent children, were enrolled in a degree program at Rowan University. Additionally, all participants had to be over the age of 18 years old and maintained primary physical custody of their child(ren) while enrolled in their program at Rowan University.

Selected participants were emailed a consent form and a follow-up email. The consent form was signed by each participant and electronically returned. The consent form had to be completed before interviews were conducted.

Data Collection

There is little research focused primarily on the experiences of non-traditional adult student-parents. As a result, the researcher utilized a qualitative instrument to gather data for the study. The use of a qualitative study approach sought to make sense of the world around us by finding meaning in the experiences of individuals (Creswell 2018). The use of qualitative research presented an opportunity to gather rich data to help explain the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). This was an appropriate research method because the researcher sought to understand the essence of an understudied population, specifically the experiences, motivations, and decisions of student-parents. The hermeneutic approach gave equal weight to the participants' descriptions of their lived experiences, as well as their interpretations and meaning-making of such experiences. Together this helped reveal shared phenomena across all study participants.

A virtual platform was used to conduct semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with each participant, to understand the experiences of non-traditional adult college students who were also parents and raising children while pursuing a college degree. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allows participants the opportunity to elaborate on the qualitative results revealed (McMillan, 2012). Qu and Dumay (2011) informed that the researcher interview is simply "one of the most important qualitative data collection methods" separate from "casual everyday conversations" (p. 238-239). Interviews were an hour to an hour and a half long in length total. Throughout the

questionnaire and interview processes, confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity were stressed to each participant. Following strict Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, participants were made aware that their participation was voluntary (McMillan, 2012).

Qualitative Instrument: Interviews

Qualitative information was gathered through a series of open-ended questions and conversation-style follow-up questions. A semi-structured interview approach was utilized. This method allowed each participant to discuss their individual, lived experiences that occurred during the attainment of their educational goals while attending Rowan University in greater detail. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed participants the opportunity to elaborate on qualitative results from the survey (McMillan, 2012). The freedom to ask follow-up questions when further clarification was necessary was another benefit of the interview style. Virtual interviews were conducted in a private classroom on Rowan University's main campus in Glassboro, NJ. Participants were interviewed for 1 hour to 1 hour 30 minutes in length, at a pre-selected time of the participant's choice, virtually, using Zoom technology, and backed up electronically for security purposes. Participants were given the option to skip any question they do not wish to answer. No form of deception was used. The interview process spanned from February 2021 to March 2021.

All participant interviews were audio-recorded and electronically transcribed after the completion of the interview. Participants were invited to share their thoughts, opinions, and feelings freely and openly, without fear of judgment or retaliation. Throughout the research process, confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity were stressed to each participant to allow the highest levels of honesty.

Data Analysis

Each participant's virtual audio-recorded interview was transcribed verbatim, in a confidential manner, immediately following each interview. After each participant's interview transcription was completed, the resulting raw data was analyzed using standard qualitative data analysis techniques. Transcripts were read several times thoroughly to identify themes, patterns, and relationships. Theme and patterns were organized into groups and summarized. Data was coded and categorized (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Emic and etic data were also summarized (McMillan, 2012). The findings were compared to the research questions. The study data was stored on a password-protected computer owned by the researcher. All data participant was de-identified to ensure participant anonymity. The researcher was the only person with access to the study data, and all data was destroyed upon the completion of the study.

Researcher Positionality

As a researcher, my personal life experiences and my experiences within academia heavily influenced my interest in this research topic. It is crucial to address my positionality within the research, which played an important role in contextualizing this study. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) believed that researchers have the ability to remain silent while owning their story within the research. This positionality is referred to as the researcher staying "in the midst". I identify as a Black woman, the mother of two, and caretaker to my mother who fell ill during the height of the COVID-19 Pandemic. I am also a full-time Higher Education administrator who has worked in the U.S. higher education system for over 15 years. In addition, I am a full-time graduate student and hold a position as an unpaid intern.

I identify with the criteria put forth in the study and identify as an adult student-parent. I understand from first-hand experience how challenging balancing school, work, children, and life can be. I realized my journey towards a graduate degree was extremely complex and very different from the experiences of traditional students. In addition to the normal coursework load, I encountered great difficulty balancing childcare conflicts with limited course offerings. Adjoining these obstacles with mom guilt, caused me to extend my degree completion timeframe to seven years. I was curious how other adult parents fared in the academy. These points of view normally are not centered so it was vital that the voices of the adult student-parents were included in this study; to have their stories heard.

Chapter IV

Findings

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of adult, non-traditional students who are pursuing a college degree at a suburban, Division III, predominantly White institution while raising children (i.e., student-parents). While the topic of non-traditional college students pursuing a college degree has been researched widely, this study sought to address the gaps in the literature on the experiences of the narrowly researched population of adult student-parents. This study was developed to give voice to the lived experiences of this overlooked population by gaining awareness of motivations, challenges, and the use of campus resources. This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative analysis garnered from the narratives of 16 non-traditional adult student-parents who attended a mid-sized college in Southern New Jersey. To add rich, comparable qualitative data to this phenomenological study, the researcher relied on semi-structured interviews which gave students the opportunity to share their educational experiences openly. This chapter also includes (a) the profile of the sample and (b) data analysis of the interview questions.

Profile of the Sample

Study participants were selected after applying both purposeful sampling and snowball selection methods to display a diverse range of perspectives from student-parents. To ascertain the unique characteristics of a particular community, researchers often gather data by sampling. Sampling is the process of choosing a sample or part of the population to represent an entire population (Hejazi, 2006). Snowball sampling in qualitative research, is a type of conservative purposeful sampling method, which selects

a fixed sample of every subject who meets specific criterion until the required sample size is reached. This is a nonprobability method, which has been efficacious when members of a specific population are not easily accessible and may supply a deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Hejazi, 2006). To participate in the research study, students had to meet the specific criterion:

- currently enrolled, degree-seeking college student (undergraduate or graduate),
- identify as a parent,
- was supporting a dependent child (or children) while enrolled in college,
- adult (18 or older), and
- willing to share their experiences.

Recruitment emails were sent to various Rowan University Academic Advisors and Rowan University Administrators who regularly engaged with non-traditional students (See Appendix A) enrolled at Rowan University, to help recruit participants from this often-hidden population of students. The email described the study and sought their assistance in identifying potential eligible research study participants. The Rowan University Announcer email system was used to email Rowan University students directly and provide them with the opportunity to self-identify interest in the research study (See Appendix B).

Self-identified and referred student-parents were emailed directly and invited to complete the research study pre-participation questionnaire. This email provided preliminary research study information about the research study, displayed the researcher's contact information, and provided the instructions on submitting the research study pre-participation questionnaire (See Appendix C). The pre-participation

questionnaire collected basic information about each student-parent participant (See Appendix E). Out of the 49 self-identified student-parents who voluntarily completed the pre-questionnaire survey, 44 student-parents met the specific criteria and were eligible to participate in the research study interviews. Based on the responses collected via the pre-participation questionnaire, eligible student-parents were emailed an invitation asking for their participation in the study's virtual interview along with a copy of the research study consent form. Eligible participants were asked to reply with the completed and signed consent form, as well as indicate times and dates that they were available for the virtual research study interview.

The researcher's sample goal of 15 student-parents study participants was achieved, and the researcher was able to exceed this goal with 16 participants. In total, this sample consisted of two men and 14 women; two undergraduate students and 14 graduate students. All study participants lived off-campus and were considered commuter students. 16 one-on-one interviews, lasting 60 to 90 minutes in length, took place between February 16, 2021 and March 5, 2021. All student-parent participant interviews were held virtually on a day and time selected by each participant using the Rowan University Zoom platform due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Participant Biographies

Below is a short biography of each study participant. Of the participants, one was enrolled in a doctoral degree program, 13 were enrolled in master's degree programs, and two were enrolled in bachelor's degree programs of study. *Table 1* provides a visual description of study participant demographics. Among the 16 study participants, two were men and 14 were women. In terms of racial identity, two participants identified as

African-American or Black, two as Hispanic or Latino/Latina, and 12 as Caucasian or White. 15 participants had between one and three children, and one participant had five children. Nine participants indicated a married or remarried marital status, while seven participants indicated a single or divorced marital status.

To protect the confidentiality of the individuals in the research study, all participant names were replaced with pseudonyms.

- “Aja” is a 36-year-old, White, divorced, part-time student in the Master’s in Education program. She has two children; one is a college student, and the other is in high school. She is a full-time employee at Rowan University. She was been enrolled in her current degree program for six semesters because she began taking one class per semester. However, she enrolled in two classes per semester since Fall 2019 semester. She graduated from Rowan University after completing her undergraduate degree and took a long break before beginning her master’s degree at the age of 50.
- “Ann” is a 32-year-old African American, divorced, a full-time student enrolled in the first semester of the Master’s in Education program. She has a 12-year-old child who is Autistic. She is a full-time employee and had to delay beginning her graduate program because of some challenges within the infrastructure of her program of study. Her parents are from Jamaica. Her mother has two master’s degrees and is finishing her Ph.D.
- “Bee” is a 46-year-old, Black, single, full-time student enrolled in her senior year of the Bachelors of Psychology degree program. She has two children; a 24-year-old daughter and a 16-year-old son who is in high school. She is a caretaker for

her mother who has multiple sclerosis. She completed her associate's degree at a local community college and transferred to Rowan University and began to continue her studies. She struggled with parenting challenges, mental health issues, and a disability before taking a break from college. She was previously employed full-time but was laid off due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She used her time out of work as an opportunity to return to college full-time after being out of school for three years.

- “Eve” is a 30-year-old, Hispanic woman who identifies culturally as half Puerto Rican and half El Salvadorian. She is a married, part-time undergraduate student enrolled in the Bachelors of Education program. She had two children; ages 14 and seven. She is a full-time employee at Rowan University. She is enrolled in her current degree program for four semesters and had been continually enrolled since the beginning. At the time of our interview, she was heavily considering taking time off from her degree program due to burnout from balancing roles of a wife, mother to 100% remote learning children, a part-time business owner, and a full-time university employee. She noted her role as a parent is the top priority and her education can be put on hold.
- “Gia” is a White, 52-year-old, divorced, part-time student in the Master’s in Education program. She has two children; one is a college student and the other is in high school. She is a full-time employee at Rowan University. She has been enrolled in her current degree program for six semesters because when began, she was enrolled in only one class per semester. However, she has been enrolled in two classes per semester since the fall 2019 semester. She graduated from Rowan

University after completing her undergraduate degree and took a long break before beginning her master's degree at the age of 50.

- “Jan” is a 41-year-old, White, married, full-time English teacher and Special Education teacher. She is the mother of five children and is in the final semester of her graduate program. She has always been a student-parent because she started her undergraduate degree when her youngest was nine months old. For the past 12 years, she has earned several degrees and certifications; sometimes enrolled in multiple programs simultaneously while working full-time. She comes from a family of educators, and her siblings attended Rowan University. She considers herself a lifetime learner and is enrolled in a doctoral Education program.
- “Jen” is a White, 38-year-old, married, full-time student in a Master's of Communication program. She has a six-year-old daughter and her husband is an essential employee who works 12-hour shifts; sometimes for numerous days in a row. She is a full-time employee at Rowan University. She had been enrolled in her current degree program for seven semesters because she began taking one class per semester. She is currently enrolled in three classes for her final semester. She says the heavy course load has negatively affected her mental health but she had to enroll in the courses due to course offering limitations. She is also caring for an ill parent temporarily and had a child involved in remote learning at home. Health problems caused her to miss classes. She is also a business owner who grew up in a middle-class household and was a first-generation college student. She was considered a non-traditional student for her undergraduate degree from

Ryder University because life hardships caused her to stop out of college for over a year before completing her bachelor's degree.

- “Kim” is a White, 36-year-old; woman with immigrant grandparents. She is a part-time student in the Master's in Education program. She is married and has an eight-year-old daughter who has a serious medical condition. She is a full-time employee at Rowan University. She identifies as neuro-diverse, is a proud member of the LGBT community, and has been hospitalized for a serious medical condition while enrolled in her current degree program. She completed two undergraduate degrees at Rowan University and completed coursework as a non-matriculated student, before enrolling in the master's degree program in 2016. She has been enrolled six semesters despite taking one class per semester and “taking gaps due to life happening”.
- “Liv” is a 24-year-old, Hispanic student, who is single but and currently dating. She is a full-time graduate student enrolled in the Masters of Arts in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Education program. She had plans of being a doctor but found out she was pregnant as an undergraduate student. Due to the rigor of her program, she decided to change majors. She hid her pregnancy from the students in her program because she didn't see other undergraduate student-parents in her classes. She felt like she had become the stereotypical pregnant Hispanic. She chose education as her new major because it would allow more time to spend with her child. She comes from a large, supportive family.

- “Max” is a 30-year-old, recently engaged, White male who is enrolled part-time in the Master’s in Psychology program. He is employed full-time as an educator and has a one-year-old Autistic son. He admits his relationship suffered during the first year of his son’s life to the point that he and his then girlfriend questioned if their relationship would last. His fiancé had a medical complication that caused her to lose her job and he also became her caretaker. He struggled to manage all of his responsibilities which made him contemplate withdrawing from his program to focus on his family’s needs and pick up a second job to make ends meet. He is an out-of-state student whose commute is over an hour.
- “Sue” is a 50-year-old, White, married, part-time student in the Masters in Education program. She has three children who are close in age and is currently a full-time employee at Rowan University. She proudly served as a stay-at-home mother for many years. She experienced a high level of guilt when she planned to leave her children and this caused her to delay returning to finish her undergraduate degree many times. She began a part-time college journey after her youngest child entered kindergarten. She received her bachelor's degree from Rowan University then continued into her graduate degree and is enrolled in her final semester. Being a mother of students entering college helped her discover a passion for higher education and student development which lead to her current career path.
- “Tia” is a 47-year-old, married, White woman, who is the foster mother of a three-year-old daughter. She is also a part-time student enrolled in the Master’s in Education program. She is a full-time employee at Rowan University. She loves

her work and loves providing support for medical school students. She is a part-time college student and enrolls in only one class at a time. She is currently enrolled in her eighth semester in her degree program.

- “Tom” is a 40-year-old married man enrolled in the Masters of School Administration program. He is pursuing his third academic degree. He considers himself a human and no longer associates himself with a racial identity after “seeing terrible things in our society” over the last year. He is employed full-time and is also a high school track and football coach. He was raised in a middle-class, blue-collar working family. He is now the father of three children; six years old and a set of two-year-old twins. He is currently enrolled in a full-time course load during the final semester of his program due to limited course offerings, poor communication from administration, and program infrastructure issues.
- “Uma” is a 23-year-old, White woman, and a full-time Rowan employee who is also a full-time student in the Master’s in Education program. She attended Rowan University as an undergraduate, earning a bachelor’s degree in Criminal Justice. She has a two-year-old son. She delayed beginning her graduate degree program because she was pregnant and no online course options were available. She began her program when her son turned five months old. She has a great support system but doesn’t feel her academic program was designed for working parents. Each day is consumed by managing her time and fitting as much as possible into her busy schedule. She admits she does not balance her role as a mother well and leaves much of the parenting to her boyfriend while she focuses on academics, work, and self-care.

- “Val” is a 38-year-old, single, White, woman, enrolled part-time in the Master’s in Education program. She is the mother of two children; ages 12 and eight. She is a Rowan University full-time employee and has taken one class per semester for four semesters. She has a shared heritage of German, Italian, and Polish ethnicity. “Zoe” is a White, 52-year-old, married, full-time student in the Master’s in Education program. She has three children and is a “cat mom”. She began her college journey when her youngest child was 18 and heading off to college. She started her graduate degree after being out of college for 30 years because she no longer had children at home. She describes her first semester of graduate school as “horrible” which left her unsure as to whether she wanted to continue in the program. She took the summer to figure things out and did not withdraw. She is now in her fifth and final semester. Despite being a full-time employee at Rowan University, she carried a full-time course load for the majority of her enrollment. She experienced personal tragedies while navigating cacophonous faculty personalities but credits classmates with keeping her focused.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Name	# of Children	Race	Gender	Degree Level	Employment Status	Age	Marital Status
Ann	1	Black	Female	Graduate	Full-Time	32	Single
Bee	1	Black	Female	Undergraduate	Unemployed	46	Single
Eve	2	Hispanic or Latino/a	Female	Undergraduate	Full-Time	30	Married
Liv	1	Hispanic or Latino/a	Female	Graduate	Full-Time	24	Single
Tom	3	White	Male	Graduate	Full-Time	40	Married
Kim	1	White	Female	Graduate	Full-Time	36	Married
Gia	2	White	Female	Graduate	Full-Time	52	Single
Sue	2	White	Female	Graduate	Full-Time	50	Married
Uma	1	White	Female	Graduate	Full-Time	23	Single
Val	2	White	Female	Graduate	Full-Time	38	Single
Tia	1	White	Female	Graduate	Full-Time	47	Married
Zoe	1	White	Female	Graduate	Full-Time	52	Married
Aja	3	White	Female	Graduate	Full-Time	36	Married
Jan	5	White	Female	Graduate	Full-Time	41	Married
Max	1	White	Male	Graduate	Full-Time	30	Single
Jen	1	White	Female	Graduate	Full-Time	38	Married

Analysis of Data

In this study, the researcher collected data through interviews which provided an understanding of the lived experiences of adult, non-traditional, student-parents who were enrolled at Rowan University. The researcher conducted 16 semi-structured, one-on-one interviews using questions pre-approved by the Rowan University Institutional Review Board (IRB). All participants agreed to participate in one-on-one interviews and signed an audio and participation consent form before being interviewed. (See Appendix A) Study participants were informed several times that there was a minimal risk associated with participating in a research study. The interviews were then electronically audio-recorded and transcribed by the co-investigator verbatim. Audio files and transcriptions were saved in a central location, on a password-protected computer; which the researcher only had access to, as outlined by Creswell (2013).

To analyze the qualitative data produced, a thematic approach was employed. Each interview transcript was read and re-read many times to generate codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006 and Creswell, 2013). Each transcript was manually coded and the systematic coding process was repeated multiple times to identify additional themes. Emergent themes from this study were: a) the role of identity, b) managing careers, c) navigating adversity, d) access to resources, and e) impact of relationships.

Role of Identity

Non-traditional students carry multiple identities and have numerous roles in addition to that of a student. Identity is an important concept and can inform the way students think and operate within a defined space. In a university setting, the way students identify can inform the choices they make concerning enrollment, adding or dropping classes, or whether to cease enrollment or push through during times of adversity. For the

adult student-parents involved in this research study, the identities that each person carried informed the decisions they made regarding their academic journeys. This main theme emerged from three sub-themes mention below:

Parent

All participants in this study identified as parents and several were emphatic that this identity was more important to them than their identity as a college student. For example, Bee, Gia, Sue, Kim, Uma, Tom, and Zoe all put their education on hold to raise their children. Zoe said:

My daughter was involved in competitive gymnastics for many years, my son played lacrosse, while my other son had music lessons in Philadelphia. There's no way I could balance work, parenting, and school at that time. The thing that was optional was school, so that had to wait.

Bee and Gia reported that their children's school events clashed with their class meetings, so it was difficult to attend important events such as Back to School Night for their children. Gia expressed that she felt guilty because she missed her daughter's first Back to School Night at a new High School due to her class schedule. She said:

This impacted the way I registered for classes moving forward. I did not take another Tuesday night class in the Fall because I did not want to miss Back to School Night again. A child only gets so many of them and if a parent doesn't show up it sends a message. That was a real challenge.

Kim's daughter had to be hospitalized at the beginning of the semester one year. She said, "if there's a competition between [my daughter and college], I have to stay home with her. I've missed a couple of classes due to kid stuff."

Although, the majority of student-parents interviewed put their identity as a parent before their identity as a student, not all made the same decision. Jan and Aja's identity as a parent is equally important as their student identities due to their drive towards reaching their career goals, which include obtaining graduate degrees. Aja stated:

I love being a mother but I also love being a highly educated and career-driven woman. I want women to realize they can be all that and still enjoy life as well as succeed in everything they do. All that it takes is drive but also a village of support.

Alyssa accredits "good time management" as a key element. She does not want to take time away from her kids or miss their activities so she will put schoolwork on the backburner. "I will sacrifice sleep in order to get my homework done versus not helping them with their homework assignments instead."

All 16 participants indicated their role as a parent impacts their experiences as a student-parent in the pre-study questionnaire.

Employee

Of the 16 participants, 15 identified as full-time employees, and eight of the 15 identified as Rowan University full-time employees. Val admitted, "having kids at home and working full time is a lot". Jen mentioned often contemplating taking a break from work to focus on school but also is enrolled in her graduate program to advance her career in Higher Education. Val believes "you have to have a master's degree to advance in Higher Ed" so that has motivated her to continue. Ann remarked, "with school, I feel like it is ten times harder between juggling my work schedule". Liv said. "I'm the head of

the household so I gotta make sure my kid is good. I don't have a lot of money so I have to work to maintain my household. It's stressful sometimes."

In terms of non-traditional student-parents working full-time jobs while enrolled in college, the participants of this study reinforced the existing statistics on this subject. One participant was a full-time employee and student but was laid off after the COVID-19 pandemic and was not working at the time the interview was conducted. She described unemployment as a blessing because it allowed her to return to her college classes as a full-time student. Aja on the other hand says the work experience that she brings with her, helps her thrive in the academic environment. Eve said she feels obligated to be in school and take classes. While she is happy to have a full-time job she also admitted:

My full-time job won't get me far at all without a degree. I'm somewhere like my heart's not in it. I'm not here because I want to be; like school is my passion. It's something that needs to be done if I want to be able to provide better for my family. I have no choice.

Age

The topic of age was a theme that repeated many times. Lundberg (2008) defined traditional college students as students under the age of 24. Of the participants in this study, 15 were over the age of 24, fitting that description of a non-traditional student. Uma, at 23 years old, is the only research study participant under the age of 24. Three participants revealed that they felt "older" than their peers in their classes. Ann, Gia, Tia, and Val all noticed they were the "oldest" in their classes. Val reported, "[older students] are the minority. Everyone provides a unique perspective and we get along but it is hard to connect to a 22-year-old." Tia said:

I'm an older student. There's a lot of students who are fresh out of undergrad.

Now I feel less different. It's funny now that I'm older, I actually feel less different from them, than I did when I first started the program because we have more in common now.

Gia reported that she is the oldest person in most of her classes but she is also secure with that.

Three participants said at some point in their academic journey, they noticed they were "different" due to their age compared to their younger classmates. Jen revealed being older than most of the students in her class is a drawback for her. She described her experience in one of her classes saying:

Most of the students are either fresh out of college or they're [undergraduate] seniors. Given my experience, having worked in the field for so long, it's a challenge for me. Group work is incredibly infuriating. I did not get to pick my partner and I'm paired with the same partner for the entire semester. She is so much younger than me and doesn't understand what the goals of the assignments are. Whereas, because I worked in the field, I know exactly what we are expected to do. It requires me to be patient with someone that like I would rather not exhaust myself with because I need to save that energy for other people in my life. The experience is beneficial for the younger ones but it's not beneficial for me.

Regarding age, Ann said:

I'm almost 10 years older than some of them. Sometimes I find myself asking, why don't I know this? Why do they know this? They are so "woke" for lack of

better words. It makes me doubt myself sometimes because they seem to have a deeper understanding of the concepts.

Eve revealed that she often feels behind compared to her classmates and it can be discouraging.

Based on the participant's responses, age can be a factor that changes a student's perception of their educational journey. It is something that can either empower students or it can create division or insecurity.

Caretaker

Several students identified as caretakers, in addition to other roles. Jen revealed that she is a caretaker to her mentally ill mother and it is an additional burden on her. Bee and Gia also identified as caretakers. Ann, Max, and Kim mentioned they are the parents of children with special medical needs. Ann revealed, "I am also a caretaker because my son is on a feeding tube and has to be machine fed three times a day." She is in the process of finding an in-home nurse for him to assist with his care. Gia mentioned she was a caretaker for both of her parents "at the end of their lives". Adding the responsibilities of a caretaker adds to the complexity of a student-parent life and adds additional obligations for them to shoulder.

Navigating Competing Identities

Navigating multiple roles as a student-parent can be a challenge for some non-traditional students. Participants in this study balanced career, family, relationships, children's activities, household chores, and even side businesses while enrolled in university courses. Eve, Gia, and Zoe reported that their role as parents equipped them with skills that supported their success in the university setting. Eve explained:

Being a parent and wife has helped me develop a lot of patience. Being a parent also means I have great time management skills. I'm used to keeping up with appointments or deadlines and I bring those qualities into the classroom setting. Gia and Zoe both reported that acquiring life experience from various career paths and motherhood before beginning their degrees has benefitted them. Gia eloquently stated, "as a parent, I don't think you will find a more dedicated student [than a student-parent]. Their why has already been defined. It's the HOW. I think the University could fill in the how." Uma on the other hand feels privileged in terms of all her identities. She said she feels her program was designed for someone like her to succeed.

Some terms used by other participants to describe how it felt to balance all the identities they carry included: stretched thin, overwhelmed, juggling, hard, and struggle. Tom said he "fails". He admits he chooses his battles and has to deal with failure sometimes. Jen used a great analogy to describe how she feels balancing all of her identities. She said:

It's not so much balance; it's more like things are in rotation. If I were to put everything on a spinner and spin the spinner, wherever it lands at that moment, that thing becomes the priority that I have to do at that moment. I feel like that's getting spun all day long. I feel like it's just like it's a juggling act but there's no balance. Mom balance is a myth that doesn't exist.

Similarly, Jan described balancing many roles compares to a book she read to her children called "Caps for Sale". She explains:

The story is about a hat salesman who has all his caps on top of his head just lined up piled on top. I see myself like that, where I have all my hats on my head and I

guess the one closest to my head at any given time is whatever I'm doing at the moment. So, if I'm at work, I have my teacher hat on. But my mom hat is usually pretty close because my students or children often need that mothering.

For Kim, the lack of time for all her identities prevents her from doing something outstanding in her program. She said:

I could really do well or do something special if I could put more effort in.

However, if I have a school assignment due, I'm usually up all night the night before just finishing it as fast as I can. If I had more time, I could do a lot better.

The feedback provided by the participants was consistent with the empirical data, which says student-parents often suffer from role strain due to having so many responsibilities outside of the classroom. All 16 of the study participants noted balancing all of their identities as a challenge.

Navigating Adversity

With so many responsibilities on their plates, student-parents and the associated challenges they faced are not surprising. During the interviews, all participants reflected on various adversities they faced on their path towards degree completion. Jen said, “the pandemic brought out a lot of negativity. I have witnessed a huge number of people who are very supportive and understanding. But it surprises me when I still see a passive-aggressive tone [used towards student-parents]. I’m trying to balance all of these things”. This main theme revealed four sub-themes: COVID-19, Time Management, Single Parents, and Impact on Health.

COVID-19

Remote Learning. Most of the participants enjoyed the flexibility of remote or online learning. Uma, Max, and Kim stated they hope after COVID-19 is over, the university continues with the online learning option. Moving to remote learning as a result of COVID-19 was noted as an opportunity to get back time spent commuting to and from the university for classes. Max stated, “COVID made it easier for me not having to commute from an hour away three nights a week. Had I not [been remote], I would not have been able to take this number of classes and it would have taken me twice as long.” Tia also pointed out the number of hours she gained, no longer commuting to work and class anymore. She said:

I just go from work then to class. I didn't have to commute to Glassboro from Camden or come back from Camden to here. I never thought that I would like an online program but I was like wow this is so much easier this way. But with COVID-19, it became a lot easier because I just didn't have a commute anywhere. It saves me 10 hours a week.

While the majority of students enjoyed the flexibility that the remote learning style offered, some described remote learning as not their ideal method of instruction. Tia and Zoe said, they “missed the personal engagement from classmates” in reference to moving from in-person to all virtual, remote classes. While Val said, “It’s stressful because it’s harder to contribute in an online environment. People are always talking over each other. You are trying to jump in and it stresses me out.” Kim said remote learning is not good for her ADHD but in terms of convenience, “it’s nice. It gives me time to get other things done now that I don’t have to commute and hunt for a parking spot. It would

be nice to have the option [of online learning]. Jen mentioned her home is not set up in a manner that is great for online learning so having class online at night is disruptive to her daughter's bedtime schedule and causes stress in her home.

Remote Learning for Children. Due to COVID-19 social distancing restrictions, many schools were closed for in-person instruction. This instantly caused parents to become homeschool teachers; adding another level of responsibility to their already full plates. Val stated she, "almost dropped out because having to homeschool my children all of a sudden and work from home and not see anybody and not having help; I was not in a good place." Kim reported:

With my daughter, we are currently remote learning. There was not any instruction. They checked in with the teacher for like 15 minutes on a Google Meet. And then the rest of it, like here's your assignments and you're on your own. I also had to work from home at the same time. She needs somebody sitting there with her. I can't leave her in a room to do her homework [alone] and come back and it's done. If left alone by herself in her room with her homework, you come back an hour later and she's playing.

Social Injustice. While the world battled COVID-19, the United States also watched various protests take place around the country at the same time. Although it was not a discussion question, social justice themes were mentioned by six of the 16 participants. Uma mentioned COVID-19 in the context of it enhanced the dialogue in her classes and her professor used it as an opportunity to provide healing and gain understanding. She stated:

It was in the middle of COVID-19 and everything that happened with George Floyd. That class used the group interactions for mental health and the wellbeing of our classmates. That was really important. I felt like we mattered and our wellness mattered. But at that time, I felt like it was probably needed.

Regarding the social justice protests of the summer, Tom said,

I've seen terrible things in our society. Things that I had no idea about. I mean I've never been blind to it, but the idea of white privilege is real. So, I don't want to identify myself as a white male anymore. I just want to define myself as a human being. I used to check Caucasian on all the ethnicity things, and now I don't do it anymore. I know there's inequality; legit inequality. But I identify as a male. And there's no prejudice, there's no discrimination.

A Blessing in Disguise. While COVID-19 has had devastating, far-reaching effects on people's lives, our country, and financial markets, some study participants noted some outcomes that had a more positive on their lives. Val remarked, "Although online learning is stressful for me, I probably would pick this because it fits into my life a little better." Jen mentioned:

Because of COVID-19, the University is seeing different people have different needs. It actually united the department's a little bit and gave everyone the same goal and put us on the same page. It has made campus way more of a place I want to be now than before COVID-19. It took COVID-19 to make things more accessible.

Zoe and Val both mentioned COVID-19 helped with making the university more accessible and equitable. Max and Val both noted, due to the University moving their in-

person courses to online, virtual learning; they were able to take more classes. Bee said she was laid off from her job of five years due to COVID-19. She didn't have much balance with working a full-time job so being laid off provided the balance she needed to return to college and continue her college degree.

Time Management

Time management was a topic that all 16 participants discussed frequently throughout their interviews. There isn't enough time was a commonly used phrase among study participants. For example, Tia mentioned time 65 times during her interview.

Val reported:

Time! Time, what is time? It's mental capacity. I was looking at my assignments for the semester. I have to write 12 papers for two classes in three months! But being a parent, I don't come home from work and watch TV. I have children to take care of and the laundry that's piling up. Even when I'm working [on an academic assignment], there's the constant interruption from your children that makes it hard to stay focused. There's never enough time or energy to do it all. There's so much reading that it takes me all week to read. Then by the time I finish all the reading, I forget what I read.

Ann said, "Life changes time management. Priorities. There isn't enough time in a day to stretch so many different ways so some things, I just let fall by the wayside. What you gonna do?" Jan, Liv, and Uma said she has to schedule everything to fit it all in and try to maximize their little free time.

Single Parents

Val explained her feelings toward being a single parent, stating:

I am a single mom but I hate saying it because I don't want to use it as an excuse or a crutch or anything like that. The reality is, I wasn't always a single mom and it's a lot harder to be a single mom than when you have someone else there on a daily basis. I feel like I carry the burden for this family and everything falls on me. So, nothing gets the attention it deserves. I'm kinda a jack of all trades, but master of none. I constantly feel like I'm not doing something properly.

Ann remarked, "I can't come and go as I please. I'm always thinking about him. Most times, before myself so it's definitely a challenge." Although married, Aja said she "feels like a single parent for the most part." Her husband works in a different state about eight hours away and is home four days out of the month.

Impact on Health

While increasing knowledge by way of college degree attainment can create many positive results for students, several study participants noted the impact their academics had on their health. Val admitted, "The last two days have been really bad for me anxiety-wise. I look at the syllabus something and just shut down. I think I can't do this and it's too much. I start to look up the drop period dates. I consider dropping out at least once a semester." Kim said in 2018 she had to take a break from classes due to depression. "I just needed time. I needed to step away", she revealed. Aja mentioned, "there are so many stressors! I take anxiety medicine." Sue revealed she struggled with extreme mom guilt, anxiety, and imposter syndrome during her college journey. Since student-parents have additional responsibilities aside from their education, degree attainment may have a greater impact on their overall wellness.

Access to Resources

Having access to adequate university resources is an important factor in the success of students. Many of the study participants admitted to not utilizing many of the university resources due to being too busy. A large majority also stated they felt the university resources catered to more traditional students. Many of the non-traditional adult student-parents interviewed said they did not utilize many campus resources due to a lack of awareness and not knowing what resources were available to them. Bee said she uses the Disability Office, her Academic Advisor, and the Financial Aid office. Tom, Liv, Zoe, Uma, Gia, and Kim all mentioned the Honor Society as a campus resource that they did participate in. Zoe said there was a big push from the administration to get graduate students involved.

Sue said she took so long to complete the undergraduate degree that she was very nervous about entering a graduate degree program. She sighted meeting with her Academic Advisor and the encouragement that he provided as the reason why she decided the Education Program was right for her. She remarked, “He changed my mind about education! He was so wonderful! Dr. Cisco actually told me his mom had been a stay-at-home mom and went back to work many years later. She had this wonderful journey and it was so inspiring.” Once enrolled, one of her courses was the Academic Advising in Higher Education course. She said it was meant to be her first class and she loved all the information she was learning. Sue has gone on to find a passion for student development and now has a full-time career as a professional Academic Advisor.

Financial Resources

Several study participants brought up concerns surrounding affording or paying for their education. Out of the 16 student-parents who were interviewed, 8 were Rowan University employees receiving an employee tuition waiver. All 8 mentioned the tuition waiver as a great financial benefit. Some student-parents also mentioned they would not have pursued their degree if they did not receive the employee tuition waiver. Zoe clarified:

The only reason I'm here is because the university is paying. I would not be paying for this nonsense myself! If the waiver suddenly ended tomorrow, I literally would stop going. I'm not taking money out of my family's coffer to pay for this degree! What I get paid right now, I make dirt! There's no way I could afford this degree.

Kim, also an employee receiving a tuition waiver, said, "if the tuition waiver program went away then there would be no master's degree for me! I can't afford it." Kim also remarked about academic expenses not covered by the tuition waiver saying:

The cost [I am responsible for] is when they tax the price of my education. They take the taxes right out of my paycheck. I also pay for books and stuff. My procedures book was pretty expensive. I like to buy all my textbooks. The other research book, it was a big honkin gigantic one! That one was like hundreds of dollars!

Bee and Liv mentioned they received the CARES Act: Higher Education Emergency Relief Funding and it helped their financial situation tremendously. The majority of the study participants were not aware of the grant funding, were confused

about the eligibility criteria, or were disqualified by university-imposed criteria that were too limiting. The March 2020 bill passed by the United States Congress, was the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act or The CARES Act (Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund- Student Aid, 2021). This bill established the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) which was to provide direct financial assistance through federal grant assistance for college students. The university received “received \$14,471,695 in CARES funds and disbursed 50% (\$7,235,848.00) to students in emergency assistance” (Rowan, 2021). According to Rowan University (2021), the university had an estimated 14,000 students that were eligible for grant assistance but only awarded the grants to 11,163 of its students. Although the federal government created flexible grant-awarding guidance, the university restricted the maximum awards at \$2,000 per student and made employees ineligible to receive grant funding. Eight of the study participants, who were also university employees, were disqualified and not able to receive this federal grant funding to help offset education-related expenses incurred.

Student loan debt continues to be a widely discussed, hot-topic in academia. Several students mentioned they currently held a student loan debt balance due to financing their education through student loans. Jen said she still “owes about \$50,000 from borrowing loans for her undergraduate degree and it’s a struggle to repay.” Kim said:

I will be in debt pretty much forever. I was a first-generation college student and had no idea. My mother told me not to go to community college and I needed to

go to a real, four-year college. So, I got bad advice from parents who didn't go to college. In total, I borrowed over 90 Grand.

Bee said she is paying for her classes with financial aid and student loans. She recently had to defer her student loan and was enrolled in the pay as you earn repayment plan. She said she may have to work for the rest of her life to pay off her student loans, however.

Aja said:

Ahhhh student loan debt! I hate it! My degree increased it a lot. I am getting worried about repaying it since my life expenses are so much more than they were. I will probably have to take a second job to pay them so it doesn't affect my family finances.

Bee and Ann know a lot about student loan repayment because time spent out of school caused them to go into loan repayment.

Not all students utilized financial aid to finance their college education. Sue paid out of pocket for her undergraduate and graduate degree until she became a full-time university employee and became eligible to receive an employee tuition waiver. Because of the tuition waiver, she often worried about the amount of money her academic programs would cost and if her family could financially manage it. This caused her to feel an immense amount of guilt and made her constantly question if using the family's financial resources to pay for her education was a wise decision.

Infrastructure of Academic Program of Study

The success of an academic program can be an indication of the program's infrastructure. A large majority of the student-parents who were participants in this study mentioned themes that related to the infrastructure of the academic program of study they

were enrolled in. Ann said her admissions process was very rough and it almost caused her to consider other colleges. Internal issues caused her to delay her education by a few years. “They said the program was new and it switched different directors so every semester it was another delay and another delay. That was very annoying.” Ann and Gia mentioned their programs should be more accepting of people from different educational backgrounds. Ann said, “Not everybody comes from an education background and knows what a pedagogy is.”

Many participants expressed dissatisfaction about the limited class offering available for their classes. Kim mentioned, “it would be nice to have some flexibility, have some more consideration of our schedules. That's not really the Faculty so much deciding that. I think it's the whole setup of the program.” Jen said the lack of flexibility in graduate programs is infuriating.

Unnecessary Program Requirements. Of the 16 students interviewed, a majority of the students expressed concern for the necessity of degree requirements such as a thesis, exams, or internships. They felt their programs should more adequately align with the career options available after graduation. They suggested academic work should be applicable to and match the skill sets employers are looking for in graduates. Val mentioned:

I think some of the program requirements are silly. Like the benchmark. I think some things are done for the sake of doing things. It's just dumb. If we're being equitable, then take the bullshit away.

Several students mentioned the internship requirement in their interviews. A lot of students that are parents are also full-time working people, so why are you going to make these people go do an internship. I already work in higher ed so filing papers is not helping me further my career.

Jen passionately stated:

This is a thorn in my side. Currently, I'm taking three classes in my last semester; which also includes finishing a thesis, taking COMP exams, and a big presentation. All these have to be completed for the semester, in order for me to be to graduate. It is a huge stressor and it's not helping me. I just feel like there's other things I could be doing and using my time towards that I'd get more benefit out of. I feel like the major element that's missing is reality. Implementing the material we are learning in class and applying it to my daily work.

Tia explained:

I felt that it was a weakness [to the program]. Expecting somebody who's working full-time to do another full day's worth of internship work for a year. It's kind of tone-deaf when you say we're teaching you to focus on adult learners and their needs. You are an adult learner but we are going to make this harder for you; because you're an adult learner.

Some participants offered specific examples of ways to eliminate unnecessary academic requirements. Tia offered, "do things like eliminating busywork; like blackboard posts". Jen suggested replace the required internship portion of the program, specifying:

I would rather have coaching from my professors on how to do my job better.

There're elements that I feel like are just missing from the program. I would rather have full-time focused on [career preparation] instead of spending two to three classes, out of the entire program focused on the thesis. I think it could be better.

Val stated, "I thought the idea was to get experience in higher ed or help to me do what I want to do in higher ed." She suggested:

How about every week we have presentations from each department and divisions within higher ed. They come and they talk about their division, what they do, and they talk about all the different positions options. Students would really get to know all the ins and outs of the university. That is way more beneficial than being a paper pusher for an internship.

Impact of Relationships

Internal Relationships

Students mentioned interacting with professors outside of the classroom setting for additional help or networking purpose as important to them. Gia mentioned one professor, "was honest about her academic journey and gave us time to decompress after stressful conversations". Sue stated:

I have a tremendous amount of support from my professors. I feel like, especially in the graduate program. I honestly don't know how I would have been able to get through this without my professors. They've all been really, really supportive and wonderful. That was unexpected. I think my experiences as a non-traditional

student was very intimidating for me. Especially attending school after being a stay-at-home mom for so long.

Others mentioned have great experiences with administrators and staff. Val reported, “These successful women VPs are really inspiring! To be in this environment is supportive.”

Aside from university staff, students reported that developing relationships with their fellow classmates was an important factor in their academic journey. Zoe explained:

Honestly, if it wasn't for my classmates, I won't be doing this, seriously. It's like working in an office. As long as the people that you're working with are cool, you can do the work. The work can suck as long as the people that you're working with are good. In this case, I am lucky I had some good classmates.

Classmates. Several participants mentioned their classmates as a source of encouragement. This is consistent with the literature on emotional support by Lundberg, 2008. Val said, “I met some people that also work there and are in my program so that was really nice.” Gia mentioned:

I think I have developed really good relationships with my classmates. I have to tell you, that's probably the best part about class. I would like to still take a class even once I'm done [my degree] here and there, just for the relationships that you build and the people that you meet.

Jan told a story about her experiences with her classmates, saying:

During orientation, there was a woman who stood up and said that she worked in Camden. Immediately, I wanted to go talk to her and then we just clicked. She's

like my rock! We text every day. We've been in almost every class together. We still always email each other to ask questions. Right now, we're in a group together for a project. Sometimes, I'll say I'm quitting. She'll tell me I'm not allowed because she needs me. Other times she'll tell me she's quitting. I tell her no! So that's been a lifesaver! She's been a really good support ever since we started our dissertation stuff.

Many of the participants mentioned the comradery with fellow classmates as a motivating factor and a benefit in their academic journey.

External Relationships

Family and Significant Others. All 16 of the participants said their family support was an important factor in helping them pursue their educational goals. Jen and Aja said their husbands provide support by keeping the kids occupied while they are in class. Val stated, "I have a huge support system I could not live without! My parents are very supportive."

Children. Most of the study participants mentioned their children as a source of motivation. Val and Gia stated they are able to connect with their children on a different level because of the things they learn in their academic program. Most of the participants look to their children as a source of encouragement. Eve said, "during rough times I think about my kids and their future. If my future is bright, their future will be brighter. If they see me pushing along and doing what I need to do...all to encourage and motivate them."

Self-Care

Balancing academic work, careers, and caring for children can be a lot for student-parents to manage. Self-care is an important tool to help them relieve some of the

pressure they feel while pursuing a degree. All 16 participants said they use some type of self-care. Val stated, "I take it one day at a time!" Similarly, Kim said she takes things as they come but "nothing is done with care. I just don't think about it much. I just grin and bear it and hope someone will show me some grace." Ann, Gia, Bee, Eve, and Zoe all stated they prioritize treating themselves well. They mentioned getting regular pedicures, manicures, getting their hair done, and massages for methods of self-care. Ann elaborated by saying "I listen to my body. When I'm tired, I'm going to sleep. I'll go out by myself or go shopping. I definitely take time out for myself." Gia says she had to teach herself to prioritize making time for herself. Kim said she likes to "eat her feelings with eating ice cream on the couch." Bee said she got a pool membership, she works with a therapist, and she uses coping mechanisms when she's feeling overwhelmed. She also said she, "always makes time for myself. That's number one. I don't let it slide for anybody".

Chapter V

Summary and Recommendations

Summary of the Study

Non-traditional adult student-parents and their experiences while pursuing an academic degree is not a widely researched topic. The findings of this study provide a deeper understanding of lived experiences of student-parents. The study data adds to the limited current literature on lived experiences of student-parents pursuing a college degree while raising children. Non-traditional students often carry multiple, competing identities that are marginalized within institutionalized spaces. Student-parents are a subset of non-traditional students that often encounter difficulty completing their college degree. 49 students responded to the requests for participation in this research study. Of the 49 respondents, only 44 met the specific criteria to be included in the research study. 16 student-parents were selected and participated in interviews. From this survey, five major themes emerged: a) the role of identity, b) managing careers, c) navigating adversity, d) access to resources, and e) impact of relationships. Excerpts from the student-parents' lived experience were used to explain their educational experiences while advancing towards degree attainment.

This research examined the student perspective from the lens of adult student-parents. The findings are consistent with the literature reviewed, in that student-parents are a unique subset of non-traditional students that have diverse needs. If give additional support, they will continue to succeed. This study reveals opportunities for improvements in providing support, resources, and additional programs for adult college students who are supporting children. The participants represent a vast range of identities of students

enrolled in colleges and universities around the country. The experiences they shared substantiate the necessity for additional support systems for this overlooked population of students. This study has the ability to have a significant impact on research, practice, and policy regarding increasing access to higher education for non-traditional students.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the findings of this study, the current research available on this Student population, and personal examples shared in this study, the following recommendations for Rowan University are presented:

1. Develop a task force to identify student-parents to fully assess the range of needs that may exist. The task force should collaborate with the Registrar's Office, the Financial Aid Office, and Academic Advisors to locate student-parents within the Rowan University community and survey their needs.
2. Expand the childcare options available to include low-cost drop-in childcare. This should be available affordable or a sliding scale fee. Additionally, expand the childcare centers hours to reflect the class times of adult students.
3. Partner with local child care centers to expand childcare provider hours that are aligned with university course hours.
4. Collaborate with the Engineering Department to design, build, and install an indoor soundproof playground; which includes glass study spaces for student-parents to study while their children play nearby, foldaway cots for naps, a library, and an educational computer lab to occupy children while student-parents study.

5. Staff the on-campus childcare center with Education majors and adult student-parents via the Federal Workstudy program. This will make use of the experience student parents have with children and allow them to earn money to support their families in an academic setting and keep them connected to campus.
6. Provide financial assistance- in the form of childcare vouchers to the on-campus daycare center for high-performing student-parents.
7. Promote grant funding opportunities clearly so that students understand and have an opportunity to apply.
8. Remove overly restricting funding barriers that unintentionally disqualify adult non-traditional students.
9. Collaborate with the Parents and Family department and the Commuter Services to host child-friendly networking events for student-parents. Students will be encouraged to bring their children along and events will be held on a weekend day before each semester starts. This event will highlight campus resources that may benefit student-parents, campus departments, and clubs, and organizations.
10. Develop a list of resources within the state, city, and community which are available for student-parents.
11. Educate and retrain faculty and professional staff on appropriate language and development theories to use when engaging adult students. Specifically, train Admissions Representatives and Academic Advisors on the nuances of adult, student-parents to assist in preparing them for the academic journey ahead and manage appropriate expectations before enrollment. Train faculty members to

refer adult students, including student-parents to the Rowan Cares team for additional interventions.

12. Offer an online option for all graduate courses. Offer classes at various times.

Allow student-parents additional flexibility concerning missing classes and the camera policy for remote classes. Record all in-person classes for non-traditional adult students who miss class due to childcare or caregiver duties or work-related conflicts.

13. Collaborate with the Registrar's Office to host an early registration event for non-traditional students. Reserve a percentage of seats in each for non-traditional students who may need to register later due to work or childcare schedules.

14. Develop a support center exclusively for non-traditional students, which will include student-parents, that features child-friendly meeting spaces, offers virtual counseling appointments, and bi-weekly outreach to proactively engage adult students via 15-minute check-ups. The check-ups will be an opportunity to check student needs, academic progress, mental health check, and an opportunity to connect students with necessary campus resources and available services. This support center will also be tasked with following up with adult students who were referred via the Rowan Cares Team. Data collected from this center will be used to inform future non-traditional retention initiatives.

15. The Career Management Center will partner with local businesses to develop an initiative, which will be modeled across all graduate programs, that allows full-time adult employees to earn internship hours with the current employer if the position meets defined criteria or is related to their academic degree.

16. Collaborate with the University Foundation office to create scholarship programs for adult, non-traditional students returning to complete an academic degree, beginning an academic program, and to reward currently enrolled adult, non-traditional students who are excelling in their academic journey.
17. Update university equity and inclusion language to be inclusive of adult and parental statuses.
18. Discuss each student's individual career goals. Check-in with students to make sure their educational experiences are on track to yield the desired career path. If internships are mandatory, the internship should align with their future career goals.
19. Develop an introductory course for students who have been out of the academic setting for a long time or need a refresh. This course will also introduce them to key foundational elements which will be useful in a writing-intensive program. Such topics will be covered in this course like APA formatting, the Benchmark, Internship requirements, and pre-planning for writing a Thesis.

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Appendix A

Institutional Board Review Approval

IRB #: PRO-2020-210

Title: Thinking for You, Thinking for Two: Uncovering Student-Parent Experiences in Higher Education

Creation Date: 12-2-2020

End Date: 1-25-2022

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: Raquel Wright-Mair

Review Board: Glassboro/CMSRU

Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Expedited	Decision	Approved
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Key Study Contacts

Member	Brandi Blanton	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	blanton@rowan.edu
Member	Raquel Wright-Mair	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	wrightmair@rowan.edu
Member	Brandi Blanton	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	blanton@rowan.edu

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

KEY INFORMATION AND CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN A RESEARCH STUDY

ADULT CONSENT FORM FOR SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH

TITLE OF STUDY: Thinking for You, Thinking for Two: Uncovering Student-Parent

Experiences in Higher Education

Principal Investigator: Dr. Wright-Mair

You are being asked to take part in a research study. This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide key information that will help you decide whether you wish to volunteer for this research study.

Please carefully read the key information provided in questions 1-9 and 14 below. The purpose behind those questions is to provide clear information about the purpose of the study, study-specific information about what will happen in the course of the study, what are the anticipated risks and benefits, and what alternatives are available to you if you do not wish to participate in this research study.

The study team will explain the study to you and they will answer any questions you might have before volunteering to take part in this study. It is important that you take your time to make your decision. You may take this consent form with you to ask a family member or anyone else before agreeing to participate in the study.

If you have questions at any time during the research study, you should feel free to ask the study team and should expect to be given answers that you completely understand.

After all of your questions have been answered, if you still wish to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this informed consent form.

You are not giving up any of your legal rights by volunteering for this research study or by signing this consent form.

The Principal Investigator, Dr. Wright-Mair, or another member of the study team will also be asked to sign this informed consent.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to understand the decisions of non-traditional student-parent perceptions and their lived experiences as non-traditional student-parents at

Rowan University while raising children. Non-traditional students often carry multiple, competing identities that are marginalized within institutionalized spaces. Student-parents are a subset of non-traditional students that often encounter difficulty completing their college degree (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Lovel, 2020; Lundberg, 2008; Turner, 2007). Studying the lived experiences of these students will help institutions provide appropriate levels of support for their non-traditional student population.

2. Why have you been asked to take part in this study?

You are invited to take part in a research study exploring your experience as a college student in addition to identifying as a parent. You have been asked to be in this study because you are currently enrolled in a degree-seeking program at Rowan University and a parent of minor child/ren.

3. What will you be asked to do if you take part in this research study?

If you choose to participate in the study, you will be asked to complete a pre-participation questionnaire, participate in an interview which will take approximately 60 minutes and will be conducted virtually via Zoom. All interviews will be digitally recorded, transcribed, and analyzed with all identifying information removed at the point of transcription.

4. Who may take part in this research study? And who may not?

Currently enrolled Undergraduate and Graduate students who self-identify as parents, raising a child or children, will be invited to participate in this study.

5. How long will the study take and where will the research study be conducted?

The entire study will take approximately one year, but your participation will be approximately 60 minutes in total; consisting of a one-on-one interview. The interview will take place virtually via the Zoom platform.

6. How many visits may take to complete the study?

A virtual interview may/will occur with participants to complete the study.

7. What are the risks and/or discomforts you might experience if you take part in this study?

Participants will not be exposed to any more risk of harm or discomfort than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. There are no physical risks in the procedures

themselves, and it is not anticipated that participants will experience risks in completing the interview. The interview may cause you to reflect on some of your academic experiences and campus resources used. If you experience any discomfort in this process, you are free to stop the interview at any time. You may discontinue your participation at any time, for any reason. Any potential risk is extremely rare.

8. Are there any benefits for you if you choose to take part in this research study?

This study may be of no direct benefit to you, but you may be content knowing your contributions will be used to advance practice and theory as it relates to students raising children while pursuing a college degree. Participation will help to document the experiences of student-parents which may assist institutions in providing additional, adequate resources for this student population.

9. What are the alternatives if you do not wish to participate in the study?

If you do not wish to participate in this study for any reason, no alternative is available.

10. How many subjects will be enrolled in the study?

Approximately 10-15 participants

11. How will you know if new information is learned that may affect whether you are willing to stay in this research study?

During the study, you will be updated about any new information that may affect whether you are willing to continue taking part in the study. If new information is learned that may affect you, you will be contacted.

12. Will there be any cost to you to take part in this study?

There is no cost to participate in this study.

13. Will you be paid to take part in this study?

You will not be paid for your participation in this research study.

14. Are you providing any identifiable private information as part of this research study?

We are collecting identifiable private information in this research study. Your identifiable information will not be used in any of the future research projects or disclosed to anyone outside of the research team.

15. How will information about you be kept private or confidential?

All efforts will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential, but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Your personal information may be given out if required by law. Presentations and publications to the public and at scientific conferences and meetings will not use your name and other personal information.

16. What will happen if you do not wish to take part in the study or if you later decide not to stay in the study?

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may change your mind at any time.

If you do not want to enter the study or decide to stop participating, your relationship with the study staff will not change, and you may do so without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may also withdraw your consent for the use of data already collected about you, but you must do this in writing to:

Dr. Raquel Wright-Mair
Educational Services and Leadership
856-256-4711

If you decide to withdraw from the study for any reason, you may be asked to participate in one meeting with the Principal Investigator.

17. Who can you call if you have any questions?

If you have any questions about taking part in this study or if you feel you may have suffered a research-related injury, you can call the Principal Investigator:

Brandi Blanton
201 Mullica Hill Road
Glassboro, NJ 08028
856-256-4069

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you can call:

18. What are your rights if you decide to take part in this research study?

You have the right to ask questions about any part of the study at any time. You should not sign this form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have been given answers to all of your questions.

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

I have read the entire information about the research study, research risks, benefits, and alternatives, or it has been read to me, and I believe that I understand what has been discussed.

All of my questions about this form or this study have been answered and I agree to volunteer to participate in the study.

Subject Name: _____

Subject Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator/Individual Obtaining Consent:

To the best of my ability, I have explained and discussed the full contents of the study including all of the information contained in this consent form. All questions of the research subject and those of his/her parent or legal guardian have been accurately answered.

Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Signature: _____ Date _____

Version #: 1
Version Date: 12/24/20

This study has been approved by Rowan University's IRB (Study ID: [PRO-2020-210](#))

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Each interview will include the following questions:

1. Tell me about your experience at Rowan University.
 - a. How many semesters have you attended Rowan University?
 - i. Did you ever consider taking a break, dropping out, or taking time off from your degree?
 - ii. Did your role as a parent influence your decision to take a break from your education?
 - b. How would you describe the people you have encountered at Rowan University and your relationships with them?
 - i. Your classmates
 - ii. Your Professors/Faculty Members
 - iii. Administrators and office staff
2. Which identities do you carry in addition to a college student?
 - a. Tell me about your experiences related to balancing multiple roles?
 - i. How do your identities make you feel?
 - ii. How does the university environment impact the way you balance all your identities?
 - iii. How have your identities helped to shape your experiences at school?
3. How would you describe the vibe or the personality of the campus environment?
 - a. Does your child/children fit into the campus environment?
 - b. What characteristics (adjectives) would you say describes college the best?
 - c. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your college?
 - d. How do you feel you are treated?
 - e. How do you think that you are being perceived by others?
 - f. Did you experience any challenges directly related to being a student-parent?
 - i. How did you overcome those challenges?
 - ii. What would have helped you avoid or navigate your challenges more effectively?
 - iii. How did you take care of yourself or refuel yourself continue?

- g. Can you name any instances when your responsibilities as a parent interfered or competed with your responsibilities as a student?
 - 1. Did you feel comfortable asking for help?
 - 2. Who did you ask for help?
 - 3. Was the help provided?
 - h. Can you name any instances when being a student-parent was beneficial to you or a privilege?
- 4. Who has been the most supportive of your academic journey as a student-parent?
 - a. Beyond people, what has helped you survive or thrive in college?
 - i. What campus resources helped you be successful?
 - ii. What clubs/organizations/activities helped you be successful?
 - iii. What support did you need but did not find?
 - iv. Did you feel engaged in the campus environment outside of the classroom?
- 5. Is there anything else you would like to discuss about your experience as a student-parent?

Version #2:
Version Date: 01/23/2021

This study has been approved by Rowan University's IRB (Study ID: [PRO-2020-210](#))

Appendix D

Advisor Recruitment Email

Dear Colleagues:

My name is Brandi Blanton. I write to you today as a researcher interested in gaining a better understanding of some of your students. I will be conducting a study on the experiences and decisions of college students who also identify as parents or student-parents.

Please consider referring some of the students that you currently support to be a part of my study. The objectives of the study include:

- A. Understand student-parents' motivations for pursuing a college degree while raising children;
- B. Investigate the experiences and challenges that student-parents may face while attending an institution of higher education;
- C. Uncover the campus resources or support systems that were being utilized by student-parents during their higher education journeys.

From this study, I hope to propose additional pathways of support as well as empower student-parents in their educational pursuits. I need your help in identifying some students that you have recently worked with to determine these pathways. To this end, I would very much like to understand the lived experiences, decisions, and needs of adult, currently enrolled students, who also identify as parents.

I became interested in this unique population of students working as a college administrator for many years. I plan to ensure a thorough participant feedback process, including opportunities to review drafts (as desired) and to both review and contribute to the recommendations for practice that my study generates.

I ask that you aid me in recruiting participants for this study by identifying prospective participants who:

- A. Are currently enrolled Undergraduate and Graduate student at Rowan University
- B. Identify as a parent, providing support to a biological or foster child or children
- C. Is considered a non-traditional adult student, over the age of 18

By engaging students who offer various perspectives and experiences, I hope to identify commonalities, nuances, and differences, if they exist, in their stories. I would also be equipped with the rich data needed to inform multiple pathways towards providing equity and support for student-parents enrolled in traditional degree programs.

Once you have identified these students, I ask that you:

- A. Send them the recruiting email (Attachment B)
 - B. Encourage them to either:
 - a. Contact me directly, preferably (see contact information below) or
 - b. Express their interest in participation to you
 - 1. If students express their interest to you, I ask that you forward their contact information to me so I may contact them directly. I want them to ask questions and feel comfortable participating in this research process.
- 2. Contact Information:**
Brandi Blanton
Blanton@Rowan.Edu

Once I have made contact with students, I will send them three documents:

- A. An email with more additional information about the study
- B. A consent form
- C. A pre-interview questionnaire

Many thanks for helping to advance the knowledge on the experiences of adult student-parents attending college!

Sincerely,

Brandi Blanton

Version #1

Version: 12/24/20

This study has been approved by Rowan University's IRB (Study ID: [PRO-2020-210](#))

Appendix E

Student Recruitment Email

Thinking for You, Thinking for Two: Uncovering Student-Parent Experiences in Higher Education

Be part of an important research study about raising children while working towards a college degree. Volunteers are needed for a research study about the experiences of student-parents.

Are you between a currently enrolled Rowan University student?

Do you identify as a parent? Are you providing support to a biological or foster child or children?

Are you over the age of 18? If so, you may qualify to participate in an important research study!

We are conducting a voluntary research study to understand the experiences, challenges, and motivations of student-parents pursuing a college degree while raising children. We will investigate how the perception of these experiences drive decision-making as well as the level of engagement with campus resources.

Take the survey below to determine your eligibility. Based on your answers to the survey below, you will be contacted about your eligibility status and the next steps you can take to participate. Participants who qualify will be asked to complete two virtual interviews.

Contact Information:

Principal Investigator: Dr. Wright-Mair

Co-Investigator: Brandi Blanton

blanton@rowan.edu

Version #2:

Version Date: 01/23/2021

This study has been approved by Rowan University's IRB (Study ID: [PRO-2020-210](#))

Appendix F

Rowan Announcer Recruitment Email

Hello!

My name is Brandi Blanton and I am currently pursuing my master's degree in Higher Education Administration here at Rowan University.

As a part of the graduate program, I am required to complete a graduate thesis. To complete my thesis, I am seeking currently enrolled college students who also identify as parents, raising a child or children while pursuing a college degree.

Are you interested in becoming a voluntary participant in a research study about your experiences as a student-parent? Are you willing to share your experience via a virtual one-on-one interview?

I am conducting a voluntary research study to understand the experiences, challenges, and motivations of student-parents pursuing a college degree while raising children. I will investigate how the perception of these experiences drive decision-making as well as your engagement with campus resources.

There is little research on the experiences of adult student-parents in higher education. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. I would appreciate any willingness to discuss your experiences. The interview will last about 1 hour and can be scheduled at a time of your convenience. If you are interested, please send me an email expressing your interest.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at Blanton@Rowan.Edu. I look forward to hearing from you.

I appreciate you taking the time to read this email, and hope you have the opportunity to participate in this study!

Thank you,

Brandi Blanton
Graduate Candidate for M.A. in Higher Ed. Administration

Version #1
Version: 12/24/20

This study has been approved by Rowan University's IRB (Study ID: [PRO-2020-210](#))

Appendix G

Research Study Follow-Up Email

Thank you for your interest in my research study!

My name is Brandi Blanton. I am a graduate student at Rowan University, in the M.A. Higher Education program. I am conducting a research study on student-parents.

I am interested in **your** experiences as a college student, in addition to being a parent! Your voice matters and experiences can be used to increase support for student-parents!

- What motivated you to pursue your degree while raising a child or children?
- Did you feel seen, heard, welcomed, and supported as a student-parent?
- Have you ever felt disconnected, overlooked, forgotten, or overwhelmed juggling the roles of parent and student?
- Did you have any unique experiences, challenges, or needs as a result of being a student-parent?
- What campus resources or support services helped you navigate being a student-parent?
- What resources did you need but could not find?
- Is there something that you have always wanted to say about your college experience as a student-parent but couldn't?

Allow me to communicate **your** unique story to the educational leaders at Rowan University. I want to ensure **your** thoughts, ideas, and feelings are communicated to decision-makers.

I need to tell you that your name will not be included in my resulting report. I will do everything in my power to ensure that you remain **anonymous**. All study data collected will be destroyed as soon as I complete the data analysis portion of the study.

Version 1:

Version: 12/24/20

This study has been approved by Rowan University's IRB (Study ID: [PRO-2020-210](#))

The name of this study is:

Thinking for You, Thinking for Two: Uncovering Student-Parent Experiences in Higher Education

The **purpose of this study** is to raise awareness of the experiences and challenges of student-parents pursuing a higher education degree. I will use your stories to assist Rowan University in increasing adequate support services and resources to better serve their adult student-parent population. The objectives of the study include:

- D. Understand student-parents motivation for pursuing a college degree while raising children;
- E. Investigate the experiences and challenges that student-parents may face while attending an institution of higher education;
- F. Uncover the campus resources or support systems that were being utilized by student-parents during their higher education journeys.

With this study, I hope to propose additional pathways of support as well as empower student-parents in their educational pursuits. Your participation in this study may help other student-parents complete their college degree!

If you wish to take part in this study, please note that **you must:**

- Be a **currently enrolled** Rowan University student (Undergraduate or Graduate)
- Identify as **parent**
- Support a dependent child or children while pursuing a college degree
- Be an adult, over the age of 18
- Be willing to participate in **one virtual/online interview**
 - I will use the Zoom platform to complete the virtual interview
 - The interview will be 60 to 90 minutes long

Attached to this email are two forms:

- A consent form (that you must sign)
- A pre-study questionnaire (that you must complete)

If you have questions about the forms, please reach out to me. Do not hesitate to ask questions!

THANK YOU!

Version: 12/24/20

This study has been approved by Rowan University's IRB (Study ID: [PRO-2020-210](#))

Appendix H

Research Study Pre-Participation Questionnaire

Student-Parent Questionnaire

Be part of an important research study about raising children while working towards a college degree. Volunteers are needed for a research study about the experiences of student-parents.

Are you between a currently enrolled Rowan University student?

Do you identify as a parent? Are you providing support to a biological or foster child or children?

Are you over the age of 18? If so, you may qualify to participate in an important research study!

We are conducting a voluntary research study to understand the experiences, challenges, and motivations of student-parents pursuing a college degree while raising children. We will investigate how the perception of these experiences drive decision making as well as the level of engagement with campus resources.

Complete the questionnaire at the link below to determine your eligibility. Based on your answers, you will be contacted about your eligibility status and the next steps you can take to participate. Participants who qualify will be asked to complete two virtual interviews.

Contact Information:

Principal Investigator: Dr. Wright-Mair

Co-Investigator: Brandi Blanton

blanton@rowan.edu

This study has been approved by Rowan University's IRB (Study # PRO-2020-210)

* Required

Email *

Your email



I have read the information above about the study or it was read to me. I understand the possible risks and benefits of this study and know that being in this study is voluntary. I choose to complete this screening questionnaire. *

- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Disagree

Are you currently enrolled in a degree-granting program? *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Are you an adult over the age of 18? *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Are you a parent, providing support to a child or children while pursuing a degree? *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No



Please indicate how many children do you support? *

- ☐ 2 or more
- ☐ 1
- ☐ None

Please indicate your race *

- ☐ White
- ☐ Asian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino/a
- ☐ Native American or American Indian
- ☐ Multiracial/Mixed-race
- ☐ Other (please specify)
- ☐ Prefer not to disclose
- ☐ Black or African American

Please indicate your
gender *

- ☐ Prefer not to disclose
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Genderqueer
- ☐ Self-Identify
- ☐ Female

Please indicate what type of degree you are pursuing *

☐ Undergraduate

☐ Graduate

Has your role as a parent shaped your experiences as a college student? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

Would you like to participate in the future study? (This includes participation in two 60-minute one-on-one virtual interviews). *

☐ Yes

☐ No

Please provide your name, email address, and phone number. This information is needed in order to contact individuals who are selected to participate in the study and will only be used for that purpose. All information submitted will be destroyed immediately if you are not chosen to participate in this study. If you are not selected to participate in the study, you will not receive an email from the researcher.

Name

*

Your answer

Phone
Number *

Your answer