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“POWERING THROUGH”: A MIXED METHOD PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF RESILIENCE, GRIT, AND POSITIVE DEVIANCE AMONG SINGLE MOTHER COLLEGE GRADUATES

by

Stephanie Paramore Jones

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ABSTRACT

College students with children represent a growing segment of the college-going population. As a subset of this group, single mothers in college are considered nontraditional by their age, employment status, parental status, and status as independent for the purposes of financial aid. Overall, the percentage of single mothers who complete a bachelor's degree is well below their married women counterparts. The purpose of this mixed-method phenomenological study was to explore the "how" and "what" of single mother college completion. Resilience, grit, and positive deviance served as the theoretical and conceptual frameworks for this study. Wagnild and Young's resilience theory included five characteristics identified as the core factors of resilience. Duckworth's grit theory examined and individual's dedication to pursuing goals over time. The exploration of behaviors implemented by successful individuals who overcome obstacles is known as positive deviance. Participants included 257 individuals who responded to an online college history survey. From their responses, 10 self-identified single mothers who had earned at least one degree participated in virtual, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Moustakas' phenomenological methodology guided the qualitative data analysis. The study's findings indicated that single mothers possessed the five resilience characteristics, maintained a grit or power-through mentality, and engaged in positive deviant behaviors, all of which contributed to their academic success and degree completion. Recommendations for future studies on single mothers are provided to encourage researchers to continue exploring the needs of single mothers and other nontraditional students.

Keywords: single mother, student parents, parenting students, nontraditional students, grit, resilience, positive deviance, college degree

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"Sometimes the strength of motherhood is greater than natural laws."

-Barbara Kingsolver

In the United States, for the 2015-2016 academic year, nearly 22% of the undergraduate enrollments, or roughly 3.8 million, were student parents (Cruse et al., 2019a). Of that number, nearly 2.7 million (70%) were women. Of those 2.7 million mothers in college, close to 1.7 million (62%) were single (Cruse et al., 2019a). According to an analysis of National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) data, the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) estimated that "the number of single mothers in college more than doubled between the 1999-2000 and 2011-2012 school years, to reach nearly 2.1 million students—or 11% of all undergraduates--as of 2012" (Kruvelis et al., 2017, p. 1).

As a segment of college enrollment demographics, the population of nontraditional students (Sims & Barnett, 2015), including single mothers, is growing (Beeler, 2016). A nontraditional student, broadly defined, is one who: (a) may not enroll in college immediately after graduating from high school, (b) may work full-time, (c) may be enrolled in college part-time, (d) is financially independent from their parents or guardians, and (e) may have family obligations such as a spouse or dependents (Choy, 2002; Sims & Barnett, 2015). The enrollments of nontraditional students at community colleges are relevant as well. Specifically, within the California Community College system, in 2016-2017, approximately 42.3 % of students were age 25 and older (California Community College Chancellor’s Office, n.d.).

Single-parents and other nontraditional students' entry into college have increased over the past three decades (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2011; Kruvelis et al., 2017; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018), and admittedly, this progress is a step in the right direction. However, access or

the ability to gain admission into college is only one part of a 3-part equation. Obtaining a college degree can be broken down into three parts: access, the admissions process, and enrollment in courses. Student persistence is defined as continuing to enroll term after term each year. At the same time, completion is finishing required courses and the official posting of the degree or certificate on the student's transcript. While college access has improved for many nontraditional students, the degree completion rates for this population are relatively low, especially for single mothers (Beeler, 2016; Crumb, 2021).

A college degree affords students many benefits regardless of marital status, including developing cognitive skills, intellectual growth, moral development, and quality of life (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Conversely, the lack of a college degree often presents economic challenges to families (Markle, 2015). There is added detriment of limited career advancement for some families from not having the necessary educational credentials. There are also negative workforce implications, including a projected shortage of college graduates to meet industry demand (Bergman et al., 2014).

Statement of the Problem

The problem is that while their participation in college is high, single mothers achieve lower rates of degree attainment (Beeler, 2016) when compared to their married counterparts and other women in general (Institute for Women's Policy Research [IWPR], 2017e). In 2015, it was estimated that only 31% of single mothers older than 25 years of age obtained a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 54% of their married counterparts and 40% of women overall (IWPR, 2017e). Even more alarming is the research indicating that only 8% of single mothers who enroll in college earned their associate or bachelor's degree within six years compared to

19% of married women with children and 50% of women students with no children (Cruse et al., 2019b).

Single mothers without postsecondary education potentially miss out on the advantages of earning a degree, such as improved employment opportunities with covered health benefits, increased lifetime earnings, financial security, better overall health, and a more secure financial future (Kruvelis et al., 2017). In some instances, without a college degree, single mothers may not find their way out of poverty for themselves and their children (Mahaffey et al., 2015).

Researchers have found that single mother college students face no shortage of challenges. First, some single mothers experience the stress of balancing parenthood with academics and employment (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Mahaffey et al., 2015). In addition, access to childcare and affordable childcare pose additional obstacles for single parents (Duquaine-Watson, 2007, 2017; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Mahaffey et al., 2015). Not only is child care expensive for many families (Child Care Aware of America, 2019; Gould & Cooke, 2015) across the United States, but the number of child care centers also located on college campuses (Carlson, 2015) as well as family home-based centers is on the decline (Child Care Aware of America, 2019).

Some single mothers also experience marginalization while in college. While their access to child care and appropriate housing needs may go unmet (Beeler, 2016; Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018), some student parents often feel invisible or unwelcomed (Beeler, 2016; Duquaine-Watson, 2007, 2017; Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2018; Mahaffey et al., 2015) while in college. In contrast, but just as impactful, some student parents experience the opposite effect. Instead of being ignored, they are sometimes "highlighted" or “called out”

(usually in a classroom setting) for their martial or parental status, thereby further marginalizing them (Duquaine-Watson, 2007, 2017).

While the disadvantages for single mother college students are extensive, it is still valuable for them to obtain a degree. The benefits extend beyond the mother and positively impact her children and her community. “Mothers’ postsecondary attainment increases children’s likelihood of attending college themselves” (Kruvelis et al., 2017, p. 5). Also, adults with higher levels of education engage more with their communities (Dee, 2004) and are more likely to volunteer (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016) than those with less education. Lastly, society can benefit from single mother college graduates’ when their wages contribute to the local tax base within their communities (Cruse et al., 2019b; Gault et al., 2018).

Much of the current research focuses on the low rates of college completion and challenges faced by nontraditional students, including single mothers (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Mahaffey et al., 2015; Markle, 2015). However, more research is needed to understand the techniques or behaviors of single mothers who successfully navigate difficulties and finish their degrees. The present study examines the specific behaviors that lead to single mother college completion. Indeed, single-mother college graduates have a compelling story to tell, and it is our responsibility as educators and administrators to listen.

For the purposes of this study, it is critical to understand single mothers, the characteristics that describe them, and how they experience college. Beeler (2016) is a researcher with community college administrative-level experience working with single mothers. In her extensive review of the literature on the background characteristics of single mother undergraduates, she found that this population of students is more likely to be: (a) financially independent, (b) older than 24 years of age, (c) less likely to have a high school diploma, (d)

more likely to be employed while caring full-time for their dependent children, (e) more likely to attend college part-time, and (f) more likely to be first-generation low-income students (Beeler, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this mixed-method phenomenological concurrent triangulation study was to explore and describe the behaviors of single mothers who complete a college degree or certificate from a U.S. college or university. Successful behaviors were generally defined as those actions, strategies, and techniques that led to single mothers completing college. The researcher sought to understand how single mother college students complete their degree(s) while viewing their successes through the lens of grit, persistence, and resilience rather than deficiency and failure.

Currently, there is limited research on student parents (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2011; Mahaffey et al., 2015) and single mothers in college (Bober, 2017; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). The study results will contribute to the body of knowledge about single mothers as a subset of the nontraditional student population who are increasingly gaining college access. First-hand experiences, strategies, behaviors, advice, and recommendations from successful degree completers may benefit other single mothers considering attending college or who are in the process of earning a degree. The study also provides college leadership with insights into the needs of a single mother and could benefit other nontraditional populations such as first-generation college students.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. Are single mother college graduates significantly more resilient or "grittier" than non-single mother college graduates? (Quantitative)
2. What are the lived experiences of single mother college completers? (Qualitative)

Sub-questions include:

   a. How do single mothers finish college?
   b. What thoughts, behaviors, strategies, and techniques do single mothers describe as contributing to their academic accomplishments and college completion?
   c. What is the impact of college completion on single mothers and their children?

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The present study examines single mother college degree completion through the lens of one theoretical and two conceptual frameworks: resilience theory, the concept of grit, and the concept of positive deviance, respectively. Each of the frameworks described herein may play a role in how individuals achieve academic success. A subsequent section in the next chapter explains how the three frameworks are interrelated.

Resilience Theory

Many single mother college graduates face seemingly insurmountable challenges and setbacks along the path to their degree completion. This study implements resilience theory as the lens through which the research questions and findings are explored. Resilience is defined as "the capacity of an individual to overcome difficult and challenging life circumstances and risk factors" (Bryan, 2005, p. 220). Thus, a resilient individual may possess the ability to "bounce back" and recover from challenging situations.

Resilience theory began as the study of individuals who overcame hardships and misfortune during childhood (Van Breda, 2001; Wagnild, 2009). According to Bernard (1991), a resilient child is socially competent, has problem-solving skills, displays autonomy, and has a healthy sense of purpose and vision for their future. In Van Breda's (2001) extensive resilience theory literature review, the author summarized research supporting the notion that resilient children were more likely to be girls, had high self-esteem, enjoyed school, and asked for help when they needed it. Resilience theory examines the strengths and abilities of individuals and posits that they possess characteristics and beliefs that allow them to overcome adversity.

Wagnild and Young (1990) conducted extensive research on resilience in older women who had overcome a significant life event. Their initial study led to the development of The Resilience Scale ™, one of the first instruments used to measure resilience in individuals (Wagnild & Young, 1993). Based on narrative responses from the women in their 1990 study, Wagnild and Young designed the resilience instrument based on five characteristics: purpose, self-reliance, equanimity, perseverance, and existential aloneness. These characteristics are said to be the "five interrelated components that constitute resilience" (Wagnild & Young, 1993, p. 167).

The Concept of Grit

Grit is defined as a combination of resilience, passion, and perseverance that can predict an individual's success (Duckworth, 2016). In her research on successful individuals, Duckworth (2016) determined that talent and intelligence were not as strong of a predictor as grit. The ability of an individual to find their passion, commit to a goal, and see it through no matter how difficult or how many times they failed, determines who will complete the most difficult of challenges like intensive military training (Duckworth, 2016).

Researchers within the educational arena have studied grit amongst an array of populations, including first-generation college students (Almeida et al., 2019; Midkiff et al., 2017; O'Neal et al., 2016), Latinx adolescents (Guerrero et al., 2016), British university students (Kannangara et al., 2018), Australian university students (Hodge et al., 2018) African American males (Dixson et al., 2017), physical therapy students (Calo et al., 2019), student-athletes (Cormier et al., 2019), military, work-related sales forces, high school students, and marital relationships (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014), high school and college students (Muenks et al., 2017), online learners (Buzzetto-Hollywood et al., 2019; McClendon et al., 2017; Palermo-Kielb, 2020), and doctoral students (Blanchard, 2018; Cross, 2014; Hazy, 2019; Hudson et al., 2020; Ruttencutter, 2018). However, with a few exceptions (Palermo-Kielb, 2020; Yang & Bullecer, 2016), it appears that there is limited research on grit and single mothers in college.

Completing a college degree as a single mother despite obstacles and setbacks is the epitome of grit. Through perseverance, passion for learning/education, commitment over the long run, and the ability to bounce back from adversity, single mothers who finish college deserve to have their stories told so others can perhaps learn from their experiences.

The Concept of Positive Deviance

Resilience and grit theories may explain some of the characteristics and dispositions of single mothers who complete their college degrees or certificate. However, a conceptual framework can assist the researcher in describing the specific behaviors and techniques these mothers used to complete their college degrees.

Positive deviance is a conceptual framework that posits individuals within any given community who overcome obstacles and challenges by engaging in certain behaviors (Castaneda-Flores, 2013; Pascale & Sternin, 2005; Singhal, 2013). Although individual

community members generally have access to the same resources, a positive deviant is considered an outlier who capably navigates their challenges to realize success.

Positive deviance views the world through a lens of success and achievement. There is an optimistic undertone focusing on what has been accomplished rather than what is not working. The framework confronts societal problems by showing the community how an individual or positive deviant succeeded despite facing the same challenges and obstacles as the larger group. Leaders who wish to implement successful solutions to problems in a community where one lives, works, or studies, are encouraged to collaborate with positive deviants intimately involved in and connected to their community (Pascale & Sternin, 2005; Singhal, 2013). Working in tangent with the positive deviant has the benefit of providing increased validity and credibility for the proposed solutions (Pascale & Sternin, 2005; Singhal, 2013). While the positive deviant is considered a community "insider," they are also an outlier in their successful behaviors. Nevertheless, they are still considered a citizen of the community whose experiences are more likely to be believed and well-received by other members (Pascale & Sternin, 2005).

Resilience theory, grit theory, and positive deviance can work in concert to explore, explain, and describe the essence of how single mothers complete a college degree. Further, all three frameworks share a positive, success-centric lens that rejects the deficit model. Historically, nontraditional students and their needs are largely ignored in the literature (Sims & Barnett, 2015). Further, as a subset of the nontraditional student population, single mother-related literature has painted an unflattering picture of their educational experiences (Mahaffey et al., 2015).

Significance of the Study

Educational researchers have routinely sounded the alarm about the lack of research focused on nontraditional students (Sims & Barnett, 2015), which includes single mothers (Beeler, 2016; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2011; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018) and women raising children while in college (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). According to Beeler (2016), much of the public, including researchers and the media, refer to and primarily investigate the typical undergraduate college student. That is, a college student of traditional age, defined as under 25 years of age (Markle, 2015), enrolled full-time, and who lives on campus (Beeler, 2016).

Research about nontraditional students has typically focused on their adversities. Mahaffey et al. (2015) studied the needs of mothers enrolled at regional campuses. In their review of the research, Mahaffey et al. (2015) found "the literature on the topic of nontraditional student parents, and especially single student mothers in higher education portrays a very poor picture full of barriers, stressors, challenges, and failures for this underserved and at-risk population of 'hidden students'…" (p. 112-113). Focusing primarily on the declining success of certain nontraditional college populations depicts a bleak future for these students. Perhaps it is time to try a different approach. By rejecting previous deficit models of understanding students and examining individuals' experiences of academic success and achievement, a strength-based exploration of degree completion can emerge.

In summary, the study's significance addresses the currently limited research on the educational success of single-mother college students. Understanding this nontraditional student population adds to the body of literature on single-mother college students and the behaviors that impacted their degree completion.

Definition of Terms

Relevant terms used throughout the study are defined here.

Access: The ability of a student to participate in higher education (Perna & Jones, 2013).

Certificate: "Sometimes known as technical certificates or technical diplomas, are credentials issued by educational institutions that indicate completion of a discrete program of study or series of courses" (Bosworth, 2010).

College Graduate: An individual who has received formal recognition for completing a prescribed program of studies (National Center for Education Statistics website, n.d.).

Degree: A postsecondary award of a certificate, associate's, bachelor's, master's, or doctorate (National Center for Education Statistics website, n.d.).

Degree of Focus: For the purposes of this study, a degree of focus is the degree by which participants felt they needed the most resilience or grit to complete. When answering survey questions or participating in interviews, this delineation allowed participants to focus on one degree if they had earned more than one.

*Disproportionately Impacted: "*When one subgroup of students attains an outcome such as degree completion at a rate that is substantially lower than the benchmark rate, that subgroup may be referred to as 'disproportionately impacted'" (Sosa, 2018, p. 3).

Grit: The ability to commit to a goal with loyalty and demonstrate consistency over time (Duckworth, 2016).

Marginalization: The subordination of an individual due to their race, gender, or class (Torres & Mitchell, 1998).

Nontraditional College Student: An individual enrolled in either a part-time or full-time educational program who is "24 years or older; married; responsible for legal dependents other

than a spouse; orphaned, wards of the court, or grew up in the [foster care] system; or United States veterans" (Schumacher, 2013, p. 2).

Persistence: "…[A]dults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study or distance education when they must stop attending program services and returning to program services as soon as the demands of their lives allow" (Comings, 2007, p. 24).

Positive Deviance: A conceptual framework that emphasizes individual community members whose successful experiences can help support and guide members of the same community (Marsh et al., 2004).

Positive Deviant: An individual or organization that consistently demonstrates exceptionally high performance in the area of interest (Bradley et al., 2009).

Resilience: After experiencing adversity, the ability to overcome and move forward (Bryan, 2005; Wagnild, 2009).

Single Mother: The primary caregiver of one or more dependent children residing with them identifies as never married, separated, widowed, or divorced (Crumb, 2021; Miller & Gault, 2011).

Single Parent Household: A mother or father raising at least one child while not living with a spouse or partner within the same residence (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018).

Student Parents: "Students whose dependents received more than half of their support from the student during the school year… [T]his qualifies [them] as "independent" students for purposes of federal financial aid" (Huelsman & Engle, 2013, p. 1).

Traditional College Student: A traditional aged (18-24) student enrolled in a full class load, lives on campus, is involved in several on-campus activities, and can devote most of their time to being a student (Beeler, 2016).

Upward Mobility: The capacity or facility for rising to a higher social or economic position (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Situating the Researcher

Situating the researcher refers to providing the context for and the perspectives of the individual's positionality (i.e., race, gender, class, and sexual orientation) when conducting the study (Ramanathan, 2005). Currently, the researcher is a married, Black female in her fifties with no children. This research was conducted to understand single mother college completion as a subset of a nontraditional student population that has not been well studied. The intent was to study and understand single mothers who completed college without overly dramatizing or dismissing their challenges. Not having children of her own, the researcher knew that she might not fully comprehend the participants' challenges. She needed to listen carefully to their stories with a level of researcher's objectivity tempered with respect, compassion, and caring.

Researchers are cautioned against pitying or, conversely, "heroine-worshipping" single mothers in college. "Pitying single mothers who are college students runs the risk of denying their subjectivity and of diminishing or perhaps erasing the multiple ways they can and do express agency" (Duquaine-Watson, 2017, p. 186-187). Further, as to placing single mother college students on a pedestal of sorts, "when single mothers are characterized as heroines, it becomes quite easy to dismiss the challenges they face or to imagine that they have the skills and resources needed to respond to such challenges on their own" (Duquaine-Watson, 2017, p. 187). Thus, with these warnings front of mind, the current study sought to present a realistic, balanced,

and accurate view of single mother college graduates that contributes to the limited body of knowledge about their academic success.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 provided an introduction followed by an overview of the research problem that single mothers are not completing college degrees at acceptable rates. Utilizing the strengths-based approach of a resilience theoretical framework, with grit as a construct and positive deviance as the conceptual framework, these are the lenses through which the study examined how some single mothers complete college despite the challenges they may have faced. Chapter 2 provides an extensive literature review of the characteristics and challenges of single mothers in college, the positive outcomes of college completion, resilience theory, the construct of grit, and concludes with the history and social application of positive deviance. Chapter 3 details the methodology of the mixed-methods phenomenological concurrent triangulation study, including the participants, sampling procedures, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, situating the researcher, potential ethical issues, and concludes with the researcher's expected outcomes. Chapter 4 presents both the quantitative results and the qualitative findings of the study. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the conclusions, explores the implications of the study’s findings, and offers recommendations for future research.

Summary

To summarize, single mothers are often faced with seemingly insurmountable challenges regarding completing a college degree or certificate. Yet, some women manage to succeed. These positive deviant mothers make a way out of no way. They gain access, persist, and complete. The desire to learn more about single mothers' grit, resilience, motivation, and success inspired and compelled this research study.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the lived experiences of single mother college graduates through the lens of resilience, grit, and positive deviance to understand the behaviors that lead to their academic success. There are a limited number of studies concerning single mother college completion. Instead, researchers have focused primarily on nontraditional students, including student parents, of which single mothers are a much smaller subset. Therefore, some aspects of the literature reviewed are related to student parents in general and, in other instances, specific to single parents and single mothers when available.

The chapter begins by exploring single mother characteristics, their demographics within the United States, and the challenges they face, including role strain (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018), marginalization (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2018), limited access to quality and affordable childcare (Child Care Aware of America, 2019), and serious financial concerns (Kramer et al., 2016; Sidel, 2006; Trisi & Saenz, 2020; Tucker & Lowell, 2016).

Next, while there are numerous studies about obstacles single mothers encounter, researchers have also examined the potential successful outcomes for single mothers attending college. Positive role modeling for their children and the increased likelihood of upward social and economic mobility are some of the findings of the potential impacts on single mothers who complete a college degree (Beeler, 2016; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2011; Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Historically, nontraditional and underrepresented students' college experiences are viewed through the deficit-model lens by primarily highlighting the lack of academic success and degree completion (Castaneda-Flores, 2013). In contrast, the current study was viewed within the context of resilience theory, the

construct of grit, and a positive deviance framework, which are discussed in the latter part of the literature review. The chapter concludes with the integration of three frameworks that operate in concert to serve as a success-centric approach to exploring single-mother college completion.

Single Parent Households

According to an analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data, in 2020, roughly 70% of children under 18 lived with two parents (marital status not considered), down from 85% in 1968 (Hemez & Washington, 2021). It is estimated that in 2020, the total number of single-parent households with children under the age of 18 was just under 11 million. Of those nearly 11 million families, 80.5% are headed by single females (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Researchers indicated the percentage of single-parent households had increased internationally in the 1970s and that this growth is particularly noteworthy in the United States (Weinraub & Kaufman, 2019). During that decade, the increase in single-parent families attracted the attention of U.S. government officials (Dowd, 1997; Sidel, 2006; Weinraub & Kaufman, 2019). In 2019, it was estimated that just under one-quarter (23%) of children in the United States under the age of 18 resided with one parent and no other adults, a rate more than three times the percentage (7%) of children in other countries (Kramer, 2019).

Perceptions of Single Mothers

In the recent past, there has been a stigma attached to single motherhood. This family structure is often associated with virtually all of society's ills, including the "breakdown of the family," juvenile delinquency, addiction, illiteracy, homelessness, poverty, crime, and students' poor academic performance (Dowd, 1997; Sidel, 2006). Modern researchers traced the negative stereotypes about poor women and single mothers to the public shaming of poor women when President Ronald Reagan called them "welfare queens" (Dowd, 1997; Sidel, 2006). This not-so-

subtle insult was meant to suggest that poor women were abusing the financial support system and living a life of relative luxury from the spoils of public assistance. According to Peterson (1987), “the ‘feminization of poverty’ refers to the dramatic change in the composition of the poverty populations that…occurred in the United States roughly beginning in the late l960’s” (p. 1). During that time, the number of women and women of color living in poverty rose dramatically due to the cuts made to social support services for low-income women and children (Sidel, 2006).

As a faculty member of Hunter College-CUNY (City University of New York), Sidel (2006) conducted extensive research on poverty and its impact on women and children. As she explains, the conservative political rhetoric and subsequent funding reductions increased the number of poor people and was particularly detrimental to households led by women (Sidel, 2006). In the 1990s, the harmful stereotypes and stigma continued such that poor single mothers were labeled as “lazy, irresponsible, dependent, deviant, and living off the hard work of others” (Sidel, 2006, p. 2). Thus, as women became poorer, it became easier to blame and vilify them for being poor, thereby dismissing the serious shortcomings of that time's social and economic systems (Sidel, 2006).

Throughout the literature, as it relates to the status of single mothers in the United States, the intersectionality of racism and classism is apparent. Affluent white, male single parents are viewed very differently than poor, Black female single parents. “Single mothers are stigmatized on multiple grounds—for their race, their ethnicity, and their class as well as for raising children without a husband” (Sidel, 2006, p. 21). Ageism is also a factor related to the mother's age at the time of a child’s birth. According to Duquaine-Watson (2017), there is less stigma associated

with an older single mother since a woman is "expected" to have children in her 30's as opposed to her 20's or late teens.

There may be different circumstances under which women with children obtain single-mother status, including "separation, divorce, widowhood, and having a child outside of marriage" (Sidel, 2006, p. 5). However, un-partnered women who adopt children are also considered single mothers. In whatever manner a woman arrives at her single-parent status, researchers note it is usually the structure of her family that has been criticized. The "traditional" family structure is typically based on a white, married American heterosexual couple (Duquaine-Watson, 2017) and has been described as "stable" and "intact," while single-parent families are considered "disrupted" and "broken" (Sidel, 2006).

Single Mothers in College

According to Kruvelis et al. (2017), the number of single mothers in college is a growing demographic and has more than doubled in the twelve academic years between 1999 and 2012. Single mothers are also increasing in their share of the percentage of the total population of college students, estimated at nearly 2.1 million students or roughly 11% of all undergraduate students (Kruvelis et al., 2017).

Researchers Hensley et al., 2021 provided a comprehensive assessment of the degree attainment statistics of single parents:

> When looking at rates of degree attainment among [single] parents compared with their counterparts without children under 18, single parents are the least likely adults to hold a college degree—less than one in three (30 percent) single parents hold an associate degree or higher compared with over half (53 percent) of married parents and 41 percent of adults without children under 18. Single parents also are the most likely to have started

> but not completed a degree (26 percent) compared with married parents (18 percent) and adults without children under 18 (21 percent). (Hensley et al., 2021, p. 18)

Further, it is estimated that single mothers (27%) are also more likely to have obtained some college credits without earning a college degree compared to single fathers (23%) and single women without children (21%) (Cruse et al., 2019b; Hensley et al., 2021). However, single mothers are slightly more likely to have earned an associate's degree than other women but are less likely to have earned a bachelor's degree (Cruse et al., 2019b).

For this study, there are two types of educational institutions and one instructional delivery mode that warrants further exploration of single mothers' participation in higher education. These include 2-year and community colleges, traditional 4-year colleges, and the role of online education.

First, "the largest share of single mothers is enrolled at community college: 44% of all single mothers attend public two-year institutions" (Kruvelis et al., 2017, p. 3) based on analysis of the latest available data from the 2011-2012 study on National Center for Education Statistics. Generally known for being affordable and accessible in terms of admissions requirements and serving a diverse student body, California Community Colleges provide students with a wide array of short-term vocational certificates and transferable degrees (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2021).

Academic and financial support resources for single mothers at community colleges are regularly offered, but ever-looming federal or state budget cuts can threaten this support at any time. In California, support programs such as CalWORKs (California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids) offer aid to students, many of whom are single mothers. This support includes vouchers for childcare and transportation, designated case managers and counselors,

and supplemental resources such as books and supplies for school (Velasco, 2017). As will be discussed further in another section, access to child care on college campuses is declining across the U.S. (Eckerson et al., 2016) even though studies about single mothers in college have consistently indicated that affordable access to quality child care is one of their most pressing needs (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Mahaffey et al., 2015).

Approximately 20% of single mothers attend traditional public or private 4-year universities in the United States (Kruvelis et al., 2017). Like community colleges, the percentage of available child care centers on 4-year college campuses has declined (Eckerson et al., 2016). Single parent child care needs may differ slightly depending on the type of college attended. In a study of 23,000 parenting students, Goldrick-Rab et al. (2020) found that 32% of single parents at 4-year colleges reported needing child care compared to 41% of single parents at 2-year colleges.

Online education has grown more common in higher education institutions, and the enrolled adult and nontraditional student populations are increasing (Burke, 2019). Distance or online education is typically defined by the percentage of instruction offered online ranging from 0%, known as traditional instruction, up to 79% known as blended or hybrid instruction which is offered as a mix between online and in-person instruction. Instruction offered as more than 80% virtual is known as online education (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

Online education as an instructional delivery method has been described as flexible (Baum & McPherson, 2019; Burke, 2019), accessible (Swanson, 2005), and convenient (Grau-Valldosera et al., 2019; Muller, 2008). Due to taking classes and earning a degree from virtually anywhere globally, distance education helps students overcome geographic barriers (Cragg et al., 2005). It is estimated that in 2020 of the students studying in undergraduate online programs,

50% are female, and for graduate students, 52% are female (Duffin, 2020). However, recent and specific data on the quantity and demographic characteristics of single mothers enrolled in online degree programs is not readily available.

In their study on distance education and women, Swanson (2005) stated that the "majority of distance education learners in North American are women, older, likely to be working full-time, and married" (p. 5). More recent data also suggest that most online students are women (Gnanadass & Sanders, 2018). While distance education programs are generally offered by both on-ground and online-only institutions, some distance education students have shared frustrations with the inability to access support services on evenings and weekends or the lack of engagement with instructors (Cragg et al., 2005). Further, in instances where a physical campus is not to offered or available to distance education learners, it is unlikely that campus child care is also available. Finally, a considerable challenge with distance education is the reported high dropout rates (Grau-Valldosera et al., 2019; Lee & Choi, 2011; Muller, 2008). Stoessel et al. (2015) found that female students were at an increased risk for dropping out of distance education programs due to program dissatisfaction and their perceptions of limited social support.

While many single mothers enroll in 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities across the country, they face other challenges aside from and that may contribute to their low degree completion rates. The following section outlines the hurdles often encountered by single mother college students.

Challenges Faced by Single Mothers in College

The literature reveals that student parents and single mothers face many challenges, including role strain, marginality, childcare, and financial concerns.

Role Strain

The notion of role strain for single mothers is prevalent in the current literature (Beeler, 2016; Home, 1998; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Mahaffey et al., 2015). Goode (1960) defines role strain as the feelings of an individual who experiences difficulty meeting their many obligations. For some single mothers, role strain entails balancing the competing demands of being a mother, a student, and an employee (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Mahaffey et al. (2015) explored several themes within student mother research noting that "student mothers have more personal stress and role overload" conceivably as compared to their married mothers or male student counterparts (p. 108). A similar sentiment was explained by Home (1998), where single mothers were considered a higher risk for role overload, defined as not having enough time to complete tasks. Such role overload was related to single mothers' lower income and balancing work, school, and other commitments (Home, 1998). Thus, single mothers are under extreme pressure to juggle several responsibilities at one time. It would seem that single parents who complete a college degree somehow found a way to navigate their various roles successfully.

Further, striving to be the "ideal" mother, student, and employee places undue stress on single mothers. Trying to be all things to all situations interferes with their ability to focus on academics as their time and attention are often divided (Beeler, 2016; Choy, 2002; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Mahaffey et al., 2015). Student mothers (Mahaffey et al., 2015) and single mothers (Beeler, 2016) experienced guilt for not spending enough time with their children.

Marginalization

Marginalization is defined as the subordination of an individual due to factors such as race, gender, or class (Torres & Mitchell, 1998). Based on this definition, some individuals may possess intersecting characteristics or factors that the majority group perceives as "other." In their research, Greenberg and Shenaar-Golan (2018) described a community where women were

marginalized because of their gender and single parenthood, low socio-economic status, residential community, and family background.

According to Duquaine-Watson (2017),

> This philosophy [placing blame on single mothers] denies the very real and pervasive structural inequalities that persist in U.S. society that provide certain groups with unearned privilege while marginalizing and oppressing other groups on the basis of identities such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, religion, marital status, and sexual identity. And while privilege and oppression exist in relation to single social group identities, they are exacerbated at the intersection of multiple identities. (p. 189-190)

Thus, low-income, single-mother college students from underrepresented groups would appear to be especially vulnerable to marginalization.

Not surprisingly, researchers reported several groups of students who have experienced marginalization in college. Nontraditional students, including racial and ethnic minorities, older students, graduate students, and women in traditionally male-dominated disciplines, are subjected to experiences of marginalization within their academic institutions (Auguste et al., 2018; Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Home, 1998; Scott & Stiers, 2013). In the same fashion, first-generation college students and their intersectionality with others' perception of them as being of low socio-economic status also experienced "othering" or feelings of not belonging (Phillippe, 2016).

Nontraditional students enrolled in a nursing program experienced marginalization across a host of identities like those listed above. However, their previous education, parental status, and English language-learning status were also factors (Englund, 2019). Further, researchers note that the scarce literature about nontraditional college students perpetuates their marginalization

since this growing population's needs are not adequately researched enough to inform the administrative decisions that will impact these students (Beeler, 2016; Sims & Barnett, 2015).

Marginalization is complicated for nontraditional students because it tends to present itself as opposite extremes on a spectrum. Duquaine-Watson, a senior lecturer and program administrator at the University of Texas at Dallas, conducted an extensive ethnographic study of 86 single mothers at three higher education institutions over eight years. Some participants described their marginality as feeling “invisible or unnoticed,” while in contrast, other single mothers in the same study experienced the opposite effect known as "highlighting" (Duquaine-Watson, 2017). This phenomenon creates a scenario where single mothers felt "singled out" in a classroom discussion (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). For example, when an instructor specifically mentions a student’s single-parent status during a conversation in a class where there are many traditional students and asks potentially intrusive questions about the parent’s situation, they do not ask traditional students the same questions. Such behavior leads to feelings of "other" or "outsider" by the single parent (Duquaine-Watson, 2007).

While in-class experiences add to the challenges single mother college students face, marginalization occurs outside of the classroom. Faculty expectations for completing assignments through individual weekend field trips or required small group work pose additional obstacles for single mothers (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Lovell, 2014). Research indicates that such projects often conflict with student parents' family or work responsibilities (Mahaffey et al., 2015). In addition, limited access to on-campus child care and the absence of allowances for child care as a necessary educational expense for financial aid purposes presents just some examples of how single mothers’ needs are not considered (Duquaine-Watson, 2017). Similarly, out-of-classroom facilities can be problematic when on- or near-campus housing does not

provide a bathtub, deemed an essential amenity for mothers with small children (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018).

In summary, however unintended, marginalization sends a message to nontraditional students that their specific needs are not acknowledged, understood, or considered (Sims & Barnett, 2015). It is likely this invisibility or feelings of existing in a space that is not designed for the nontraditional student that "causes many of them to discontinue their learning or continue with dissatisfaction" (Sims & Barnett, 2015, p. 1).

Child Care

Unfortunately, the status of child care in the United States leaves much to be desired, especially for low-income families (Duquaine-Watson, 2017). Currently, there is a child care crisis due to limited access and lack of affordability, which is further exacerbated by often poor-quality facilities (Duquaine-Watson, 2017). In her extensive ethnographic study of single mothers in the process of completing their college degree, Duquaine-Watson's (2017) study participants expressed frustration and anxiety about finding access to quality and affordable child care while either working full-time or part-time attending classes or both.

Access to child care is a challenge for student parents on three fronts: the decrease in the number of college on-campus child care centers, the limited number of spaces available for their children, and the lack of availability for child care outside of traditional work hours. First, the number of child care centers on college campuses is declining. Many colleges have been reducing or closing child-care programs, and less than 50% of the nation's 1,100 community colleges provide on-campus child care (Carlson, 2015). Fraught with liability insurance issues and often limited financial resources to subsidize the centers, colleges face a dilemma about whether to offer child care options for students: on the one hand, convenient access to child care can support students' persistence and completion, but is expensive to maintain; on the other

hand, the lack of a child care center on campus can be seen as a barrier to student parent success (Carlson, 2015), while foregoing or eliminating an on-campus center can relieve some of the financial strain on ever-tightening college budgets.

Another issue related to child care is the number of spots available for children of student parents, which creates long wait times (Beeler, 2016; Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Schumacher, 2013). Duquaine-Watson (2017) found that the number of available openings often limits access to quality and affordable child care. Often, student parents compete with college faculty, staff, and non-college-affiliated parents for the same on-campus child care resources and may not be given enrollment priority (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Months and even years-long waiting lists for a spot are not uncommon. For children under the age of 5, childcare access is even more hindered since many centers do not offer infant care (Duquaine-Watson, 2017). Child care for infants is difficult to find due to limited spaces available, but it is also often the most expensive care (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Sidel, 2006; Spaulding, 2015) conceivably because of the low infant-to-caregiver ratio required in licensed child care centers. Older children fare somewhat better with access to before- and after-school programs; however, children with special needs were even more challenging to place (Duquaine-Watson, 2017).

Finally, in addition to declining child care centers and limited spaces for their children, student parents face a third access hurdle. Traditional working hours are typically defined as between 8:00 am to 5:00 pm, Monday through Friday. For the single mother working the swing shift or for the mom who has school-related assignments to tackle over the weekend, these typical child care hours may not be convenient for her (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Further, some single mothers experience challenges due to requirements for weekend assignments or

attendance at events when child care may not be readily available, thereby increasing the potential for barriers to their academic success (Beeler, 2016; Duquaine-Watson, 2017).

Brady (2016) found that enlisting formal child care is common for many households with children. However, informal child care, defined as free child care provided by family and friends, is essential in providing single mothers child care support outside of formal care hours or on short notice (Brady, 2016). Overall, the need for more flexible child care is well documented (Brady, 2016; Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Spaulding, 2015). Flexibility is needed in terms of the availability of care in the evenings and on weekends and for parents who have children of different ages and need varying arrangements (Brady, 2016; Duquaine-Watson, 2017).

Access to child care has implications for single mothers' ability to complete college and potentially creates limitations on their educational progress (Beeler, 2016; Duquaine-Watson, 2017) and, by extension, their career progress (Brady, 2016; Carlson, 2015). Even the location of child care centers either on- or near- campus makes all the difference in shorter commute times (Duquaine-Watson, 2017). Also, available child care impacts the ability of a single mother to stay on campus to complete her assignments or participate in support services such as tutoring (Carlson, 2015; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018).

While the many issues surrounding access to child care are challenging for parents, the lack of affordability of child care for a single mother who may be already financially struggling is startling. Disconcertingly, the United States child care system is described as being "under-funded" (Child Care Aware of America, 2019, p. 4; Spaulding, 2015, p. 9), "fragmented," "broken" (Child Care Aware of America, 2020, p. 31), "inequitable," and "inaccessible" (Child Care Aware of America, 2020, p. 2) and often of poor quality especially for low-income families

(Duquaine-Watson, 2017). Further, for many college students with children, the cost of child care is considered a substantial barrier to the affordability of college (Huelsman & Engle, 2013).

Recent data on child care affordability for families suggests the problem is substantial:

- "The annual price of child care for two children [one infant and one four-year old] exceeds annual mortgage payment for homeowners in 40 states and the District of Columbia" (Child Care Aware of America, 2019, p. 13).
- "Child care prices for two children in a child care center also exceed annual median rent payments in every state" (Child Care Aware of America, 2019, p. 13).
- For 2018, in the Western region of the United States, the average annual cost of child care ($21,327) is the second-highest household expense next to the average annual housing expense estimated at $23,271 (Child Care Aware of America, 2019).
- For single-parent families, the portion of the household budget spent on center-based child care with two children (ages 4 and 8) ranges from 11.7% in New Orleans, Louisiana, to as high as 33.7% in Buffalo, New York (Gould & Cooke, 2015).
- California is the least affordable state for center-based (as opposed to home-based) infant care, costing families as much as 17.6 % of their annual income (Child Care Aware of America, 2019).

Despite these potential financial hardships and the unaffordability of child care for many families, there are resources available to support parents in addressing the high costs of child care. Assistance for families is in the form of subsidies from local and federal sources and, while helpful, is often not enough to cover the substantial monthly expenses (Brady, 2016).

Once access to child care has been secured, however expensive, the quality of child care is another concern. Quality child care entails highly trained teachers, small group sizes, and well-

cared-for, spacious facilities. These same characteristics make quality care more expensive due to the higher costs associated with well-trained instructors, hiring a sufficient number of staff to adhere to low adult-to-child ratios, and the potential for higher rents or maintenance fees associated with more extensive square footage (Child Care Aware of America, 2014). Unfortunately, low-quality options were often the only available child care offerings open to low-income families (Duquaine-Watson, 2017). Further, single mothers may be more inclined to need to "piece together" child care arrangements from providers that may not be licensed (Child Care Aware of America, 2019).

In summary, the importance of quality, affordable, reliable, and flexible child care for single parents cannot be overstated. It allows parents to work various shifts, attend classes or tutoring sessions, and participate in weekend or evening academic activities. Lack of access to child care can pose a barrier for student parents to complete their education (Carlson, 2015; Duquaine-Watson, 2017;). Further, high-quality child care is found to have long-term beneficial impacts on children, particularly those from low-income families (Child Care Aware of America, 2014).

Financial Concerns

"A key problem that the majority of single mothers face is economic" (Sidel, 2006, p. 7). These financial challenges are exacerbated when single mothers are in college, given the growing expenses for books, tuition, fees, and child care (Duquaine-Watson, 2017). Further, low household income for single mothers opens the door to a steady flow of other concerns, including substandard housing, limited educational opportunities, increased likelihood of health issues, and the decreased likelihood of having health insurance (Sidel, 2006). There is an ongoing conversation about the benefits of gradually raising the federal minimum wage to $15 per hour (Cooper et al., 2021) and implementing universal monthly income for all households in

the United States (Hasdell, 2020). Until such policies are enacted, the current financial status for single-mother families lags far behind their single-father or married couple counterparts:

- "Families with children headed by unmarried mothers were much more likely to be in poverty than families headed by unmarried fathers or married-couple families. The poverty rate for families with children headed by unmarried mothers was 31 percent, compared to 15 percent for families with children headed by unmarried fathers and 5 percent of families with children in married-couple families" (Fins, 2020, p. 3).
- "More than 1 in 3 single mother families lived in poverty in 2015, and female-headed households with children were much more likely to be in poverty (36.5%) than male-headed households (22.1%) or households headed by married couples (7.5%)" (Tucker & Lowell, 2016, p. 3).
- In a similar finding, data showed that between 1990-2010, single mothers were more likely to be in poverty at far higher rates than single fathers even after accounting for variables such as demographics, human capital, and type of work (Kramer et al., 2016).
- Deep poverty is defined as income below half of the poverty line or just below $14,000 in annual income for a typical family of four. In 2016, children living in single-mother families had a deep poverty rate of 5.3% versus 3.1% for children in single-father families and 1.5% for children in married-couple households (Trisi & Saenz, 2020).

Student Loan Debt

Some single mothers experience the stress of role strain, limited access to affordable child care, and financial challenges. For single mothers who attend college, there is the potential for even more pressure from student loan debt. In a comprehensive analysis of women and student loans, Miller (2017) found that women take on more student loan debt than men. It is

estimated that of the total number of outstanding student loans, women hold nearly 66%. Due to the gender pay gap, many women have less disposable income and thus tend to repay their loans slower than men (Miller, 2017). In another comparison of who takes on more debt, students with dependent children take out more loans than students who do not have dependent children (Miller, 2017). Single mothers are especially at risk for taking on more debt to pay for college. "Mothers, and especially single mothers, borrow more than other student parents and students without children" (Cruse et al., 2019a, p. 5) at nearly a rate 2.7 higher than women students who are not parents.

Whether or not a student completes a college degree or drops out long before completion, there are consequences for taking out student loans. First, many students who have loans and complete their degrees face decades of debt repayment, ranging from 10 to 30 years (Miller, 2017). Some students with loans after graduation have less money available for making investments, building personal savings, contributing to retirement savings, and they may also delay marriage and purchasing a home (Callender et al., 2020). Those students who take out loans but do not complete their degree experience problems that can spiral. "Students who begin but do not complete a degree program face a 'worst of both worlds' outcome because they may have substantial amounts of debt but lack a degree that would help them secure higher-paying jobs." (Miller, 2017, p. 23).

Finally, defaulting on loan repayments often create longer-term financial issues. When a student defaults on their loan payments, the loan holder can send the account to collections which then negatively impacts the defaulted students' personal credit (Miller, 2017). Overall, student loan debt is an ongoing and growing problem that heavily impacts women, college students with children, and single mothers.

Support for Single Mothers in College

Single mothers often face financial challenges, especially those attending college (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Huelsman & Engle, 2013), and these difficulties can hinder their degree completion (Kruvelis et al., 2017). Historically, families in need of support could find help in the form of welfare. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA) was signed into law by President William (Bill) Clinton in 1996. This law changed the welfare system to eliminate Aid to Families of Dependent Children (AFDC) and replaced it with a grant known as TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) (Cuellar-Garcia, 2018; Velasco, 2017). Significant changes to the welfare system through PRWORA were twofold, 1) to set employment as the main objective, and 2) to set time limits on the length of time recipients could receive aid (Cuellar-Garcia, 2018; Velasco, 2017). Upon initial implementation, recipients could receive support for up to 60 months, but this was reduced to 48 months in 2012 (Velasco, 2017).

In 1997, after the passage of AB 1542, California implemented CalWORKs (California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids) to replace the state-run Greater Avenues for Independence (GAIN) program and address the requirements of PRWORA and TANF (Cuellar-Garcia, 2018; Velasco, 2017). For CalWORKs students at community colleges, the majority "tend to be women who are single parents and the head of their households" (Velasco, 2017, p. 9). The California Community College system was identified as a partner for implementing TANF, and subsequently, CalWORKs funding is now disbursed by the California Community College Chancellor's Office (Velasco, 2017).

As to financial aid, single student parents are the most likely to apply for federal student aid compared to other types of students, i.e., dependent students or independent students without children (Huelsman & Engle, 2013).

Successful Outcomes of College Completion

Although many single mothers face challenges and setbacks in completing degree completion when they attend and complete college, successful outcomes are revealed. Researchers determined that single mothers' engagement in educational pursuits leads to positive role-modeling for their children and a created path for upward mobility (Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018).

Positive Role Modeling

Parents are often a child's first teacher and role model. In Bandura's (1986) social learning theory, modeling is defined as learning through observation (Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2018). When studying modeling behavior of the children of single parents who attend and complete college, researchers described the impacts as generally positive (Beeler, 2016; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2011; Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Lindsay and Gillum (2018) explained that single mothers expressed a "desire to be role models for their children" (p. 192). Thus, single mothers understand that their children listen to what they say and watch what they do.

There are positive outcomes of such role modeling found in the literature about single mother college students, including impacts on single mother motivation and parenting skills development. Knowing that their children are watching them serves as a motivator for single mothers to complete college (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Not only is modeling positive behavior often a priority, but single mothers are also motivated to finish their degree as a means of providing a better life for themselves and their children (Beeler, 2016; Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Thus, future-oriented thoughts and behaviors can serve to benefit single-parents both academically and economically.

Improvement in parenting skills is another benefit of a college education. Davis-Kean (2005) found that parents with more years of education increased their children's achievements through setting high expectations and engaging their children in dialogue about the importance of education. According to Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2011), "the benefits of college attendance among unmarried parents may be especially substantial because college-educated parents serve as role models for their children that both improve their parenting and help increase their household income" (p. 3). College-educated parents tend to expose their children to environments where education is viewed favorably, and they set high expectations for their children's academic success (Davis-Kean, 2005; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2011). Such behaviors by single parents would reinforce the positive impacts of higher learning and may, in turn, pass this knowledge down to the next generation.

Upward Mobility

Upward mobility is defined as an individual's capacity to rise to a higher-level social or financial status. Although the financial concerns of single mothers were discussed earlier in this chapter seem dire, it is well documented that single mothers often seek a better future and improved financial stability for themselves and their children (Beeler, 2016; Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). The impact of such security may help some single mothers create a brighter economic outlook for themselves and their children, thereby minimizing the possibility of financial struggle (Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2018; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Thus, earning a college degree can be the most expedient and tangible method for creating a path to stability and security for many families.

In her ethnographic study of 86 single mothers, Duquaine-Watson (2017) found that the women she interviewed "believed that they would have better job opportunities and a more

secure financial future once they completed a college degree" (p. 37). These mothers' efforts to finish school were also a way to show themselves, their children, and those around them that they are good mothers (Duquaine-Watson, 2017). Given the pervasiveness of negative stereotypes around single motherhood, it is no surprise that she would endeavor to overcome the many obstacles placed before her to achieve a better life for herself and her family.

Once a woman earns a college degree, there is potential for her income and overall financial situation to improve. Kruvelis et al. (2017) assert that "women with a bachelor's degrees who earn postsecondary credentials have much higher lifetime earnings than those with less education" (p. 5).

Resilience Theory

Resilience can be defined as one's ability to recover from adversity by getting back up after getting knocked down and moving forward with their life (Bryan, 2005; Wagnild, 2009). The first resilience studies began in the 1970s as researchers studied children who had overcome highly stressful situations (Wagnild, 2009). In the 1980s and 1990s, the study of resilience shifted focus to adults who had also faced high levels of adversity (Wagnild, 2009).

In her extensive review of resilience theory literature, Polk (1997) implemented a concept synthesis approach to enhance the theory further and provide direction for future research using a health care perspective. To broaden the understanding of resilience theory, Polk (1997) examined the literature and synthesized her findings such that four distinct resilience patterns emerged: dispositional, relational, situational, and philosophical. These four constructs each play their role in an individual's resilience, yet they also interact to provide a network of support.

In the *dispositional pattern*, both psychosocial and physical attributes are at play. The individual is autonomous, self-reliant, displays positive self-esteem and a sense of self-worth. A

resilient person is characterized as intelligent, possesses historically sound physical health, and maintains an excellent physical appearance (Polk, 1997).

Within the *relational pattern*, intrinsic and extrinsic factors influence resilience (Polk, 1997). Intrinsically, the resilient individual leans on others in times of need, finds and connects with a role model, and looks for a trusted friend with whom to share their experiences. Extrinsically, resilient individuals are identified as having several interests and activities. They are dedicated to their work, school, and community while pursuing supportive and positive social engagement (Polk, 1997).

The pattern of *situational resilience* refers to "a characteristic approach to situations or stressors and is manifested as cognitive appraisal skills, problem-solving ability and attributes that indicate a capacity for action in facing a situation" (Polk, 1997, p. 6). Resilient individuals are self-aware and understand their limitations. They possess an internal locus of control and are flexible, resourceful, perseverant, creative, and curious (Polk, 1997). To understand grit, situational resilience, and mindset in Australian physical therapy students, Calo et al. (2019) implemented the Academic Resilience Scale (ARS), a 30-item survey that measures academic resilience “defined as the probability of academic success despite stressful conditions” (p. 318).

The fourth resilience pattern relates to a *philosophical* perspective or the individual's belief system about the world. They believe in the knowledge of the self, have a positive outlook about the future, seek positive meaning in life's experiences, and understand the importance of keeping things in perspective (Polk, 1997).

Exploring constructs in specific contexts is needed for understanding how and why they operate and interact—understanding how or even if resilience plays a role in the academic success of nontraditional students is an essential aspect of the current study. In reference to

children, *educational resilience* is defined as "the ability to succeed academically despite risk factors that make it difficult [for them] to succeed" (Bryan, 2005, p. 220). Academic resilience, or sometimes referred to as educational resilience, is a situation-specific aspect of psychological resilience as it relates to the ability of an individual to recover from adversity in their educational pursuits (Cassidy, 2016). Cassidy 2016, citing Colp and Nordstokke (2014), asserts that academic resilience "was created to offer a greater assessment of prediction specificity to resilience research" (Cassidy, 2016, p. 1).

There are also *protective factors* known to impact resiliency in children that decrease the harmful effects of stress and hardship (Bryan, 2005). Caring and supportive adult interactions, meaningful contributions to the school, and in their community, along with high parental and teacher expectations regarding student performance and academic success are such factors (Bernard, 1991; Bryan, 2005). Where adults are concerned, the relational pattern categorized by Polk (1997) appears to most closely align with the protective factors identified by Bryan (2005). Adults and children are resilient when dealing with traumatic events (Wagnild & Young, 1990, 1993).

Characteristics of Resilience

In 1993, researchers Wagnild and Young developed the original 25-item Resilience Scale™ based on their 1990 qualitative study of 24 older women. Participants recovered after experiencing intense life circumstances, including the death of a spouse, loss of their employment, or the loss of their health due to illness or injury. Results from the study yielded specific phrases that later developed into the prompts within the 25-item instrument. Wagnild and Young (1993) explored five characteristics that served as the building blocks of resilience

and labeled these as the Resilience Core (Wagnild, 2009). These five characteristics are purpose, perseverance, self-reliance, equanimity, and existential aloneness (authenticity).

Purpose serves as a critical characteristic of resilience because it grounds the other four. According to Wagnild and Young (1993), without purpose or "reason for being," life would be virtually meaningless. An individual needs to recognize and understand their mission in life. It is this recognition that provides motivation and persistence to endure difficult times.

Perseverance is defined as the drive to continue moving forward despite obstacles, setbacks, and discouragement. Resilient individuals are strong in perseverance and maintain both "courage and emotional stamina to fight the good fight" (Wagnild, 2009, p.16).

Self-reliance refers to one's recognition of their abilities and limitations. Individuals with high resilience perceive obstacles as an opportunity to build their problem-solving abilities, which are needed to face and overcome the next hurdle (Wagnild, 2009). Learning to adjust and adapt to life's challenges reinforces self-reliance, which then builds additional skills.

Equanimity means finding balance or harmony. Individuals who are high in resilience learn how to avoid extreme responses to adversity or success. They essentially "take things as they come" and "hang loose," often using humor to navigate situations. According to Wagnild (2009), resilient individuals are often described as optimistic because, despite obstacles, they tend to view life as a series of opportunities.

Finally, existential aloneness, also known as authenticity, as a characteristic of resilience, refers to self-acceptance despite one's faults and imperfections. This characteristic also entails understanding one's unique place in the world and recognition that some journeys must be taken alone. Wagnild (2009) explains that existential aloneness does not discount the importance of

social support. Instead, it acknowledges individual uniqueness. Those who learn to navigate some challenges independently build self-confidence, which can make the journey less difficult.

To summarize, resilience theory is defined as a set of distinct but interrelated patterns working in concert to form a cohesive whole supporting an individual's ability to bounce back and overcome adversity. As addressed earlier, many single mothers face obstacles and challenges yet manage to earn a college degree. However, very few studies have examined their academic resilience in the context of college completion.

The Construct of Grit

Duckworth et al. (2007) define grit as a combination of perseverance and passion for committing to a long-term goal. Grit is made up of two aspects: consistency of interests and perseverance of effort. Analogous to running, grit is described as a marathon, not a sprint to the finish line; thus, stamina is a critical component of the grit construct (Duckworth et al., 2007). Duckworth et al.'s (2007) seminal work on the study of grit sought to discover what makes people succeed even when they may not be the "smartest" individual or were not born with extraordinary natural talent in a certain discipline or interest area. Intelligence and grit are negatively related. Researchers speculate that less bright individuals may make up for lower levels of intelligence with their industriousness and determination (Duckworth et al., 2007). Grit as a noncognitive construct is a relatively new concept, and aspects about what it is and how it works warrant more research (Duckworth & Gross, 2014; Duckworth et al., 2007). As such, few studies have examined grit among single mothers.

There is some interaction between grit and age. Kannangara et al.'s 2018 study of grit among university students reported that students over age 31 were gritter than the 18-21 age group. However, the interaction between grit and gender is still unclear. While Kannangara et al.

(2018) found gender differences such that women were grittier than men, other studies did not report these findings (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Guerrero et al., 2016).

In the literature, grit is found to significantly interact with other constructs such as self-control, conscientiousness, and resilience (Calo et al., 2019; Crede et al., 2017; Duckworth & Gross, 2014; Duckworth et al., 2007; Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014; Hardeman, 2016; Muenks et al., 2017). Self-control entails navigating daily decisions about whether one will work toward or detour away from higher-level goals. Grit and self-control are highly correlated (Duckworth & Gross, 2014). Both constructs are related to success such that self-control requires one's *daily* decisions to stay focused, while grit takes a longer-term view in one's progress toward higher-order goals (Duckworth & Gross, 2014). These same authors also suggest that gritty individuals are adept at finding new paths to reach their goals despite roadblocks, detours, and setbacks. It is conceivable then that in an educational context, daily decisions to stay the course (self-control) combined with a long-term commitment (grit) are needed by nontraditional students, including single mothers, to achieve academic success.

Similar to the relationship between grit and self-control, grit has been found to relate to conscientiousness. A conscientious individual is defined as "thorough, careful, reliable, organized, industrious, and self-controlled" (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1089). Duckworth et al. (2007) argue that although related, conscientiousness and grit differ such that grit is a long-term, stamina-driven endeavor focused on consistent goals and interests.

Researchers recommend future studies on grit make efforts to account for the role of conscientiousness because of its strong relationship with grit (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014). In their study, Muenks et al. (2017) implemented Gosling et al.'s (2003) 2-item consciousness sub-scale, part of the Ten-Item Personality Inventory. Participants rated themselves on the prompts "I

see myself as dependable, self-disciplined" and "I see myself as disorganized, careless" (reverse-scored) on a scale from 1 = disagree strongly to 7 = agree strongly (Gosling et al., 2003). The current study also included this 2-item sub-scale to account for potential interactions between grit and conscientiousness.

While the interactions between grit, self-control, and conscientiousness are established, the relationship between grit and resilience is not well understood (Hardeman, 2016; Kannangara et al., 2018). Although possibly related, it is recommended that researchers study grit and resilience as separate constructs (Kannangara et al., 2018). In studying the two concepts, Hardeman (2016) found what was, in her view, a surprising negative relationship between grit and resilience, such that an individual who scored high in grit scored low in resilience. Resilience theory describes how an individual bounces back from adversity by addressing their response to stressors and setbacks along the way (Kannangara et al., 2018). However, some other non-cognitive, forward-looking, goal-oriented forces such as grit (Hardeman, 2016) may be what propels someone to keep moving ahead in reaching their long-term goals over an extended period. "Grit is most often used as a predictor of achievement, whereas resilience as a construct is much less goal-oriented. What seems to be much more central to resilience are qualities such as adaptability and flexibility" (Hardeman, 2016, p. 55). In other words, resilience is about adapting to, managing, and overcoming one's current challenges, while grit is about goal orientation and the likelihood of achieving success over the long term.

There is developing understanding about levels of grit one possesses over the long haul to achieve such goals as obtaining higher levels of education. More educated adults were found to be higher in grit (Duckworth et al., 2007). Further, it was found that grit is best studied in the context of longer-term pursuits such as graduating from college or by examining overall GPA as

opposed to studying grades for one course (Muenks et al., 2017). Grit is driven by dedicated efforts and continued interest in an endeavor such that reaching long-term goals are what matters the most. As Duckworth et al. (2007) stated, "we interpret observed association between grit and education as evidence that sticking with long-range goals over time make possible completion of high levels of education" (p. 1092). Studying grit within single mothers who have completed college contributes to the limited knowledge about the phenomenon of their college completion behaviors.

Aside from the relationship of grit to other concepts, grit is best studied when viewed through a situation-specific lens (Calo et al., 2019; Cormier et al., 2019; Crede et al., 2017; Crede, 2018; Pappano, 2013). Researchers recommend that future grit studies ask participants about a specific context (e.g., academics) regarding grit levels to support domain-specific instead of a domain-general understanding of the construct (Calo et al., 2019; Crede, 2018). The current study provided a specific context for self-assessment of grit by asking participants to consider their grit level related to earning a college degree.

Although growing in popularity among some scholars, grit is not without its detractors. Some researchers question whether the construct exists and assert that grit is simply a previously known noncognitive factor such as conscientiousness or self-control presented with a new name (Crede et al., 2017; Crede, 2018; Muenks et al., 2017). This overlap is known as a jangle fallacy— or the notion that "there are different names being given to quite similar constructs" (Muenks et al., 2017, p. 615). More research is needed to understand the interactions between grit and conscientiousness. As such, the current study seeks to add to the body of literature about grit and conscientiousness with the inclusion of the conscientiousness 2-item scale (Gosling et

al., 2003). The relationship between grit and self-control also needs further exploration but lies beyond the scope of the current study.

Previous researchers also found several issues with Duckworth and Quinn's (2009) Grit-O scale (Guerrero et al., 2016; Hardeman, 2016; Muenks et al., 2017). Originally developed as a 12-item instrument known as Grit-O (for original), after additional testing and data analysis, the authors "eliminat[ed] items from the Grit-O that were not as predictive of various outcomes across several samples of participants" (Muenks et al., 2017, p. 601), thereby creating the 8-item Short Grit Scale. or Grit-S.

The first issue concerns the overall structure of the Grit-S Scale. Although the definition of grit is specific about the importance of long-term pursuits, the Grit-S instrument does not directly provide a prompt about long-term passion and perseverance (Muenks et al., 2017). Likewise, Crede (2018) asserts that the Grit-S scale does not align well with "the theoretical conceptualization of grit because the items make almost no mention of maintaining interest and passion despite failures and setbacks—a core element of the definition of grit" (p. 4).

Another issue is that for some researchers, the Grit-S Scale created abnormal distributions such that the data were then treated as categorical rather than continuous (Muenks et al., 2017). Specifically, one of the items on the Grit-S scale has been consistently problematic when analyzing the data. Due to its phrasing as a double negative, the item "Setbacks don't discourage me" likely created confusion for some study participants (Guerrero et al., 2016; Hardeman, 2016). This prompt also caused irregularities in data analysis due to several neutral responses related to participants' uncertainty about what the phrase meant (Hardeman, 2016). The item was subsequently removed from analysis for Guerrero et al. (2016) to address this issue. In another study, the authors simplified the language of the item and instead used the

phrase “I don’t give up easily” (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014). The present study considered these concerns by also modifying the language of this item.

Crede et al.’s (2017) meta-analysis of the grit literature asserts that grit has not been vetted enough like an actual construct and is not significantly correlated with performance and retention. However, while flawed in some aspects of measurement, grit still shows some promise for future researchers. Recommendations for future study include focusing on the perseverance facet of grit (as opposed to the consistency facet), exploring grit in specific domains, for example, in academics or intense exercise, while also considering the mediating factors of performance domains, individual differences, varying levels of grit, and the interaction of grit and motivation (Crede et al., 2017).

Other authors assert that grit alone may not be enough for a person to realize success. Although well-intended, the movement to implement character development education in students, such as through grit, should proceed with caution (Pappano, 2013; Rose, 2013). For Rose (2013), attempting to develop an individual’s character through teaching grit or resilience, as examples, is reminiscent of the deficit-model approach to understanding low-income students. Doing so assumes these individuals are “lacking” in specific attributes. Rose (2013) urges caution in expecting that learning about concepts such as grit and resilience through well-meaning interventions will suddenly lift individuals out of poverty. In addition to personal grit, substantial policy changes around affordable housing, healthcare, unemployment, and immigration are needed to eradicate the systemic practices that keep low-income people oppressed (Rose, 2013).

Similarly, in another critique about perceiving grit in isolation, this approach may be seen as too individualistic for college student success. Bonfiglio (2017) advocates for encouraging grit

and resilience among college students in concert with broader community-building and social support, which are just as vital for student achievement as focusing on long-term goals. Grit and resilience, empathy, social connection, and engagement are needed to create a more balanced approach to moral and social development among college students (Bonfiglio, 2017). Thus, grit (individual persistence and passion) and its interaction with resilience (the construct's relational, social support aspect) are not well understood. More research is needed to explore how these mechanisms might combine to support college degree completion and, specifically, single mothers.

Finally, questions remain as to if there is such a thing as too much grit. Possessing extremely high grit levels could be problematic (Bonfiglio, 2017), especially if an individual narrows their attention and focus with unrelenting perseverance and passion to such an extreme that it becomes self-detrimental (Crede, 2018; Hardeman, 2016). “A potential disadvantage to high grit, by definition, is not recognizing when it’s time to change course when striving to achieve a goal that may be unrealistic or unattainable for that individual” (Hardeman, 2016, p. 59). For example, consider the student who takes and fails an intensive medical school entrance exam three or four times. This level and intensity of grit could amount to costing hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars. Such intense efforts without realizing much success may be disadvantageous since this student might have delayed starting an otherwise promising career in a different field (Crede, 2018).

Overall, grit is an intriguing concept that is not without its challenges in both its definition, overlap with other constructs, and as the subject of a measurement instrument. The results of the current study attempted to add to the literature about grit and resilience through the examination of successful single mother college graduates. Concerns about the design of the

Grit-S scale are taken into consideration with recommended modifications to the problematic item, i.e., “Setbacks don’t discourage me.”

Positive Deviance

As noted by some researchers, previous studies focused on a negative or deficit approach to understanding human behavior (Bernard, 1991; Hernandez, 2000; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Bernard (1991) asserts that "the social and behavioral sciences have followed a problem-focused approach to studying human and social development" (Bernard, 1991, p. 5). Similarly, according to Hernandez (2000) who studied the retention of Latino students, historically, the larger body of educational research implemented a deficit-model approach that viewed college retention through the lens of student problems and subsequent failures. Bober (2017) found that the literature on single mothers primarily presented a deficit narrative and instead implemented a strength-focused inquiry as an alternative. In their examination of the persistence of Black males in higher education, Kim and Hargrove (2013) encourage the momentum of research away from a deficit lens since it tended to play into stereotypes that limited the academic success of Black male students.

Given the recommendations of previous researchers, the present study shifted away from deficit thinking around nontraditional students. Within this chapter, the many challenges and obstacles faced by single mothers in college were acknowledged and explored in depth. By implementing a positive deviance lens, the study focused on the strengths, resilience, and grit of single mothers and captured the essence of the behaviors that influenced their successful completion of a college degree.

Positive deviance is a conceptual framework that posits that some individuals within any given community overcome obstacles and challenges by engaging in certain behaviors

(Castaneda-Flores, 2013; Pascale & Sternin, 2005; Singhal, 2013). A positive deviance conceptual framework is helpful since it can be applied to various environments to understand and address social and organizational challenges that are often difficult to eradicate. Researchers studied public health issues, including malnutrition in Southeast Asia (Marsh et al., 2004; Singhal, 2013) and HIV/AIDS in the United States and Myanmar (Ober et al., 2018; Pascale & Sternin, 2005).

In the corporate world, businesses implemented a positive deviance approach to address improvements in sales performance (Pascale & Sternin, 2005). Within the educational arena, researchers used a positive deviance framework to improve medical student outcomes (Zaidi et al., 2010), to examine student retention, including within elementary school children in rural South American communities (Singhal, 2013), and to study college-aged U.S. Latino students (Castaneda-Flores, 2013).

Resilience Theory, Grit, and Positive Deviance

As a theoretical framework, resilience is complementary in several ways in conjunction with positive deviance as a conceptual framework. First, both perspectives acknowledge the existence of challenges, risks, and setbacks faced by individuals. Second, both views emphasize the strengths, abilities, and positive attributes of the individual. Third, both resilience theory and the positive deviance concept integrate the importance of reliance on the community to provide relational support to the individual and implement positive change using examples of the individual's success, respectively.

Both resilience theory and the positive deviance framework align well with the researcher's optimistic yet realistic views about the world. Without question, there are challenges, setbacks, obstacles, and numerous unspeakable atrocities faced by humans every day.

However, there are fascinating stories of phoenixes rising from the ashes and individuals who survive and thrive against all odds. Understanding the behaviors and strategies that propelled single mothers to academic success served as the researcher's primary motivation for undertaking this study.

While there are similarities between resilience theory and positive deviants, researchers also assert distinctions between them. Ober et al. (2018) state, "where resilience approaches tend to examine psychological and external social contributors to positive adaptive outcomes, positive deviance approaches typically examine uncommon *behaviors*…" (p. 1700). In the present study, uncommon behaviors within a positive deviance context include describing specific actions of single mothers who completed college.

As noted previously, grit is a passionate and persistent endeavor that focuses on reaching long-term goals. Grit aligns well with years' long pursuits, such as obtaining a higher level of education: those individuals with more education were also found to have higher grit levels (Duckworth et al., 2007). Resilience may help individuals manage the week-to-week challenges in life through flexibility and adaptability (Hardeman, 2016) to navigate difficult situations and setbacks. In contrast, grit involves a goal-driven, year-after-year commitment to achieving a long-term goal (Duckworth et al., 2007). Grit and resilience are related, but findings are inconclusive as to the direction of their relationship. Both grit and resilience are best studied and understood within a specific context such as academics. The current study provided this context for grit by asking participants to consider their grit levels when completing their college degrees.

Summary

The goal of this chapter was to review literature about the current demographics and perceptions of single mothers. Historically, single mothers and their family structure were

blamed for society's problems while social support resources designed to help those in poverty were being cut. However, single mothers continued striving for a better life for themselves and their children, and often, pursuing a degree was a path toward upward mobility.

Undoubtedly, there are many challenges faced by single mother college students, including role strain, marginalization both inside and outside of the classroom, finding affordable child care, and personal financial issues. However, single mothers may not experience all of these obstacles. Still, there are reasons for single mothers to pursue and complete a college degree, such as serving as a role model for their children and creating a better life for their families.

Resilience theory, grit, and positive deviance are concepts that may help explain single mother college completion. More research is needed regarding grit and its interaction with other factors such as self-control and conscientiousness. Finally, to date, it does not appear that any other studies have implemented a positive deviance approach to explore the phenomenon of single mother college degree completion.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In the current mixed-method, phenomenological concurrent triangulation study, single mother college completion was explored through a lens of resilience, grit, and positive deviance. The quantitative research question was: Are single mothers more resilient or "grittier" than non-single mother college completers? The primary qualitative research question was: What are the lived experiences of single mother college completers? Chapter 3 provides detailed explanations of the phenomenological methodology implemented to answer the research questions. Participants and sampling procedures begin the chapter, followed by details about the original instrumentation and the measures taken to address trustworthiness. Next, plans for data collection, storage, and analysis are explained. The chapter concludes with a discussion of potential ethical issues and the expected outcomes.

Participants and Sampling Procedures

Study participants consisted of two populations to address both the quantitative and qualitative components of the research design. First, for the quantitative component, individuals at least 18 or older, both males and females, with or without children, with or without a college degree, and of any marital status were invited to participate in the initial electronic survey about their college completion experience, grit, resilience, and conscientiousness. The original goal was to collect a minimum of 385 surveys for quantitative analysis (Survey Monkey Sample Size Calculator). Social media channels, including but not limited to Twitter, Facebook, Linked In, and Instagram, along with the researcher's professional contacts, were used to distribute the College History survey electronically.

One prompt at the end of the online survey asked if participants were single mothers when they had earned a college degree and to indicate their interest in volunteering to be

interviewed. If they answered yes, to protect participant anonymity from the first survey, prospective interviewed participants were requested to contact the researcher via email or phone for follow-up screening.

For the qualitative (semi-structured interviews) component of the study, criterion sampling was used to identify 10 participants who met all the following criteria:

1) Were at least 18 years of age;
2) With an earned a college degree or vocational certificate;
3) Who was or is an unmarried (single, never married; divorced, or widowed) female head of household; and
4) They had at least one child living with them as the birth mother, foster parent, or legal guardian when they earned their degree.

In summary, a college-graduated woman at least 18-years old was a single head of household, with at least one child living with her while in school. The researcher's CARE (Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education) and CalWORKS (California Work Opportunities and Responsibilities for Kids) connections were contacted to find potential participants for the qualitative component. In addition, snowball sampling was implemented by asking survey participants to forward the survey link to others. The survey was designed to screen for the minimum age requirements ("I am at least 18 years old") and for having at least attempted a college degree. Finally, to develop a diverse group of participants for the qualitative component of the study, stratified purposeful sampling was implemented to include a range of ages, ethnicities, and types of college attended. This sampling strategy allowed input from participants who shared their first-hand experiences with the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018), in this case, single mothers' perspectives on college completion. Ten respondents who met

the criteria and aligned with the diverse needs of the study were invited to participate in virtual one-on-one semi-structured interviews.

A reciprocal relationship, as opposed to a transactional one, is the preferred method of minimizing any potential power differential between the researcher and the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). Previous researchers studying single mothers offered gift cards to the participants (Lashley, 2014; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Richard & Lee, 2019). As a show of appreciation for their time and contributions, the 10 interviewed single mother participants were offered one (1) $20 gift card of their choice between three options (casual dining or mass retailer, for example) after completing interviews and research collaborations to review the data. Participants were also offered an opportunity to receive a final electronic manuscript of the study.

Instrumentation and Measures

The study intended to understand the general perspective of college graduates, their grit, conscientiousness, resilience, and the essence of single mother college completion by implementing three instruments: an online, quantitative survey about college completion, a grit/resilience/conscientiousness survey, and a semi-structured, virtual interview. Survey participants were provided with an informed consent statement and instructions before beginning the College History Survey (Appendix E). Participant responses to prompts about their demographics and college experiences were collected within the College History Survey. One researcher-designed prompt on the survey asked respondents to base their answers about college on the one degree that they felt required the most grit or resilience for completion. Throughout the study, this designation is referred to as the *degree of focus* and allows participants with more than one degree to focus on a specific degree completion experience.

For interviewed participants, the researcher reviewed the informed consent statement (Appendix F) before the interview, and the form was signed electronically. A link to complete the survey was sent to prospective participants via email and social media following a recruitment protocol (Appendix G).

In addition to the researcher's College History Survey questions, three instruments designed to assess grit, resilience, and conscientiousness were presented, including the 8-item Grit Scale (Duckworth, 2020) as provided in Appendix H, and the 14-Item Resilience Scale ™ developed by Wagnild and Young (1993) presented in Appendix J. Conscientiousness was assessed using a 2-item subscale (Gosling et al., 2003). Participants rated themselves on the prompts "I see myself as dependable, self-disciplined" and "I see myself as disorganized, careless" (reverse-scored) on a scale from 1 = disagree strongly to 7 = agree strongly (Gosling et al., 2003) as presented in Appendix K.

According to Leech (2002), "semi-structured interviews allow respondents the chance to be the experts and to inform the research" (p. 668). The semi-structured interview protocol and follow-up prompts were developed to explore the lived experiences, grit, resiliency, and positive deviance behaviors of single mothers who completed college (Appendix L). Participants answered questions about specific college experiences such as their daily schedule, finances, child-care, social support, and any advice they would like to offer to other single mothers in the process of completing college. At the end of the interview, one open-ended question allowed participants to share any information that was not asked but would contribute to their college completion story.

After the initial semi-structured interviews, the research reviewed and edited each transcript to develop segments then converted segments into themes. The original research plan

was to contact participants for up to two additional 30-minute interviews. However, during the process of analyzing data, it was necessary to adjust. Instead of conducting follow-up virtual interviews as initially planned, the researcher emailed two follow-up questionnaires to the 10 single-mother participants to conserve time and limit inconvenience for the study participants. These brief questionnaires included multiple-choice options and allocated space for written, open-ended comments for each prompt. The researcher designed the follow-up questionnaires to confirm and refine or refute the researcher's initial findings of segments, codes, and themes. Participants' written comments provided an opportunity for them to take additional time to reflect on and express their thoughts and feelings about their degree completion experiences. Some of their written comments were used as direct quotes presented in the next chapter. Finally, the follow-up questionnaire process also engaged participants as co-researchers, recommended for effective phenomenological research design (Moustakas, 1994) and member checking (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

Reliability

From a quantitative approach, reliability is about the consistency of measurement. For example, a student who scores high on self-efficacy one day would be expected to obtain a similar score two weeks later. However, to account for changes in participants' mood, stress levels, or lack of sleep, researchers allow for some degree of error, typically at less than 5%.

Internal consistency in research includes two approaches: split-half reliability. The researcher divides the items on a test into two parts to see if both are consistent with each other. Kuder-Richardson (KR) examines consistency between right and wrong answers on an instrument, while Cronbach's alpha explains the reliability of a measure of a single construct (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). For the current study, it appeared split-half reliability, and KR

did not apply. However, Cronbach's alpha is relevant as it relates to measures of a single construct such as grit or resilience.

Further, threats to the internal consistency of the study might arise from asking participants about their current grit or resilience levels even though their completion of college and their college experiences may have taken place several years in the past. As for stability/test-retest, there is no reliable mechanism for measuring participants' actual grit or resilience levels from an earlier period as their levels may have changed over time due to life circumstances. One way to address this possible threat to reliability was to ask survey participants to rate their perceived grit and resilience levels related to earning their college degrees.

Other threats to the study were participants' accurate recollection of past events. There was also a threat as to whether remembering their college experiences caused them unintended anxiety. This possibility was addressed by providing instructions that let participants know they were being asked to recall their college experiences, which may prepare them mentally to answer the survey. Within the informed consent document, the researcher provided interviewed participants with information about access to free counseling services if they needed emotional support after recounting their college completion experiences. Also, participants were informed that they could withdraw from the survey or virtual interviews at any time.

The researcher used three strategies to create a reliable study from a qualitative perspective by acknowledging the possibility of common research challenges such as subject errors, subject bias, and observer errors and biases (Gibbs, 2012). First, a subject error occurs when participants produce different answers on different days (Gibbs, 2012). Through a process known as skip logic, where participants answer only the prompts relevant to their situation, the length of the college completion survey was designed to reduce exhaustion or boredom. Ideally,

this prevented participants from answering a long list of questions where they might have been tempted to provide random or incomplete answers to finish more quickly. Also, the researcher implemented the 8-item Grit Scale (Duckworth, 2020) as opposed to the 12-item scale as well as The Resilience Scale ™ (RS-14), containing 14 items instead of the original 25-item instrument (Wagnild & Young, 1993).

Second, to address the possibility of subject bias, which occurs when participants try to please the researcher by answering the way they think the researcher wants (Gibbs, 2012), the study was designed to encourage participant transparency within the instructions. Within virtual semi-structured interviews, confidentiality was ensured in reporting the results using participant aliases and generic geographic descriptions. Hence, participants were encouraged to answer questions truthfully.

Observer error and bias refer to the researcher anticipating results that cloud how the data is interpreted (Gibbs, 2012). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), "in qualitative research, *reliability* often refers to the stability of responses to multiple coders of data sets" (p. 264). The third strategy was first to bracket the researcher's expectations or engage in a process known as the Epoche (Moustakas, 1994). The Epoche is defined as "a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions and allowing things, events, and people to enter into a new consciousness, and look to see them again, as if for the first time" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). The next step was to collect comprehensive notes from the participants using high-quality, trustworthy recording devices and transcribing the audio files into printed text (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In summary, implementing reliable and valid strategies is an essential component of producing quality research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gibbs, 2012; Maxwell, 2013). Threats to

reliability and validity, both quantitatively and qualitatively, were acknowledged and addressed by the researcher through careful planning and implementation of reasonable strategies to address these threats (Maxwell, 2013).

Validity

There are several aspects to consider regarding validity in educational research, including internal, external, construct, content, and criterion. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2014), "validity is clearly the single most important aspect of an instrument and the findings that result from the data" (p. 194).

Internal validity refers to the "degree to which extraneous and confounding variables are controlled" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014, p. 4). For the current study, variables such as intelligence, socio-economic status, number of children, and age of the mother at birth of her first child presented a threat to the validity of the findings. One approach to address these possible threats was to ask participants questions to control the variables in the data analysis. However, intelligence is a construct that poses a significant threat since it is challenging to measure within the scope of the research study. Within the Discussion section, the impact of intelligence on any variances is taken into consideration.

External validity means the "extent to which the results of a study can be generalized to other subjects, conditions, and situations" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014, p. 3). One threat to the study's external validity is generalizing results to single mothers and college students related to assessed levels of grit or resilience and the impact on college completion. Due to the small sample size of the qualitative interviews, the study was expected to be somewhat limited in generalizability. Therefore, the researcher used caution in explaining results and their application to the broader population of single-mother college graduates.

Construct validity is the notion that scores on one construct measurement correlate with measures of another similar construct. For example, one would expect that scores on the construct of grit would at least moderately correlate with the constructs of motivation, resilience, and conscientiousness. A threat to the study's construct validity is if these three constructs are not correlated at all or are negatively correlated. The researcher remained aware of this possibility and addressed the threat with initial pilot testing of a survey containing items related to grit, resilience, and conscientiousness.

There are two types of criterion validity: predictive and concurrent. Predictive criterion validity refers to the ability of the first measure to predict the criterion in the future. For example, for the present study, one could hypothesize that the single mothers who complete a degree could be predicted by their high grit levels as measured by the Grit scale. Concurrent validity means that the measure and criterion are taken simultaneously and reported as a correlation. Following the same example, with concurrent validity, one might expect that grit correlates with college completion. In either instance, the study addressed predictive and criterion validity threats by implementing robust instruments that have been pilot tested.

To create a valid study in qualitative research means there is credibility, authenticity, and correctness within the study (Gibbs, 2012; Lincoln et al., 2011, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). Two strategies to increase the study's validity included triangulation and member checking/collaborating with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In this mixed-method phenomenological concurrent triangulation study, the purpose was to understand the essence of single-mother college completion. Triangulation is the process of seeking multiple sources of evidence that substantiate each other and support one's inferences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). The two sources of triangulated evidence included: a)

data from the College History Survey, including data from respondents' grit, resilience, and conscientiousness scales; and b) participant answers to the semi-structured interview protocol that inquired about specific events (Maxwell, 2013), which occurred during college. The integration of these quantitative and qualitative sources relied on evidence rather than a methodology to support potential conclusions (Maxwell, 2013).

The second strategy combines two similar techniques: member checks and collaboration with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Seeking participant feedback and member checking involves asking participants to review the initial interpretations and conclusions to determine if they accurately represent the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018), i.e., college completion. By collaborating with participants, the researcher engaged them at various stages of the research, including, but not limited to, data collection and the development of research conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Both member checks and participant collaboration align well with the conceptual framework of positive deviance. Individuals, known as positive deviants, realize success by engaging in certain behaviors despite serious obstacles (Castaneda-Flores, 2013; Pascale & Sternin, 2005; Singhal, 2013). Researchers who study positive deviance stress the importance of including positive deviants in contributing to the solutions for their respective communities. Further, positive deviants working in tangent with the researcher increase validity and credibility for proposed solutions (Pascale & Sternin, 2005; Singhal, 2013).

In summary, implementing reliable and valid strategies is an essential component of producing quality research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gibbs, 2012; Maxwell, 2013). The researcher acknowledges and addresses potential threats to reliability and validity through careful planning and reasonable strategies to address these challenges (Maxwell, 2013).

Plan for Data Collection and Storage

For part one of the study, data from the College History Survey were collected via an online survey link created using Survey Monkey, which allowed participants to submit their responses anonymously. Before starting the survey, prospective participants confirmed they were at least 18 years of age. Next, the participant consent statement was agreed upon electronically by checking "I agree" before directing the survey instructions. If an individual selected "I do not agree" to the consent statement, then using skip logic, their participation in the study ceased, and they were thanked for their time. Participants who continued with the process could skip any survey question or stop participating at any time without any penalty or repercussions. The last item of the online survey asked participants if they were willing to participate in the second part of the study for further research. If so, they were asked to contact the researcher via phone or email. After the initial contact from the participant, the researcher collected basic demographic information to confirm eligibility and support stratified purposive sampling for diversity in participation, as noted previously. Data collected from the College History Survey were stored in an encrypted, password-protected account that was only accessible by the researcher.

Data for the qualitative component were collected from 10 single mother participants via recorded one-on-one, virtual interviews lasting between 45- and 60- minutes. The first interview was conducted virtually using Zoom, an online video meeting platform. Upon arrival into the first interview “room,” the participant was greeted by the researcher and offered the opportunity to share a bit more about their current work or educational endeavors. This informal interaction allowed time to build rapport and for participants to become more comfortable with the interview setting and process (CSSL, 2012; Holland & Elander, 2013).

Before the start of the first virtual interview, the researcher began the audio-visual recording, explained the purpose of the study, and reviewed in detail the research informed consent form, which had been emailed and signed by the participants before the interview. Participants received a copy of the consent form, which contained the researcher's contact information for their future reference. They also had the opportunity to ask any questions before commencing with the interview. Lastly, the researcher informed participants that they could skip any question or stop the interview at any time without penalty or repercussions.

The first virtual interviews lasted between 45- and no more than 60 minutes. The semi-structured interview protocol asked participants specific questions about their college completion experiences, including access to child care, personal finances, social support, motivation for completing their college degree, and the impact earning a degree had on their lives. After the first interview, participants were thanked for their time and reminded that they might be contacted up to two more times for follow-up purposes during the data triangulation and analysis process.

All video and audio recorded interview data were downloaded from the virtual meeting platform and stored securely on a hard drive. Only the researcher had access using an encrypted password. Any physical or printed documentation collected was stored securely in a locked filing cabinet to which only the researcher had access. All electronic, recorded, and printed data will be permanently deleted or destroyed three years after completing the study.

After the initial data collection from the first virtual interview, the researcher contacted the participants two separate times via email, asking them to complete two brief surveys and provide written comments about their degree completion experiences.

Plan for Data Analysis

The independent, interval variable data included age, income/socio-economic status, and the number of children. In contrast, one independent, categorical variable of gender was captured from the initial online College History Survey. Levels of resilience, grit, and conscientiousness served as the dependent variables. All online surveys with quantitative data were converted into a spreadsheet format appropriate for statistical analysis using StatFi. A Pearson's R^2 correlation was run between the interval variables and the dependent variables to determine the strength and direction of the relationships. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were run between gender (categorical) and grit or resilience (the dependent variable).

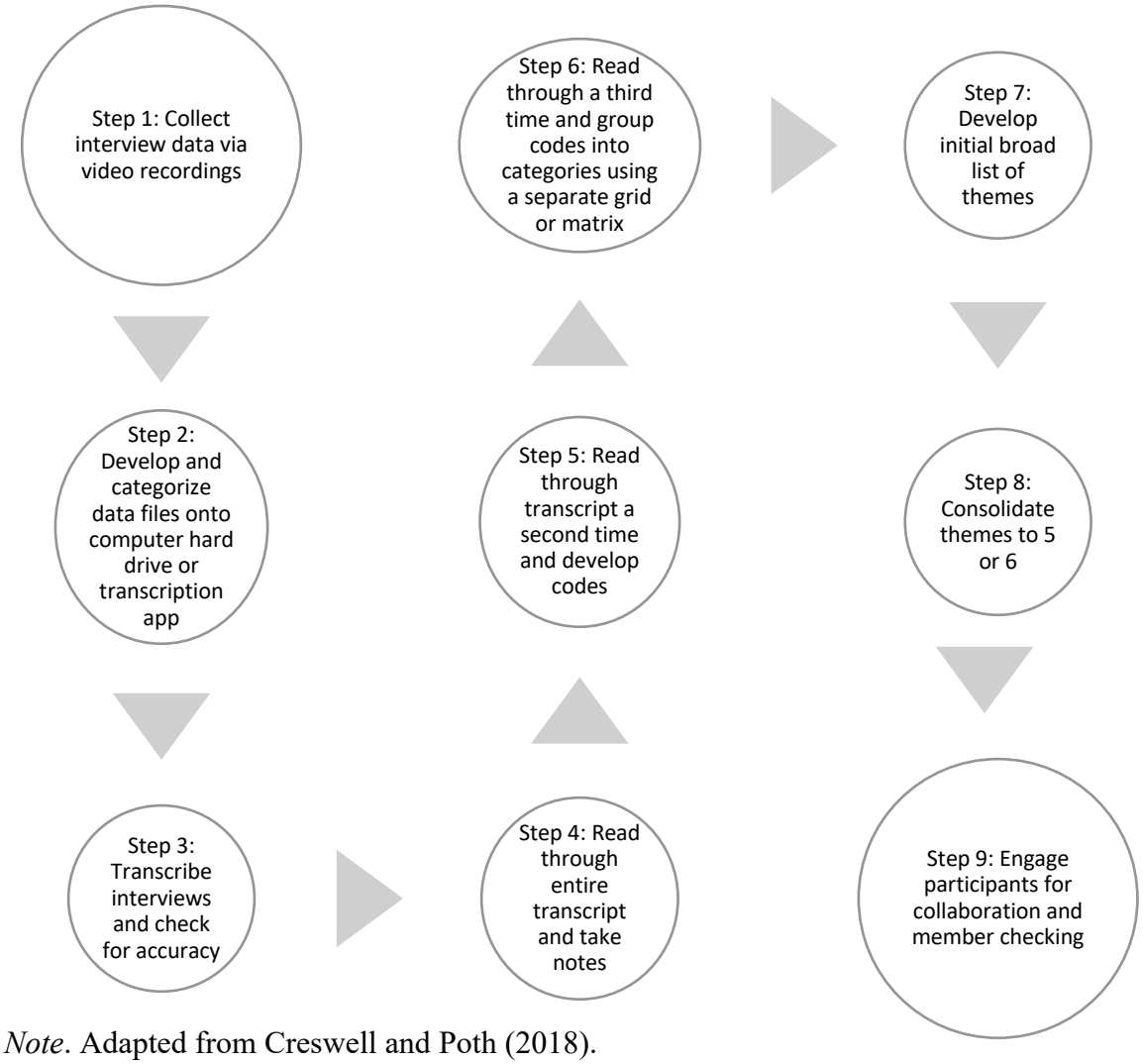
Analysis of qualitative data followed steps, as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018) and Moustakas (1994), as shown in Figure 1. First, all recorded interviews and transcripts were downloaded from the virtual meeting platform. All transcriptions were reviewed and edited for accuracy. Each interview transcript was printed out and read through thoroughly for the first reading. During the second reading, the researcher added memos in the margins of the pages. For the third reading, keywords or statements were underlined or highlighted. Based on the notes, keywords, and statements, the researcher formed segments then developed codes. Codes were then aligned into the themes that were prevalent among interviewed participants.

The researcher engaged in member checking and participant collaboration as part of the follow-up procedures and subsequent interviews to further understand the data. Both techniques involved "taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 261). The researcher asked participants via email to provide feedback on their experiences with the emergent themes, and they had the option to elaborate by giving written responses. Finally,

participants received a summary draft of their profiles for revisions and a draft of the findings in Chapter 4 for feedback to ensure the accuracy of their quotes.

Figure 1

Plan for Qualitative Data Analysis



Note. Adapted from Creswell and Poth (2018).

Ethical Issues

Ethical issues in qualitative studies are present throughout the entire research process, and researchers must take responsibility for acknowledging their existence and developing plans to address them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Three potential ethical issues were present within the current study: confidentiality or participant identifiability, a power imbalance with the researcher, and recalling painful or embarrassing memories.

Participants remained anonymous for the first part of the data collection process when submitting their College History Survey answers. For the second part of the data collection process of semi-structured virtual interviews, the researcher ensured confidentiality; however, participants' answers were not anonymous.

Regarding confidentiality issues, it was realistic to expect that participants might be reluctant to fully disclose their college experiences in detail if there was fear that their responses would be looked upon unfavorably by an administrative official or by current students of their alma mater. Also, participants may not have wished to share personal experiences that they perceive as embarrassing or shameful. The researcher addressed concerns and issues of confidentiality by excluding all participants' names, names of their children, their alma maters, current locales, or any other identifiable information with the exceptions of actual age, race, and the number of children. Participants' identities were thus masked using aliases and general descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For example, a participant description such as: "Julia (alias), age 27, a single mother of two children who identify as Hispanic, graduated from a mid-sized Southern California community college" is intended to provide enough detail to give context to her story, but not enough specific information for her to be identified.

A power imbalance between study participants and the researcher occurs when a hierarchical relationship develops during the interview process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participant may report what they think the researcher wants to hear out of deference or fear. Also, every effort was made to protect participants against being or feeling "used" by the researcher for their gain or solely as a means to an end (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013).

There were at least two strategies to address this ethical issue. First, power imbalance "needs to be respected, and building trust and avoiding leading questions help to remove some of this imbalance" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 57). Careful attention was paid to how interview questions were formulated and asked participants through pilot testing with a similar population. Trust and rapport-building were developed in the interview process's early stages during introductions and casual getting-to-know-you interactions (CSSL, 2012).

Second, reciprocity helps reduce any power imbalance (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). To this end, all interviewed research participants were offered their choice of one of three types of $20 electronic gift cards as a small token of appreciation for their valuable time and contributions to the study. Participants had the opportunity to review and revise the researcher's interpretations of their interview content, the study's findings, and their profile summary before publication. The researcher thanked all interviewed participants in the Acknowledgements and offered them an electronic copy of the final research manuscript.

The third potential ethical issue relates to participants' experiencing the recall of painful memories during their time in college, which may place them at risk for undue stress or anxiety. Researchers are required to promote the welfare of all study participants by "ensuring adequate protection of participants" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 54). During the initial interview consent process, the researcher clearly and thoroughly explained the study's goals, purpose, and intended

use to address any ethical issues associated with painful memories. Participants were informed that as volunteers, they could stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. The researcher answered any questions about the study, confidentiality, identifiability, consent form, planned use of results, or any other aspects of the research before the semi-structured interviews. In addition, the informed consent document contained information about free online counseling services should participants need emotional or psychological support.

Lastly, the researcher completed approximately 8 hours of required Institutional Review Board (IRB) training in Social and Behavioral Research provided by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Program and obtained a certificate of completion. The content of the training emphasizes the importance of appropriate and ethical treatment of study participants. To summarize, potential ethical issues have been carefully considered and are addressed in a manner that seeks to protect participants' social and psychological well-being.

Expected Outcomes

Based on the limited literature regarding single mothers, it was expected that during the interview process, participants would reveal that the following experiences played a factor in their success:

1. Childcare issues and access to affordable childcare were factors at various points in their college career, yet they found a way to overcome this with support from friends, family, and neighbors.
2. Despite facing obstacles and setbacks while pursuing a college degree, participants found ways to “bounce back” from adversity, indicating high resilience levels.

3. With an unrelenting drive to improve their lives and the lives of their children, single mothers stayed focused on their long-term educational goals, thereby indicating high levels of grit.
4. Single mothers who earned a college degree will describe their specific and, in some cases, uncommon behaviors that align with positive deviance. In this manner, they were academically successful when other single mothers facing similar obstacles were not.

Summary

In summary, the current research study implemented a mixed-method phenomenological approach to explore and describe how single mothers complete college. Ten single-mother heads of households who were 18 or older with at least one child living with them while completing a college degree served as the primary participants. In addition, participants of any gender or marital status with a college degree were surveyed for comparison of grit, resilience, and conscientiousness scores. Data collection included an online college history survey for all participants and virtual, semi-structured interviews with single mother college graduates. Data analysis included the use of StatFi for quantitative survey items. Reliability and validity measures enhanced the study's trustworthiness through member checks, triangulation, and participant collaboration. The researcher situated herself and was aware of her limitations as a married woman without children. Care was taken to address and minimize ethical issues of confidentiality, power imbalance, or undue stress. Offering reciprocity to participants in the form of gift cards ($20) aligned with previous studies of single mothers. Finally, expected outcomes were based on current literature about single mothers and on the researcher's hypothesis that participants depended on diverse social and financial resources as forms of support for their academic success.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This mixed-method phenomenological study examined the grit scores, resilience levels, and positive deviance behaviors of 10 single mothers who completed a college degree compared to a broader population of college graduates, both male and female. The researcher asked the following research questions and sub-questions:

1. Are single mother college graduates significantly more resilient and "grittier" than non-single mother college graduates? (Quantitative)
2. What are the lived experiences of single mother college graduates? (Qualitative)

Sub-questions included:

   a. How do single mothers finish college?
   b. What thoughts, behaviors, strategies, and techniques do single mothers describe as contributing to their academic accomplishments and college completion?
   c. What is the impact of college completion on single mothers and their children?

The purpose of this chapter is to present the quantitative results of the College History Survey taken by over 250 adults with a college degree and to summarize the qualitative findings of the semi-structured interviews with 10 single mothers who completed at least one college degree. First, the chapter outlines the demographic characteristics of all participants who completed the survey, including their age, race, gender, income, marital status, and the number of college degrees. A presentation of quantitative results includes the grit, resilience, and conscientiousness scores for all participants. The research compared scores between those who identified themselves as non-single parents and survey participants who identified as single mothers. Next, qualitative findings are presented, beginning with a summary of the demographic characteristics of single mother semi-structured interview participants, including their age,

ethnicity, number of children, number of degrees, and type of colleges attended. Consistent themes of college completion across single-mother participants and direct quotes highlighting the phenomenology of their grit, resilience, and positive deviance are also presented. A mixed-method triangulation of the quantitative results, qualitative findings, and literature review evidence in Chapter 2 highlight the study's significance. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of findings and introduces the interpretations and discussion presented in Chapter 5.

Quantitative Results

The College History Survey contained 55 items and was attempted by a total of 257 participants using an online, password-protected data collection platform known as Survey Monkey. Analysis of responses revealed a survey submission rate of 72%, calculated by the platform as those respondents who proceeded to the last section and submitted their survey. Using skip logic, any potential participant who started taking the survey but had not earned at least one college degree was skipped to the end and thanked for their time. Of the 257 respondents, 244 (94.9%) answered the survey question if they had ever attempted a college degree. Table 1 presents a summary of the survey respondents' degree attempts.

Table 1

Degree Attempts for College History Survey Respondents

Characteristic	*n*	%
Total number of survey respondents	257	
Total number of respondents who answered degree attempt prompt	244	94.9
Never attempted a college degree	0	0
Currently enrolled in a degree program	8	3.28
Started but did not finish a college degree and not currently enrolled in a degree program	11	3.97
Attempted and completed at least one degree	225	92.21

Results indicated that 86.5% of participants identified as female (n =148). The median age of all participants was 46 years (n = 171, SD 12.89). Table 2 summarizes the demographic data for all survey participants, including their ethnicity, current marital status, parental status, number of children, and individual annual income ranges.

Table 2

Demographic Data for All Study Participants

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Female	148	86.5
Male	23	13.5
Nonbinary	0	0
Ethnicity [a]		
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	.59
Asian	5	2.94
Black or African American	26	15.29
Hispanic/Latinx	49	28.82
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0	0
Middle Eastern	2	1.18
White or Caucasian	81	47.65
Mixed Ethnicity	6	3.53
Current marital status [b]		
Single, never married	42	52.6
Married	90	24.6
Divorced	32	18.7
Widowed	5	2.9
Separated	2	1.2
Individual annual income [c]		
Under $15,000	9	5.36
Between $15,000 and $29,999	10	5.95
Between $30,000 and $49,999	16	9.52
Between $50,000 and $74,999	35	20.83
Between $75,000 and $99,999	33	19.64
Between $100,000 and $150,000	47	27.99
Over $150,000	18	10.71

Note. N = 171. Participants did not answer all survey prompts. [a] n = 170. [b] n = 171. [c] n = 168

Across all survey participants, nearly half (49.12 %) had earned a master's degree as their highest level of education. Table 3 summarizes the educational data, including the highest degree attained, number of degrees, and degrees of focus for all survey participants. As described in Chapter 3, the *degree of focus* refers to the college degree earned by participants, which they felt required the most grit or resilience. This delineation allowed participants to focus primarily on their experiences related to earning that particular degree.

Of the 257 survey participants (70.5%) indicated they had children, with the largest percentage (36.63%) having 2 children. Table 4 provides a summary of the family demographics for all survey participants. While attempting to complete their degree of focus, 60 (66%) participants had children between 0 and 11-years-old as shown in Table 5.

Participant's data were divided into three primary groups who indicated their status while earning their degree of focus: a) those who identified as single mothers (n = 42), b) those who identified as married women with children (n = 53) and c) due to small sample sizes, the researcher combined other classifications into one group, including married women without children (n = 15), married men with children (n = 9), single men with children (n = 8), married men without children (n = 2), and a single male without children (n = 1), for a total of 35 participants labeled as Combined Group.

Table 3

Educational Data for All Study Participants

Characteristic	*n*	%
Highest degree attained [a]		
Associate's or 2-year degree	4	2.34
Bachelors' or 4-year degree	53	31.00
Master's degree	84	49.12
Doctoral degree	28	16.37
Professional certification	2	1.17
Other degree	3	1.75
Number of degrees earned [b]		
1 degree	47	22.49
2 degrees	73	34.93
3 degrees	57	27.27
4 or more degrees	32	15.31
Degree of focus [c]		
Vocational certificate	1	0.48
Associate's or 2-year degree	12	5.71
Bachelors' or 4-year degree	83	39.52
Master's degree	83	39.52
Doctoral degree	28	13.33
Other degree	3	1.43
Age when starting degree of focus [d]		
Under 18	17	8.06
18-24	79	37.44
25-34	61	29.81
35-44	33	15.64
45-54	18	8.53
55-64	3	1.42
65 and older	0	0

Note. Due to missing data [a] $n = 171$, [b] $n = 209$, [c] $n = 210$, and [d] $n = 211$

Table 4

Family Demographics for All Study Participants

Characteristic	*n*	%
Have children?		
Yes	148	70.5
No	62	29.5
Number of children (*n* = 142)		
1 child	33	23.24
2 children	52	36.62
3 children	33	23.24
4 children	12	8.45
5 or more children	12	8.45
Age at birth of first child		
Under 18	5	3.5
18-24	38	26.57
25-34	88	61.54
35-44	7	4.90
45-54	0	0
55-64	0	0
65 and older	0	0
Not applicable due to stepchildren	5	3.5

Table 5

Age of Children During Degree of Focus for All Study Participants

	Number of Children				
Age Range	Child 1	Child 2	Child 3	Child 4	Child 5
Pregnant	2	0	0	0	0
0 to 5-years old	29	15	3	2	1
6 to 11-years old	31	13	6	2	1
12 to 17-years old	10	11	5	3	4
18 years and older	19	11	5	2	0

Are Single Mother College Graduates Grittier or More Resilient than Others?

The first research question asked: “Are single mother college graduates significantly more resilient or "grittier" than non-single mother college graduates? There were five measures of grit and resilience in the study, two related to resilience, two related to grit, and one related to conscientiousness.

Table 6 shows a summary of the five measures, sample prompts, along with the Likert scale legend. The first measure asked participants about their resilience in college and is referred to as their self-reported measure of resilience. Participants answered the prompt, “Resilience can be defined as the ability to ‘bounce back’ from challenges. How would you rate your resilience level when it comes to working toward a college degree?” using a Likert scale from 5 = Completely Resilient to 1 = Not at All Resilient”.

The second measure of resilience was Wagnild and Young’s (1993) Resilience Scale 14, or RS-14, described in Chapter 3.

The third measure included a question about participants’ self-reported grit in college. “Grit is defined as the ability to commit to a goal with loyalty and to demonstrate consistency over time. How would you rate your grit level when it comes to working toward a college degree?” on a scale from 5 = Completely Gritty to 1 = Not at All Gritty.

The fourth measure of grit was the 8-item Short Grit Scale developed by Duckworth and Quinn (2009), also discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

The fifth measure was the 2-Item Conscientiousness Scale developed by (Gosling et al., 2003). Previous studies acknowledged that the construct of conscientiousness interacted with grit and recommended that future research consider this (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014; Muenks et al., 2017).

The researcher conducted one-way ANOVA's (analysis of variance) for all five measures and across all three groups of participants. Results of the self-reported levels of resilience indicated that there was a significant difference in scores. A Scheffe post-hoc analysis revealed that single mothers self-reported a higher level of resilience in college ($M = 4.785$) compared to the Combined Group of participants ($M = 4.352$) $F\ (2,126) = 5.085$, $p < .05$. Table 7 shows a summary of the one-way ANOVAs for all five measures. There was no significant difference in self-reported college grit levels between single women and married women with children or between married women with children and the Combined Group.

One-way ANOVAs on Wagnild and Young's (1993) Resilience Scale ™ (RS-14) scores did not reveal any significant differences between single mothers and married women with children or between single mothers and the combined group of participants. Similarly, results of one-way ANOVAs for reported grit levels in college and the Grit-8 Scale did not reveal any significant differences in scores between single mothers, married women with children, or the combined group of participants. Finally, one-way ANOVAs also did not reveal any significant differences in conscientiousness scores between any of the groups.

The researcher conducted pairwise linear correlations between the three groups and their respective scores on the five measures. Single mothers' self-reported college resilience and self-reported college grit were moderately positive correlations, $r\ (41) = .42$, $p < .01$, as shown in Table 8. Married women with children's self-reported college resilience and self-reported college grit revealed a strong positive relationship, $r\ (51) = .54$, $p < .001$, as shown in Table 6

Table 6

Instruments to Measure Participants' Resilience, Grit, and Conscientiousness Levels

Construct	Measure	Sample Prompts	Likert Scale
Resilience	Self-reported resilience level while earning a college degree	"Resilience can be defined as the ability to 'bounce back' from challenges. How would you rate your resilience level when it comes to working toward a college degree?"	5 = Completely resilient to 1 = Not at all resilient
Resilience	The Resilience Scale, RS-14™ (Wagnild & Young, 1993)	There are 14 prompts related to the five characteristics of resilience: purpose, perseverance, equanimity, self-reliance, and existential aloneness (authenticity)	7 = Strongly agree to 1 = Strongly disagree
Grit	Self-reported grit while earning a college degree	"Grit is defined as the ability to commit to a goal with loyalty and to demonstrate consistency over time. How would you rate your grit level when it comes to working toward a college degree?"	5 = Completely gritty to 1 = Not at all gritty
Grit	Short Grit (8-item) Scale (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009)	"I am a hard worker." "I often set a goal, but later choose to pursue a different one." [a]	5 = Very much like me to 1 = Not like me at all
Conscientiousness	2-Item Conscientiousness Scale (Gosling et al., 2003)	"I see myself as dependable, self-disciplined." "I see myself as disorganized, careless." [a]	7= Agree strongly to 1 = Disagree strongly

Note. There are four prompts on the Short Grit Scale and one item on the 2-Item Conscientiousness Scale that are reverse scored.

[a] Examples of reverse-scored prompts.

Table 7

Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way ANOVAs for Resilience, Grit, and Conscientiousness Scores

Measure	Single mothers			Married women with children			Combined group			ANOVA		
	n	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*F* ratio	*df*	Ω^2
Resilience Scale (RS-14)	42	86.00	7.54	53	83.00	7.75	34	83.38	8.78	1.73	2,126	.01
Self-reported college resilience	42	4.78	.47	53	4.57	.54	34	4.36	.77	5.08*	2,126	.06
Short Grit Scale	42	3.91	.63	52	3.79	.49	34	3.97	.44	1.32	2,125	.00
Self-reported college grit	42	4.71	.55	53	4.55	.57	35	4.54	.51	1.34	2,127	.00
Conscientiousness Scale	41	6.01	.84	53	5.88	.89	35	5.9	1.08	.26	2,126	-.01

Note. ANOVA = analysis of variance. The Resilience Scale (RS-14) ™ scores can range from a low of 14 to a maximum of 98. Short Grit Scale scores, self-reported college resilience, and self-reported college grit scores can range from a low of 1 to a high of 5. Conscientious scale scores range can from a low of 1 to a high of 7.

*$p < .01$.

Table 8

Correlations for Single Mother Participant Scores (n = 42)

Measure	1	2	3	4	5
1. Resilience Scale (RS-14) scores	-				
2. Self-reported college resilience	.19	-			
3. Short Grit Scale scores	.21	.33*	-		
4. Self-reported college grit	.31*	.41**	.42**	-	
5. Conscientiousness [a]	.45**	.07	.44**	.35*	-

Note. [a] Due to missing data $n = 41$ for Conscientiousness Scale scores.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 9

Correlations for Married Women with Children Participant Scores (n = 53)

Measure	1	2	3	4	5
1. Resilience Scale (RS-14) scores	-				
2. Self-reported college resilience	.33*	-			
3. Short Grit Scale scores	.43** [a]	.21[a]	-		
4. Self-reported college grit	.34*	.54***[a]	.16 [a]	-	
5. Conscientiousness [a]	.44**	.15	.44**[a]	.13	-

Note. [a] Due to missing data $n = 52$.

*$p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

The combined group of participants' scores revealed a moderately positive relationship between their Conscientiousness Scale scores and their self-reported college resilience r (33) = .43, $p <$. 05. The correlations for the Combined Group's Resilience Scale (RS-15), self-reported resilience score, and Short Grit Scale scores are shown in Table 10 and did not reveal strong relationships.

Table 10

Correlations for Combined Group Participant Scores (n =34)

Measure	1	2	3	4	5
1. Resilience Scale (RS-14) scores	-				
2. Self-reported college resilience	.10 [a]	-			
3. Short Grit Scale scores	.19 [a]	.15	-		
4. Self-reported college grit	.05	.20	.39*	-	
5. Conscientiousness	.29	.43*	.35*	-.01 [b]	-

Note. Due to missing scores [a] = 33. Due to complete scores [b] = 35.

*$p < .05$.

Previous research indicates that grit and conscientiousness are related and should be accounted for in future studies (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014). Pairwise linear correlations between participants conscientiousness scores and their Short Grit Scale scores revealed moderately strong positive relationships for only two groups: single mothers r (41) = .44, $p < .01$ and married women with children r (52) = .44, $p < .01$ as shown in Tables 9 and 10, respectively, but not for the Combined group r (34) = .15, $p > .05$.

Qualitative Findings

In the analysis of demographic data, results indicated that survey participants who were single mothers while earning their degree of focus (n = 43) were predominantly Caucasian (43.9%). Table 11 presents all single-mother survey participants' ethnicity, current marital status, and individual annual income ranges.

Table 11

Demographic Data for All Single Mother Participants (n = 43)

Characteristic	*n*	%
Ethnicity [a]		
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	2.44
Black or African American	10	21.95
Hispanic/Latinx	12	29.27
White or Caucasian	18	43.9
Mixed Ethnicity	1	2.44
Current marital status		
Single, never married	9	20.93
Married	11	25.58
Divorced	18	41.86
Widowed	3	6.98
Separated	2	4.65
Individual annual income [a]		
Under $15,000	3	7.32
Between $15,000 and $29,999	1	2.44
Between $30,000 and $49,999	5	12.20
Between $50,000 and $74,999	10	24.39
Between $75,000 and $99,999	7	17.07
Between $100,000 and $150,000	14	31.71
Over $150,000	2	4.88

Note. [a] Due to missing data, $n = 42$.

The majority of all single mother participants (62.79%) had earned a master's as their highest degree. Table 12 highlights the educational data for all single mother survey participants' highest degree attained, number of degrees, degrees of focus, and age when starting their degree of focus.

Of the 43 single mothers, 30.23% indicated that they had two children. Table 13 shows the family demographic summary for the single mother survey participants. The majority of all single mothers (69.8%) had at least one child between 0 and 12-years-old while completing their degree of focus. Table 14 shows the age ranges for each child.

Table 12

Educational Data for All Single Mother Survey Participants (n = 43)

Characteristics	*n*	%
Highest degree attained		
Associate's or 2-year degree	0	0.00
Bachelors' or 4-year degree	10	23.26
Master's degree	27	62.79
Doctoral degree	4	9.30
Professional certification	1	2.33
Other degree	1	2.33
Number of degrees earned		
1 degree	4	9.30
2 degrees	12	27.91
3 degrees	17	39.53
4 or more degrees	10	23.26
Degree of focus		
Vocational certificate	1	2.33
Associate's or 2-year degree	3	6.98
Bachelors' or 4-year degree	15	34.88
Master's degree	21	48.84
Doctoral degree	3	6.98
Other degree	0	0.00
Age when starting degree of focus		
Under 18	1	2.33
18-24	5	11.63
25-34	23	53.49
35-44	6	13.95
45-54	7	16.28
55-64	1	2.33
65 and older	0	0

Table 13

Family Demographics for All Single Mother Survey Participants (n = 43)

Characteristic	*n*	%
Number of children		
1 child	13	30.23
2 children	13	30.23
3 children	7	16.28
4 children	6	13.95
5 or more children	4	9.30
Age at birth of first child		
Under 18	4	9.3
18-24	20	46.51
25-34	18	41.86
35-44	1	2.33
45-54	0	0
55-64	0	0
65 and older	0	0

Table 14

Age of Children during Degree of Focus for All Single Mother Participants

	Number of Children				
Age Range	Child 1	Child 2	Child 3	Child 4	Child 5
0 to 5-years-old	16	4	3	1	
6 to 11-years old	14	7	2	1	
12 to 17-years old	4	4	2		2
18 years and older	9	5	3	2	

At the end of the College History Survey, participants were asked if they were presently or had even been single mothers while they earned their degrees. If they answered yes to this question, they were asked if they would be interested in volunteering for additional research in the form of one-on-one interviews. Participants received the researcher's email and phone number to contact for follow-up. The researcher then contacted participants who indicated that they were single mothers at the time they earned at least one degree. After additional screening for ethnicity, degree type, and type of college, selected participants received an email with more

details about the research study, information on how self-schedule the virtual interview, and an informed consent form to review, sign and return to the researcher.

The researcher scheduled and conducted virtual interviews with ten women who were single mothers during the time they earned at least one college degree. Using a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix L), the interviews ranged between 45 and 60 minutes and were videotaped with permission via a signed informed consent statement. Participants received two follow-up surveys to assist the researcher with confirming and refining the initial themes.

Of the 10 single mother interviewed participants, four (40%) had earned at least two degrees, and six (60%) earned over $75,000 annually. Table 15 highlights the participants' demographics, including the number of children and individual annual income.

As shown in Table 16, the ten interviewed single-mother participants represented diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds including Hispanic/Latinx (n = 3), Black/African American (n = 2), Caucasian (n = 3), Native American (n = 1) and Mixed Race (n = 1). The median age of the interviewed participants was 45.5 years (*SD* = 6.21). The text throughout this chapter refers to interviewed single mothers using aliases and generic geographical locations to protect their identity. Table 16 also summarizes interviewed participants' aliases, age at the start of their degree of focus, geographic location, number of children, and ages at the start of the degree of focus. Throughout the narrative about the single mother interviewed participants, the researcher also omitted unique details shared during the interviews that could lead to participants' identification.

Of the 10 interviewed single mother participants, two (20%) had earned at least 3 degrees. Table 17 highlights interviewed participants' number of degrees, degree of focus, and degree program modality.

Table 15

Demographic Data for Single-Mother Interviewed Participants (n = 10)

Characteristics	*n*	%
Current number of children		
1 child	3	30.00
2 children	3	30.00
3 children	2	20.00
4 children	1	10.00
5 or more children	1	10.00
Number of degrees earned		
1 degree	3	30.00
2 degrees	4	40.00
3 degrees	3	30.00
4 or more degrees	0	0
Individual annual income		
Under $15,000	1	10.00
Between $15,000 and $29,999	0	
Between $30,000 and $49,999	1	10.00
Between $50,000 and $74,999	2	20.00
Between $75,000 and $99,999	2	20.00
Between $100,000 and $150,000	4	40.00
Over $150,000	0	0

Basic demographic information and degree completion experiences of each interviewed participant are presented throughout this chapter. However, to better highlight participants' stories, Appendices M through V contain in-depth profiles of each participant's personal and educational backgrounds, descriptions of their grit, resilience, and positive deviance behaviors, as well as their financial status and child-care needs. The profiles also present participants' advice to other single mothers who are completing a college degree and close with a brief epilogue that explains their educational and career status at the termination of the current study.

Table 16

Aliases and Demographics of Single Mother Interviewed Participants (n = 10)

Alias	Current Age	Age Range at Start of DOF	Race/Ethnicity	Current Location	Number of Children During DOF	Age of Children at start of DOF
April	50	45-54	Hispanic/Latinx	Southern California	3	23-, 21-, and 17-years old
Araceli	34	18-24	Hispanic/Latinx	Southern California	2	Infant and unborn
Callie	47	25-34	Black/African American	Southern California	1	12-years old
Elizabeth	47	25-34	White/Caucasian	Southern California	4	19-, 15-, 6-, and 5-years old
Lacey	39	25-34	Mexican Amer.	Southern California	1	9-years old
Lindsay	40	25-34	Native American	Northwest	1	6 months old
Michelle	53	25-34	Black/African American	Southern California	1	2-years old
Rachel	54	25-34	White/Caucasian	Southern California	2	18- and 9 years old
Samantha	44	18-24	White/Caucasian	Northwest	1	4-years old
Sonya	40	35-44	Black/Latinx	East Coast	2	8- and 7-years old

Table 17

Aliases and Educational Data for Single Mother Interviewed Participants (n = 10)

Alias	Number of Degrees	Degree of Focus	Type of Degree Program
April	1	Bachelor's	In-person
Araceli	3	Associate's	Accelerated, in-person
Callie	2	Master's	In-person
Elizabeth	1	Bachelor's	In-person
Lacey	2	Master's	In-person
Lindsay	2	Master's	Online
Michelle	2	Masters'	In-person
Rachel	3	Master's/Teaching Credential	Online
Samantha	2	Bachelor's	In-person
Sonya	2	Master's	Online

How Do Single Mothers Finish College?

The first qualitative phenomenological research sub-question asked: "How do single mothers finish college?" Interviewed participants reported that a considerable portion of their ability to complete a college degree stemmed from the social support from various sources, including their parents, church family, friends, neighbors, and classmates.

Emotional, Financial, and Spiritual Support from Family

Results indicated that of the 10 participants, 10 (100%) shared examples of receiving assistance from their parents or close family members in some combination of emotional, financial, or spiritual support. Often single mothers sought out the assistance and described their families as providing it to them willingly. Regarding financial support, Araceli, Samantha, and Sonya described the relief provided on their strained budgets.

Araceli, a 34-year of Latinx female whose degree of focus was her associate's degree, shared, "I think I'm very thankful to my brother for that [offering to move into the extra bedroom

in her 2-bedroom apartment and share expenses] because my brother…he came in at clutch … right at the time that I needed him. And I think that helped a lot because it took a lot off of me."

Samantha, a 44-year-old Caucasian female whose degree of focus was her concurrent bachelor's degrees: "My parents were able to [assist me] …if I got into a bind and I actually broke down and asked for help…they could help me, which was really great."

Sonya, a 40-year-old female of mixed Black/Latinx descent whose degree of focus was her master's degree: "Definitely had to call on my mom a few times to buy some groceries, and she's always willing to help, but that was rough. I don't like to... I appreciate her, but I don't like to ask her. Having to ask someone for grocery money is embarrassing, you know what I mean, even though it's my mom."

April, a 50-year-old Hispanic/Latinx female, received emotional support from her family when they expressed how proud they were of her for working on and eventually finishing her bachelor's degree. Callie, a 47-year-old Black/African American female, also experienced support from her extended family during her MBA program. Rachel, a 54-year-old Caucasian female who focused on her master's degree and teaching credential, expressed how important it was for her to receive long-distance, emotional support from her mother while completing her master's degree and navigating the end of her marriage. "But I would say, my mom and my dad… my dad's no longer alive, but my mom was really pushing and supportive and always there. She's out of state, so I didn't have any… family in California… so that was more of a long-distance relationship of support."

Michelle, a 53-year-old Black female whose degree of focus was her master's, described her family as an essential emotional and spiritual support source from a distance. Lindsay, a 40-year-old Native American female with a bachelor's degree from a fully online degree program,

received support from her nearby family by offering to babysit her young daughter. Elizabeth, a 47-year-old Caucasian female, returned to college to earn her bachelor's degree after nearly a two-decade hiatus. Her parents also provided childcare support as they often took her children to their homes when she needed to focus on school and her studies. In preparation for finishing her Master's in Nursing degree, Lacey, a 39-year-old Mexican American female, secured living arrangements within her family home to reduce housing expenses. At the same time, she also provided in-home caregiving to an elderly family member.

Support From Church Family

For some mothers, both their faith and support from church members served as a vital resource. Of the 10 participants, seven (70%) indicated that they turned to their faith or church family in times of need.

Lacey shared how much her church family meant to her when she wrote, "in addition to the fortifying effects of my faith itself, my church family provided a truly game-changing amount of tangible/practical support, including (but not limited to) childcare, relational investment in my son, help with moving during my program, sustaining friendship, and invaluable cheerleading." Similarly for Rachel, support was offered to her through her church as she explained, "and there were people at my church that started helping me too, so we met this one family that they started helped out a little bit too because, like I said, I have no family here in California…."

Michelle also experienced emotional support by attending church. She explained: "We're a religious family, so I knew they were praying for me, and I knew that their prayers were sustaining me. Being able to go to church and just be surrounded by, you know, a church family

without them even really knowing what was going on, you know, but just being able to be a part of something bigger than myself."

Findings indicated that support from church families was sought after by single mothers (by going to church) and offered to them when congregants volunteered to provide services such as child care.

Support From Others

Of the 10 single mother participants, 10 (100%) shared an example of how either friends, classmates, neighbors, co-workers, or college counselors provided support. For Michelle, a classmate who once saw her without transportation after evening classes offered their help and began giving her a ride to pick up her daughter from childcare on the way home. Sonya teamed up with one of her classmates-turned-friend, who also had children, to complete small-group assignments. Rachel's friends, who were also her neighbors, provided emotional support and offered Rachel and her daughter temporary housing in their home due to her strained finances during her career transition. Araceli's neighbor extended a lifeline by offering to babysit her two daughters at an inexpensive and manageable rate for Araceli's limited budget. Callie also received support and encouragement from her close-knit circle of friends who were also parents of children who attended school with her son.

Samantha's co-workers encouraged her degree of focus attainment and offered advice to assist with her career advancement. Samantha also found that she had more in common with her co-workers when she stated, "Yeah, I think I bonded more with… my co-workers at the [work location] who were very supportive and helpful and just…they knew my situation." Lindsay also encountered co-workers who encouraged her educational pursuits and hosted a party to celebrate her bachelor's degree completion.

While co-workers, friends, and neighbors provided ongoing support, college personnel also played a vital role in the success of some participants. Elizabeth explained how much support she received from her college counselor:

> My advisor…at [name of college] was a godsend. He was always there to answer questions. I had a lot of questions, sometimes on the weekends, and he would call me right back. He was…really happy every time I would report my grades, and I think he really helped me get through in two years.

Similarly, April was encouraged by her college counselor to continue her education and complete her bachelor's degree. She explained, "I had a counselor, and she said, 'April, just go to school'…she encouraged me. She probably spent a good two years trying to get me back to school." In addition, Rachel found that having a program mentor who understood how best to coach her was instrumental in her eventual degree completion.

What Behaviors, Strategies, and Techniques Do Single Mothers Use to Complete College?

The second research sub-question asked: "What behaviors, strategies, and techniques do single mothers describe as contributing to their academic accomplishments and college completion?" Qualitative results revealed through interviews and follow-up questionnaires indicated that mothers primarily maintained specific thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors that impacted their ability to complete their degree of focus.

Single Mother's Thoughts About Finishing Their Degree

The initial research question asked about behaviors single mothers engage in that contributed to their college degree completion. However, findings indicated that participants primarily shared specific thoughts and mentalities, significantly impacting their academic success. The prevailing thought described by single mothers was maintaining a "power-through"

mentality throughout completing their degree of focus. This mentality resembled the concept of grit defined in Chapter 1 as "the ability to commit to a goal with loyalty and to demonstrate consistency over time" (Duckworth, 2016). Of the ten interviewed participants, 10 (100 %) provided insights into their power-through thought processes.

Samantha summarized her *power-through* mentality through the lens of grit when she said: "You know I…I've been pretty focused, and once I decided that I wanted to be a [job title] and work at the [position location]…once I have a goal and a plan, I can really focus in and move forward with that and everything I do is about that goal." Michelle shared a similar sentiment when she described her thought process around completing her master's degree:

> And so, I think one of the things that I just did without even realizing was kind of switch something off. And just got into that mode of 'I have to do this'… [And I] just kind of pushed through and I think having that mode flipped on allowed me to just kind of push through and not even deal with what was truly feeling because there just wasn't time.

Michelle also described the seriousness of maintaining this mentality when she wrote, "it was either push through it, or I would not have been able to care for myself and my child. So, there was no other choice." Similarly, Araceli explained the dire situation she found herself in as a teenager before having her first child yet maintained her power-through mentality when she said, "I even had forced my mom to emancipate me at age 17 so that I could get out of that household that...that craziness and I think from there, I just realized…I can't give up." She also wrote that she "always had a 'you have no choice but to suck it up and keep going' mentality."

For Lindsay, the power-through mentality she maintained while completing her bachelor's degree was intense and nearly all-consuming. As she explained:

> I just felt like I was doing it [studying/schoolwork] every single free moment that I had because I wanted to get done and I wanted to finish, and I didn't have time for anything else besides parenting my daughter.

Rachel started and stopped her master's degree at three different institutions before she completed it. When sharing her frustrations with an encouraging friend who reminded Rachel she was not a quitter, she recalled:

> That person, when she said that to me, it seemed to me to…resonate like, 'no, you're not a quitter you just have to take a break sometimes,' and then you just get back out there, and you go again.

Elizabeth experienced a 20-year gap when she first started to complete her bachelor's degree eventually. Her power-through mentality stemmed from wanting to finish college to overcome some of her embarrassment:

> I was always very self-conscious about not having my degree. Nobody made me feel like that, and it was just kind of an internal thing … so that also pushed me, too. It was just…my own embarrassment, I guess, for not finishing."

Elizabeth also wanted to serve as an inspiration to her children by showing them that determination even over time will eventually pay off when she said, "Being an example to my kids to show them that it doesn't matter how hard something is or how long it takes even if you…put your mind to it…you can finish.

April expressed her unwavering commitment to her educational goals and the importance of understanding what was at stake while completing her degree. She described:

> I knew it was my money, it was my time, it was my family's time, like, I had a drive that no matter what, I was …going to get through it once I made that decision. I was just going to get through it.

Similarly, Sonya expressed her drive to complete her degree despite the demanding Master's level Information Systems degree and her bachelor's degree in an unrelated field. She states: "but, I think that my…my hunger for this degree remained, it just was sometimes just, like, 'oh my gosh, I'm just so tired of this class.' All of my coding classes were very difficult for me."

Lacey recalled the challenges of completing her master's thesis using a marathon analogy: "I mean it's just it's an endurance race, right? It's kind of, among many other things, just to see if you've got what it takes to stick all the way through." She also shared, "It never seriously occurred to me not to finish my degree once I'd started, but more generally, I do think it's critically important to role model pushing through uncomfortable and hard things."

Finally, maintaining a power-through mentality was also described as beneficial beyond the realm of college degree completion. Callie wrote, "my [master's degree] experience shaped me into the person I am today, and I wouldn't change anything. Powering through the process contributed to my ability to work through other life and work challenges." It was Callie's description that provided the researcher with this theme's terminology to encapsulate the mentality.

Single Mothers' Beliefs and Faith in God

Of the 10 single mothers, seven (70%) indicated that their faith or belief in God was a vital source of support while completing their degree of focus. As single mothers experienced

challenging situations, they turned to their faith and church family to support, encourage, and ward against feelings of loneliness. As April described:

> Praying, believing, and having faith in Jesus helped me get through school and other tough times in my life. I have to give God…it was God. I give God thanks because…I would go to still go to church, and I do a lot of praying...I'm glad you brought that up because I think that would probably be the number one thing was having faith in God.

Araceli shared: "I'm very thankful to God…because I don't know how it happened, it just did." She showed appreciation to God and her daughters by displaying Bible verses and photos of her children on her regalia cap at each commencement ceremony.

Lacey's faith and close connection to her church family were central to her college completion journey. She was extremely grateful for the amount and intensity of their support for her and her son.

Managing feelings of loneliness through faith was also a theme expressed by single mothers. Rachel explained how different facets of her faith supported her when she wrote, "My church provided some support for me. My faith in God helped me when I felt alone." As Araceli explained, "I have felt that my faith in God has helped me never feel alone."

Single Mothers' Positive Deviance Behaviors

Positive deviance is defined as individuals' unusual behaviors that lead to success when others in the same community have not been as successful (Pascale & Sternin, 2005; Singhal, 2013). In describing their positive deviance behaviors while earning their degree of focus, common themes among single mothers included making sacrifices and setting high academic standards.

Out of 10 interviewed mothers, 10 (100%) reported sacrificing both personal time (fun with family and friends, exercise, or social gatherings) and sleep, while nine of 10 (90%) reported also sacrificing quality time with their child or children.

Sacrifice of Personal Time. Participants were clear that earning a college degree meant little if any personal time remained. As Lindsay stated:

> I think that it [the word 'sacrifice'] would definitely apply…In order to be able to parent and go to college, I sacrificed a lot of time. I didn't have much time for anything else…To stress about it and to find time to do it [earn a degree] and want to do well and want to do well at parenting too. And try to juggle everything… I think the stress alone takes a lot out of you, so you sacrifice part of yourself in a way.

Sonya shared a similar experience when she said, "I'm … very social, I have a lot of friends, and I rarely saw them during that period of time. And dating was not even a thing. I didn't have time to do that at the time."

For April, sacrificing her personal time meant that she had to forgo her regular exercise plans temporarily.

> It was hard. I had no personal time, no social time with friends. And, I used to exercise a lot, and I couldn't even really do that…I just sacrificed having friends and family and going out, you know, to do just to get by with my homework. Also, I sacrificed vacations to do homework and skipped a lot of dinners due to time constraints when going to class at night.

Sacrifice of Sleep. Getting enough sleep was another sacrifice that some participants made to accomplish the many required tasks in 24 hours. Sonya described her late nights and early mornings to finish her assignments "Yeah, I think that it was a lot of sacrifice of

personal…of personal things like sleep, which is super important, but a sacrifice of sleep." When explaining her attempt to balance school and parenting, Lindsay recounted, "I sacrificed a lot of sleep [laughs]." Samantha sacrificed sleep as well so she could spend time with her son. She described, "I would put off my studies until late at night to attempt to be more engaged with my son in the evenings, which lead to little sleep."

Sacrifice of Quality Time with Children. Participants were sometimes conflicted by the competing demands of completing assignments and wanting to parent and spend quality time with their child(ren). As Lindsay explained:

> It [earning a degree] takes time away from…living life … going out and playing with my daughter. It [earning a degree] took time away from her too, even though I tried to do it [study/assignments] when she was asleep. That didn't always happen, and so I would have to have my mom watch her or something so that I could take a test… And so it involved other people too…[I]sacrificed a lot of my time with her [Lindsay's daughter] ... Sonya recalled, "there was a lot of times where I felt like I just had to put my kids in front of a TV…[There was] not enough interaction with them."
>
> However, she had regular conversations with her two sons about why she was going to college and could not play with them or take them places as often as she liked.

To balance her competing demands on her time, Samantha built time with her son in her schedule as often as possible:

> My son and I would do something fun (and cost-free) every Friday night, which helped me to feel like we were still connecting and having some quality time together. It was difficult for me to feel like I was giving equal attention to my studies, to my son, and to myself.

Some mothers also reported different types of sacrifice, including adjustments to their housing arrangements, temporarily limiting their ability to earn income, and spending family income to complete their degree. Lacey shared that she "temporarily sacrificed some standard-of-living to reduce income needed during this time [working on her degree]; this allowed me to not have to work full-time during my program, which I'm pretty sure would have led to me quitting." Araceli explained that she temporarily sacrificed her ability to earn additional income and, at times, risked her family's financial stability such that she "had to go to school instead of getting a second job." April also described that she sacrificed family income that might have otherwise gone to her children's needs instead to pay for her college-related expenses: "I sacrificed money to buy books, school supplies, parking permits, and gas."

Despite the many sacrifices, one mother described her feeling about making them and her opinion of the results. As Lindsay stated, "I think the sacrifice is worth it. It was hard…a hard few years but, then it felt so good when I was done and when I finished."

Setting High Academic Achievement Standards. Single mothers made personal and financial sacrifices while managing their time well. Another theme was that the majority set very high academic achievement standards for themselves. Of the 10 participants, nine (90%) indicated that they engaged in this behavior while earning their degree of focus.

Sonya described that despite getting her master's in a discipline where she had limited previous experience, she made every effort to complete each assignment and every class with high grades:

> I want to say that I think I always have had a strong desire to get good grades. In school… in my undergrad, I've always gotten good grades, mostly straight A's. So, I

always strive for an A. I do recall my mom saying to me, you know that when you go to get a job, they don't care if you got an A in this class, and I said, “Yes, I care, though.

For Lindsay, giving 100% effort and being recognized for her academic successes was extremely important for her:

> I did well. I was on the Dean's list every semester…so I’m proud of that. I worked really hard, and I…I don't ever want to do things halfway, you know? I think that I wouldn’t do anything differently because I worked really hard, and…it paid off. I have my degree. I did really well in school.

Samantha felt a sense of pride when she earned high marks. “I’m very grade-oriented and competitive that way… so any good grade on an exam… those were always super uplifting moments for me.”

Elizabeth also set high standards for herself even when others thought just finishing her degree would be enough:

> I would say right before I started, I told myself, I will accept no less than an ‘A.’ I will finish with a 4.0, I will get A’s in all my classes. Everyone was, like, “Well, just be happy with what you get and if you finish,” and it’s like, “Nope, I’m going to get a 4.0”, and I, and I did.

Like Elizabeth, who set her intentions at the start of each new course, Lacey also had a plan at the beginning of each semester:

> My strategy was always to start the semester as strong as possible, then keep some running calculations of just how well I needed to do on the next assignment or test in order to keep my A. As the semester progressed, I generally was able to relax

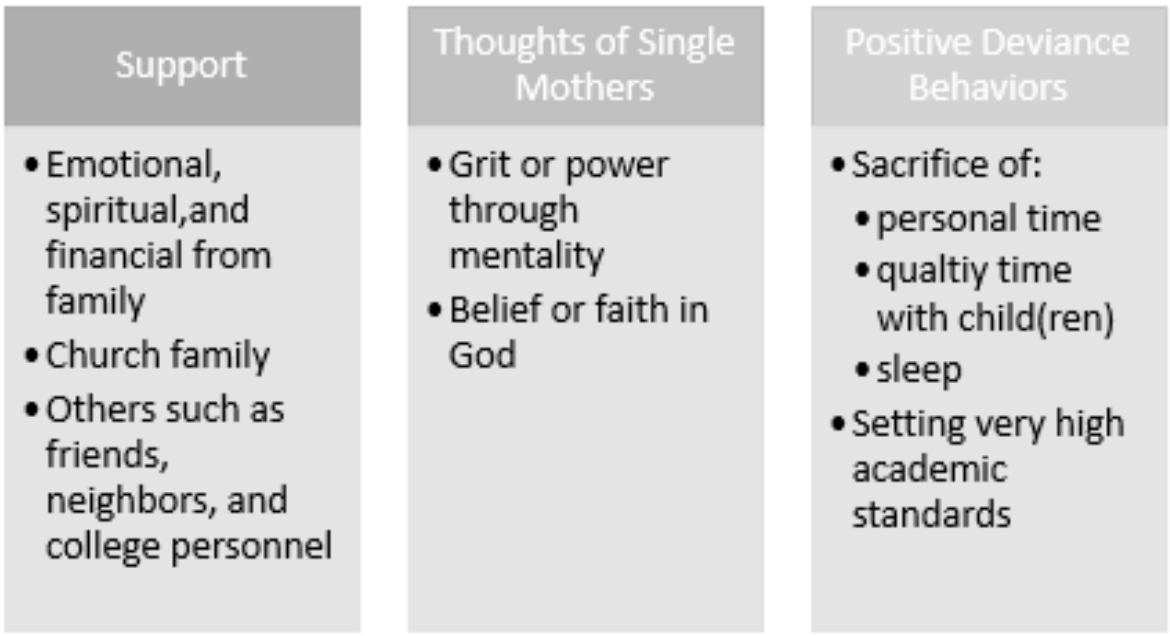
progressively more. This allowed me to balance my own high academic standards with carving out time to live life and play with my son.

April also expressed how earning mediocre grades was not acceptable to her when she said, “I think when I go to school, I really try hard, like, I’m not trying to just get a ‘C’ and pass; I’m always trying to get an ‘A.’” Araceli’s daughters served as her motivation: “I had to give my daughters something to look towards based on resilience, and never giving up and getting good grades was part of that.”

Along with receiving support from family and others, single mothers appear to employ various thoughts and behaviors that support their efforts to complete a college degree. Figure 2 summarizes the themes as identified in the semi-structured interviews.

Figure 2

Primary Themes of Single Mother College Completion



The Resilience of Single Mothers

Wagnild and Young's (1993) research identified five characteristics of resilience found in their review of the literature: purpose, perseverance, self-reliance, equanimity, and existential aloneness, also known as authenticity. Single-mother study participants described some of these characteristics in their qualitative interviews, with the most common being perseverance, self-reliance, and purpose.

Perseverance

Perseverance refers to the ability to continue progress toward a goal despite setbacks, challenges, or obstacles (Wagnild, 2009). Of the 10 participants, or 100%, described the resilience characteristic of perseverance as an integral part of their life journey and educational pursuits.

Michelle pressed ahead with earning her master's degree, all while experiencing a contentious divorce. Her position was in jeopardy without the master's degree, "and so I plugged on through and was able to finish in time and applied for the job." Although Araceli juggled raising two small daughters, working, going to classes, and taking a 3-year break to save money, she remained determined to earn her associate's degree.

> And that's hard because if you have to go to work early in the morning and the kids don't go to sleep until…later. So, I kind of got them used to going to sleep… at nine so that I can have at least a good two hours of work every day…Not giving up was definitely, just...the key…that was never an option. I think that's what it is, and I never allowed that to be an option for me.

Sonya described the exhaustion she experienced but did not waver in her determination to complete her master's degree. She shared, "I just felt drained all the time…all the time, so I don't

think I wanted to give up, but there were times that I do think it was difficult…to see the light at the end of the tunnel."

Both Samantha and April persevered through experiences of marginalization as single mothers. April had to overcome the discouragement and negative comments she experienced while working as a single mother and advancing her career. Similarly, strangers told Samantha that she had ruined her life as a young single mother. Both women channeled their anger into focused energy on completing their goals.

Rachel enrolled in and started at four different institutions before she completed her master's degree. At the same time, Lacey described her perseverance through her strong work ethic and acknowledged that her family influenced her academic pursuits. "I come from an academic family, and I have always maintained a high GPA, so there was never really a time where it was, like, 'oh, quitting is an option.'"

Callie also persevered when she described her exhaustion near the end of completing her MBA "I was like, okay, I'm done, I'm tired...but you gotta cross the finish line…I can't really even explain, but I was just tired of school, and I was over it, but I knew I had to keep going. My future depended on it, I felt like."

Lindsay described her perseverance through the challenges of her degree program through the lens of wanting to be a good role model for her daughter. "And I wanted to be a good example for my daughter. I mean, she wasn't old enough to talk about it then. But later on, she will be, and I want her to know that, even though it was hard, and I had big things going on, I had a baby in the middle of it. But I didn't quit."

Finally, Elizabeth persevered to overcome a serious illness and difficult recovery to earn one of the highest grades her statistics instructor had ever assigned.

Self-reliance

Self-reliance involves understanding one's strengths as well as personal limitations (Wagnild, 2009). Single mothers discussed the importance of their need to depend on themselves and their abilities to overcome challenges. As single mothers, raising children independently or in co-parenting relationships required a delicate balance of knowing how much they could carry financially and emotionally and knowing when to ask for help. Of the 10 participants, 6 (60%) described self-reliance as one of the five resilience characteristics.

For Araceli, being a single mother often served as the foundation of her self-reliance: I think it's also because, as a single parent, *you are* the main parent. I think you don't … have any other alternatives. There is no...no "I'm trying it," there is no such thing as "I'm trying." You *have* to make it work, and I think that's one thing that once I became a mother that was, like, my driving force...motherhood itself.

For Samantha, recognizing that she was not working at her maximum potential in her career served as one catalyst for pursuing her bachelor's degree. As she stated when questioning positions she held many years ago: "I was tired of…am I just a receptionist? Am I just a customer service person in a title company? I know that I can do more than that." Michelle learned to rely on herself as a young single mother who had not lived on her own before her divorce and returned to college to earn her master's degree: "It was a matter of I can't stop because now I have to take care of myself and my daughter."

Lindsay acknowledged her limitations when it came to taking on more activities and having to focus primarily on raising her daughter and finishing her bachelor's degree: "I just…I couldn't do any more than I was doing. I was at my limit of my responsibilities and…I couldn't do any more for that, for a while." Samantha, Sonya, and Michelle understood their strengths yet

acknowledged their limitations when they reluctantly but gratefully accepted financial support from their parents. Finally, Lacey recognized her academic strengths in her ability to master complex content in one of her nursing master's degree courses.

Purpose

Purpose refers to the notion that life is meaningful and that one has a reason to live (Wagnild, 2009). Single mother participants expressed their purpose primarily as the desire for career satisfaction and self-pride. Of the 10 participants, 4 (40%) described their purpose in alignment with the definition of Wagnild and Young's (1993) resilience characteristic.

Elizabeth's resilience through completing her bachelor's degree as a single mother was connected to her professional career goal and passion for working directly with students. She was not eligible to work in this capacity without a bachelor's degree in her previous position. However, Elizabeth's supervisor offered her a temporary out-of-class assignment which gave her direct student contact that was important for her professionally. As she stated: "I was an administrative assistant, but I wanted to be more hands-on with the students since I got my degree. So, they're letting me work out-of-class for a little bit. I like to work with the students, and that was my purpose for going back to school."

During her interview, Michelle explained that being a good mother was very important to her, and she took pride in her mothering skills while raising her daughter and earning her master's degree. She also remained mindful of understanding the purpose or the "why" of getting her degree. Not only was the degree accomplishment for her daughter's well-being through a more secure job and thus more financial stability, but the degree was also for herself and her self-pride as she stated, "It's [earning a degree] about you as an individual. I think a lot of times, we forget and leave ourselves out of the equation. But I think if we begin to look at it as 'I'm doing

this for me because this is something I want or that I need, [then] I can be proud of my progress in this...'."

Rachel also described her sense of purpose of earning her master's degree through the lens of finding career satisfaction while also deciding to end an unhappy marriage. "So, I got my Bachelors' in [major] which took me a long time to do. I started taking college classes off and on when I was 17, and it took me about ten years to do that. And then, I was going through counseling because I was having marriage problems, and one of the things I discovered in counseling was I didn't want to be in [career field] anymore, that I felt a passion towards teaching." Like Elizabeth, Rachel's purpose was to pursue a career working with students.

Sonya's sense of purpose was also related to her career satisfaction. Although her experience as a teacher was not an overall positive one, she found that the skills she gained through teaching were invaluable and necessary for her career transition into a technical field that involved data presentations. She stated, "I love the work that I do [now], I absolutely love it, and…I needed my teaching experience to understand and do my job now. I needed all those classes and the skills I learned in the classes to do this job that I do now."

Equanimity

Equanimity refers to the idea that one needs balance in life and the attitude of "taking things as they come" (Wagnild, 2009). This perspective provides a buffer against challenging times while creating a sense of stability. Equanimity was not one of the more common characteristics described by the research participants. Of the 10 participants, 1 (10%) addressed the concept during her interview.

In her advice to other single mothers, Samantha captured the essence of equanimity when she said, "So if you can just take it [working on a degree]…one chunk at a time and know that

things with your child are going to creep in and take over and take precedence…you kind of have to be flexible."

Existential Aloneness (Authenticity)

Existential aloneness or authenticity refers to an individual's ability to see their journey as unique, combined with the understanding that there are benefits related to going through difficulties alone. Of the 10 participants, five (50%) referred to authenticity-related to completing a college degree as part of their life journey.

In her advice to other single mothers, April acknowledged existential aloneness and the unique journey of the individual when she referred to the college completion experience: "Well, I would say…and I firmly believe this, is that there's going to always be obstacles for every single person, but some people have more obstacles than others. And they just have to go through the obstacles, don't let the obstacles stop you, because that is what happens."

Elizabeth also addressed the individual journey in her advice to other single mothers when she said, "You know, everybody's journey is…no matter if our situations are the same, our journeys aren't the same. So, if you take one class a semester or six…do whatever you're going to be most successful with, and…don't measure yourself against somebody else." Callie shared similar sentiments as a reaction to some of the judgment and stigma she experienced as a young single mother when she said, "We all have our own story. We all have our own paths, and everyone's not the same."

Samantha's perspective on existential aloneness stemmed from her acknowledgment that her journey as a single mother in college related to her laser-focus and motivation differed vastly from her classmates. She observed that they engaged in more "partying and drinking" than Samantha was interested in or had time for while raising her son as a single mother.

Finally, Lindsay addressed authenticity when she described how difficult the journey is for single mothers completing their degrees to the extent that others may not understand what these women experience. Also, Lindsay felt she was more appreciative of earning her degree in her thirties than she might have otherwise as an 18-year-old student or a married woman due to her unique challenges.

Overall, single mother participants in this research study described, in varying detail, all five characteristics of resilience as defined by Wagnild and Young (1993) related to earning their degree of focus. Table 18 provides examples of the five characteristics of resilience, example quotes, and frequency counts. A combination of grit, resilience, and positive deviance contributed to participants' ability to earn their colleges degrees. The following section addresses the short-term and long-term impacts of single mothers' educational credentials on themselves and their families.

The Impacts of Earning a Degree on Single Mothers and Their Families

The third phenomenological research sub-question inquired about the impact of earning a college degree on single mothers and their children. Findings indicated that there were both short-term and long-term impacts. In the short term, mothers experienced more confidence while also receiving expressions of pride from their children and family members. Over the long term, the completion of a college degree provided mothers with wider-ranging career options. Participants also reported that having a college degree meant achieving greater financial stability for themselves and their children.

Short-Term Impacts

A theme developed throughout the one-on-one interviews was the short-term impact that earning a degree provided. Of the 10 participants, six (60%) described the sense of self-pride and boosted the self-confidence they experienced after earning their degree of focus.

Table 18

*Examples of Resilience Characteristics of Interviewed Single Mother Participants (*n = *10)*

Characteristic	Example quote	Frequency *n* (%)
Purpose	"So, I got my Bachelors' in [major] which took me a long time to do. I started taking college classes off and on when I was 17, and it took me about ten years to do that. And then, I was going through counseling because I was having marriage problems, and one of the things I discovered in counseling was I didn't want to be in [career field] anymore, that I felt a passion towards teaching." (Rachel)	4 (40%)
Self-reliance	"I think it's also because, as a single parent, *you are* the main parent. I think you don't … have any other alternatives. There is no...no "I'm trying it," there is no such thing as "I'm trying." You *have* to make it work." (Araceli)	6 (60%)
Perseverance	"I wanted to be a good example for my daughter. She wasn't old enough to talk about it then. But later on, she will be, and I want her to know that, even though it was hard, and I had big things going on, I had a baby in the middle of it. But I didn't quit." (Lindsay) "I just felt drained all the time… so I don't think I wanted to give up, but there were times that I do think it was difficult…to see the light at the end of the tunnel." (Sonya)	10 (100%)
Equanimity	"So, if you can just take it [working on a degree]…one chunk at a time and know that things with your child are going to creep in and take over and take precedence…you kind of have to be flexible." (Samantha)	1 (10%)
Existential Aloneness	"You know, everybody's journey…no matter if our situations are the same, our journeys aren't the same. So, if you take one class a semester or six…do whatever you're going to be most successful with, and…don't measure yourself against somebody else." (Elizabeth) "We all have our own story. We all have our own paths, and everyone's not the same." (Callie)	5 (50%)

Note. Five resilience characteristics as described by Wagnild and Young (1993)

Araceli, whose degree of focus was her Associate of Arts (A.A.), which took her over six years to complete, described, “Once I earned my A.A., nothing could stop me from continuing my education.” She has since earned a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree and is currently a Doctoral candidate.

Rachel, who changed careers and was doubted by her former co-workers about making a transition, described the positive impacts of earning her degree of focus:

It [her degree of focus] definitely changed my perspective of myself and my confidence level. So, because I have a Bachelor's in [degree] and I came from [career field] so I always kind of short-changed myself in the teaching world...I’m really good with discipline, but I’m not really good with…curriculum.

Rachel also shared that she is passionate about her new career and was pleased to make the transition since she would occasionally encounter former co-workers who seemed “beaten up” by staying in such a challenging profession.

Michelle described her experience through a complicated divorce when her daughter was young, and they lived far from her family. She explained that her degree of focus, a master’s degree, “enabled me to support my family and gave me the confidence I desperately needed at that time.”

In addition to the boost of confidence mothers experienced personally, they also expressed that their children and families were proud of them finishing their degrees. For Sonya, “It made my family and me proud.” Similarly, April expressed, “My kids were proud of me on graduation day,” while Callie described her son as appreciative of her efforts and that her extended family was very proud of her accomplishments.

Long-Term Impacts

While the immediate and short-term impacts following the earning of their degrees of focus meant that single mothers experienced self-confidence and pride, according to participants, the longer-term consequences are still felt to date. Of the 10 participants, 8 (80%) shared that earning their degree of focus provided both career advancement and, over time, greater financial stability.

Lindsay stated, “Earning my degree has given me stability and a future for my daughter and me. I am earning a pretty good living because of my degree.” With her advanced degree in business, Callie experienced several career advancement opportunities within her current company as one of few employees with her educational credentials. Elizabeth’s supervisor offered her a temporary out-of-class assignment working directly with students after she earned her bachelor’s degree while April moved up as well.

Samantha’s boost of confidence led to her pursuit of higher education, and eventually, she began earning a higher salary:

> It [her degree] allowed me to obtain a position with higher pay, which helped me financially support myself and my son. My first degree and subsequent career also empowered me to go back to school and earn my JD [Juris Doctorate].

For Sonya, whose degree of focus was a Master’s in Information Systems, her degree not only significantly impacted her financially but also led her on a path toward achieving improved career satisfaction. “It [her degree] allowed me to change careers, earn a much higher salary, and find a career that I love.” Similarly, Rachel earned her degree to switch careers to pursue her passion for teaching, although her salary initially decreased significantly. Michelle obtained a

full-time, permanent teaching position after completing her master's degree, which was required to maintain her temporary employment.

Another theme discovered related to the long-term impacts of education was the effect that earning a degree had on participants' children. Going to college to earn a degree set a good example, and mothers wanted to serve as positive role models. Of the 10 participants, nine (90 %) acknowledged their performance in this capacity. Elizabeth explained: "I feel that it [her degree of focus] helped show my children that education is important and that you can finish anything if you work hard." Similarly, for Rachel, "it [her degree of focus] was also a great example for my kids," while Lindsay explained, "I wanted to…be a good example for my daughter. I mean, she wasn't old enough to talk about it then, but later on, she will be."

Callie and Sonya perceived that their sons were observing and, at the same time, appreciating their struggles. For Callie, "My son, was…he would tell me he was proud of me for doing that…which was a huge thing because he watched me work hard, struggle, just over the years, and so I thought that was pretty cool." Sonya's mother also recognized the impact Sonya's master's degree would have on her sons. "I do remember my mom also said to me, like 'You are showing your children something that's super important. Showing them…working hard…and the results of it'."

April shared, "My kids see that it is possible to go to school and get a degree." Samantha explained, "I feel that watching me work through issues and struggles in earning my first degree provided my son with interactive lessons on perseverance, goal setting, achievement, etc." Michelle explained that one's actions carry more weight than words: "Our children respond better to what we do over what we say." Finally, as Araceli described, "The impact that my

degree has on my family and me is that I was able to get motivated to keep going, and I was able to show my kids that anything is possible."

Completing an Online Degree Program as a Single Mother

Of the 10 interviewed participants, three (30%) completed fully online degree programs: Lindsay, with her Bachelor's in Criminal Justice; Rachel, with a Master's in Education; and Sonya, with a Master's in Information Systems.

Lindsay found that her online degree program was supportive and affordable, which meant she did not require any student loans. She explained: "I went to an online school that I could do at my pace, so that helped me navigate my responsibilities better. The school did support me through the process."

Rachel overcame several challenges with her online degree program. Early on, she struggled with learning to use the learning management system required by the program. Also, she was not experienced writing in APA format as expected from her instructors and needed remediation until her skills developed. Another challenge was that the master's program supervisor initially assigned Rachel to a mentor who was not supporting her in the way she needed, which caused her to nearly stop out of a program again. However, when Rachel was re-assigned to a new mentor, she reported that she began to thrive:

> And then, he assigned me a different mentor that knew how to coach me. Because for me, it was like if somebody comes down on me, really, really hard, I already have a lot of hard stuff going on in my life …if I have a mentor that's coming down on me so hard, it's like, 'I don't need this other person in my life being so harsh on me,' right? So, they assigned me a mentor that, when I messed up, didn't make an assignment or whatever, would just say, 'Okay, we need to move on. Let's focus on the future and, okay, let's make a new goal'. When I didn't make a goal, they would say, 'let's make a new goal and focus on that new goal,' and that style of mentorship really helped me because I didn't focus on what I didn't get done, I focused on what I could do, and this week, this is what I could do, and then the next week was like, okay, 'I had a success last week, so this new week, I'm going to have another success' So it took me two years because I still had to take some breaks.

In her interview, Sonya explained how she overcame two significant challenges within her degree program. The first was related to the complex subject matter since her bachelor's degree, and previous work experience was in a career field unrelated to her Information Systems master's degree. With support from a classmate, Sonya formed a strong interpersonal connection and eventual friendship, which supported completing her class assignments and, eventually, her degree program.

Sonya's second major challenge involved an incident with one of her instructors. In a 100% distance education format, the coding class required zero video interaction, nor was there any in-person contact leading to what Sonya felt was a lack of rapport with the instructor. Sonya and her classmates received comments from their instructor on a draft of the assignment that they deemed overly harsh and offered little constructive feedback for improvement. The cohort

arranged a video consultation through teamwork and collaboration, spoke with the instructor to express their concerns, and resolved the issue.

Despite these challenges, Sonya enjoyed her fully online degree program because it offered her the flexibility to complete her assignments on her timeline and eliminated the need to find childcare. As she explained:

> I really liked it, and I think that it [an online degree program] was perfect for a working adult, whether or not you're a parent, because I think people work different schedules and different times. So, I was able to begin my work…we would get our assignments way ahead of time. If there are weekends I don't have my children, I can work throughout the weekend and work ahead, knowing that during the week, I won't be able to do as much. But I think because this was all virtual, I didn't have to get any childcare to take a class or get my work done for my master's. Thank goodness.

Although she did not earn an online degree, Elizabeth completed several online classes while earning her bachelor's. Once she adjusted to using the learning management system's technology, she discovered that she enjoyed learning on her own time.

Lindsay, Rachel, and Sonya's, overall positive experiences with earning an online degree highlight the benefits of engaging in this learning modality. The advantages include flexibility, individual learning, and minimal need for childcare. However, participants also faced several challenges during their educational journey, whether they completed an online program or earned a traditional, in-person degree.

Challenges Faced by Single Mothers

Single mother participants experienced support and encouragement while earning their degree of focus from various sources, including parents, friends, church family, faith, coworkers,

and college counselors. However, they also described some of their challenges. Researchers have explored such obstacles experienced by single mothers in college, including marginalization (Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2018), financial strain (Kramer et al., 2016; Sidel, 2006; Trisi & Saenz, 2020; Tucker & Lowell, 2016), finding affordable child care (Child Care Aware of America, 2019, 2020), and role strain (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). During the one-on-one interviews, some single mothers revealed that they experienced these issues while balancing college, careers, and parenting.

Experiencing Marginalization

Of the ten interviewed mothers, six (60%) indicated experiencing some form of marginalization. However, none of the participants described their "othering" as specifically stemming from the educational institution where they earned their degree of focus. Instead, they described the marginalization experiences as emanating from their community or society at large. Of the six participants who recalled this experience, four shared specific examples.

Samantha described her experience when she first learned she was expecting her son:

> I was a young single mother. When I first found out that I was pregnant, several people told me that I had ruined my life and my opportunities for college, etc. I also felt it during parent/teacher conferences for my son. It felt like I was being judged and that any issues my son was having at school could be placed on the fact that I was a single mother.

April described what she experienced and overheard as it related to both racial and socioeconomic marginalization of Hispanic/Latinx mothers:

> Although I consider single mothers to be heroes, my experience has been that single Hispanic mothers are looked down upon as a lower class and sexualized. Single mothers

> are thought to be promiscuous, which is destructive to women. Also, I have heard jokes about supporting single moms who work as strippers.

Rachel, age 54, experienced marginalization related to the timing of pursuing her master's degree. Alluding to possible ageism amidst her career change, she was asked, "why I was bothering with this right now."

Callie experienced some marginalization through how others stigmatized her as a young single mother when she shared:

> To me, that was always a struggle…the stigma of being a young teenage parent because that's really how people see you. No matter even when you're older, they see you still only 17 years older than your kids, and, yeah…they do a little math.

Callie also mentioned that she was reluctant to let her college classmates know she had a son at a young age. "And the same thing with school…I don't like to tell everybody I had him really young…but you know I have this kid, and then sometimes people pre-judge you."

Experiencing Financial Hardship

Single mothers expressed that their limited finances were a source of stress at times during their educational journey. Of the 10 participants, eight (80%) struggled financially to pursue their degree of focus. To alleviate some of the strain in meeting their basic needs, participants sought various solutions, including receiving support from their family, making alternate living arrangements, or taking out student loans, which, for some mothers, meant borrowing the maximum amount in loans.

Michelle, Samantha, and Sonya all received some form of financial support from their parents. Michelle and her parents arranged to purchase a car, and while she did take out student

loans, they have since been paid off. Sonya took out loans to pay for her degree and living expenses while her mother also sent her money on occasion to help with basic needs:

> But, yeah, through the through the living…the loans for living expenses that I took out a few thousand dollars probably through the time I was in school, maybe like $4,000 or so that I took out and then her [Sonya's mother] helping with groceries was helpful.

Samantha explained the challenge of meeting her basic needs:

> I remember...when we lived in [city]. You got to a certain point where it's like "We're having pancakes for dinner" because you only had to add water to it and [son's name] thought it was great, but (laughs) it definitely was really scraping bottom, by the end of the semester.

Callie described having to make difficult decisions due to financial constraints:

> Yeah, I mean just…not being able to always do extracurricular activities you would like. You just kind of you somehow find a way. You hear people say that, but it's true. And you somehow find a way to make things happen. Where like I said, he could participate in sports, but sometimes I had to make the difficult decision when he wanted to do something with friends and things like that, where I'd have to say "no' because maybe I didn't have the financial [means]...

Student loan debt has remained an issue for Callie, who is still paying off her loans. Rachel and Samantha both took out the maximum amounts. As Rachel described:

> I'm still paying off my master's because I took the max. I lived off…student loans; that's what I lived off of mostly. Because of a part-time job…I couldn't always get work. I didn't want to work on the weekends that I had my daughter. So, I'd pick up a 12-hour shift about once a month, and then…I just lived off of student loans; that's the truth.

As Samantha shared, “Yeah, so student loans. I always took out the max, which I’m still paying those (laughs). That…helped out for a while, but towards the end of the semester, you're kind of running thin.”

Financial challenges contributed to Araceli and April stopping and starting their degree programs. Araceli struggled to work a second job and attend classes in the evenings and every other Saturday. At one point, she took a long break from her program to work and save money. As April recounted, “Yes, I stopped going for I think…it was, like, a year just because of [my] money, financial [situation].”

However, not all participants faced financial challenges while working in their degree of focus. Michelle overcame what she initially thought was financial strain once she gained more experience managing her budget while earning a full-time income and living independently. For Elizabeth, who also worked full-time while earning her bachelor’s degree, taking out student loans was not necessary for her degree completion, and she found ways to save money and manage her family’s budget:

> I was lucky to qualify for financial aid, and I think because I have so many children [4] so that covered the classes. I just paid for the books, but I was also paying for my son's as well since he was going there [name of college]. I just budgeted and made it work. [I] rented a lot of books, found Amazon very helpful for renting the books. [and I] budgeted well.

Experiencing Child Care Issues

Of the 10 participants, five (50%) experienced concerns with child care while earning their degree of focus. Araceli found that she needed regular and reliable child care for her two young daughters while she worked full-time and attended classes one to two evenings a week

and on Saturdays. She depended heavily on her neighbor for assistance and felt fortunate that she charged a reasonable rate since Araceli would have deemed a more formal childcare arrangement too expensive.

The cost of childcare remained a concern for Samantha and Lacey, but single mothers, including Michelle, also considered the quality of care available for their children. Michelle was pleased with the options available to her 2-year-old daughter, whom Michelle felt was happy in the day and evening care facilities she attended. However, Samantha sometimes wondered if there were higher quality child care options for her son even though she was grateful for having a friend offer to babysit. “The cost was a factor, and I knew that were better daycares and… especially when you're having somebody watch your child when they have their own child there, I found in hindsight that that's not the best situation, sometimes.”

Experiencing Role Strain

Role strain refers to the stress and anxiety one experiences when balancing multiple and often competing responsibilities, or roles, at the same time (Beeler, 2016; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Markle, 2015). For single mothers, besides being a parent, their other roles could include employee and student. Of the 10 participants, three (30%) described their experiences with role strain.

Single mothers in this study expressed the sheer difficulty in simultaneously navigating single motherhood, along with working full- or part-time and engaging in college coursework. Lindsay’s expectations of herself as a mother and her high academic standards meant that she had to make personal sacrifices to be successful. As she stated, “To stress about it and to find time to do it [studying/earning a degree] and want to do well and want to do well at parenting,

too, and try to juggle everything…I think the stress alone takes a lot out of you, so you sacrifice part of yourself in a way."

Araceli juggled motherhood, working, and a long commute, sometimes by bus, to and from her daughters' daycare facility and job. Eventually, she added to this load a return to college through an accelerated degree program on weeknights and weekends. As she shared,

> I went to school for about a year, and, at the time, I [was going] to school for Microbiology. I know it was so odd because I wanted to be a CSI, and it was really difficult because I had to pay for a babysitter during the time I was in school. Then, I was working on my other days off, and I had to get a babysitter and those days too, so it was really difficult. So, it was a daily commute. I got up at four in the morning every day, got my kids to the babysitter by six o'clock in the morning, had to drive back and be at work by 7:30 am. It was…pretty difficult. We [Araceli and her brother] had one car, so sometimes I would have to [take the] bus from my job to [city] and pick up my kids and take the bus back. It was…a struggle at the time.

Sonya experienced a challenging balance of parenthood, school, and work. As mentioned in a previous section, the need to sacrifice sleep was a consequence:

> So, in the second year [of her program], it was still rough to balance everything again. Sleep was definitely the first thing that got cut short and just quality time with the kids. We were in the same space together, but it was difficult to do things…you know, spend time with them without being on my computer trying to do my work at the same time.

Integration of Quantitative and Phenomenological Data

The researcher designed this mixed-method phenomenological concurrent triangulation study to understand the college completion of single mothers through the lens of grit, resilience,

and positive deviance. In qualitative research, phenomenology refers to exploring the essence of something or understanding the “how” and “what” of an experience, for example, college completion by single mothers. The triangulation of data supports a mixed-method approach to comparing data from a variety of sources. As to concurrence in this study, participants provided answers to the online College History Survey, and prospective single mother participants answered a brief set of questions near the end of the questionnaire designed to recruit interested parties for interviews. Single mothers then contacted the researcher via email or text to express their interest in participation. The researcher confirmed eligibility and scheduled subsequent semi-structured interviews while the online questionnaire was still active. Thus, quantitative data from the questionnaire and qualitative data from interviews were collected concurrently instead of sequentially.

Triangulation is the process of seeking multiple sources of evidence that substantiate each other and support one's inferences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). The two sources of triangulated evidence in the study included: a) data from the College History Survey, including data from respondents’ grit scores, resilience scores, and conscientiousness scores, and b) single-mother participant’s answers to the semi-structured interview protocol that inquired about specific events (Maxwell, 2013) which occurred during college.

Quantitatively, the current study compared single mothers’ Grit Scale scores, Resilience Scale (RS-14) scores, their self-reported grit in college, and self-reported resilience in college scores to the same set of scores of non-single mothers. Results indicated a significant difference between single mothers’ self-reported resilience scores and the self-reported resilience scores of married women with children, and the self-reported scores of a combined group of participants.

Based on this data, it was concluded that single mothers in this study were resilient in their college completion journey.

Although there was no significant difference in self-reported Grit in college scores between single mothers and non-single mothers, single mothers' average scores indicated high levels of grit in college (4.71 on a scale of 1 = not at all gritty to 5 = extremely gritty) compared to the other groups who both scored an average of 4.54. Based on this data, it was concluded that single mothers in this study were gritty in their college completion endeavors.

In the current study, through qualitative semi-structured interviews and follow-up questionnaires, single mothers described the phenomenon or the "how" and "what" of their college completion experiences. Findings indicated that single mothers maintained a power-through or grit mentality, described their experience with varying levels of all five characteristics of resilience, made sacrifices of their personal time, sleep, and quality time with their children, and set high academic standards for themselves. Single mother participants also described the short-term and long-term impacts of earning their degree. As such, they experienced a boost of confidence and self-pride while also seeing themselves as a positive role model in the short term and gaining a more comprehensive range of career opportunities and a higher salary in the long term. Based on the qualitative data, it was concluded that single mothers in this study were gritty, resilient, positive deviants in college completion.

In this study's results, single mothers' self-reported college resilience scores were significantly different from their non-single mother counterparts. During the qualitative interviews, the finding revealed that single mothers, in varying degrees, identified possessing all five characteristics of resilience as defined by Wagnild and Young (1993). Thus, the results and

findings indicate a level of alignment regarding the resilience of single mothers who earn a college degree.

Summary

This chapter presented the mixed-method phenomenological study findings, which asked the following research questions: Are single mother college graduates significantly more resilient and "grittier" than non-single mother college graduates? What are the lived experiences of single mother college completers? The three sub-questions included: How do single mothers finish college? What behaviors, strategies, and techniques do single mothers describe as contributing to their academic accomplishments and college completion? What is the impact of college completion on single mothers and their children?

To address the first question of the grit and resilience of single mothers compared to others, t-test, one-way ANOVAs, and correlation analyses tested the scores on five different measures of grit, resilience, and conscientiousness. Results indicated significant differences in the mean self-reported college resilience scores between single mothers and non-single mothers. There were also moderately strong positive relationships between the Conscientiousness Scale and Short Grit scale scores of single mothers and married women with children.

The phenomenological aspect of the study implemented a semi-structured interview protocol to address how single mothers finished their degrees and explored their lived experiences, thoughts, behaviors, and the impact of college completion on their lives and the lives of their children. With a thorough review of the transcripts, coding, and theme development, and member-checking the qualitative findings revealed that single mothers completed college through a combination of factors including support from their families and

other social networks, setting high academic standards, and by sacrificing personal time and quality time with their children.

Interviewed participants' primary thought processes in completing their degree involved maintaining a power-through mentality, and many relied on their faith and belief in God during challenging times. The few single mothers who completed an online degree faced some obstacles but overall found the experience positive due to their program's flexibility.

Single mothers also incorporated the five characteristics of resilience when describing their educational journeys, and they experienced both short-term and long-term benefits from earning their degrees. However, the mixed-method triangulation analysis also faced many challenges outlined in previous studies, such as financial strain leading to student loan debt, childcare concerns, marginalization, and difficulty balancing competing priorities. The qualitative findings and the quantitative results generally aligned with the limited research on single mothers' college experiences, although there were some discrepancies between the literature and the study's findings regarding the severity of childcare needs of single mothers and the perceived source of their marginalization.

The next and final chapter presents conclusions based on the study's results and findings while addressing the discrepancies discovered in the triangulated data. As there is limited research on single mothers in general and their college completion processes in particular, the study's theoretical, practical, and future implications intend to add to the body of literature on these topics. The study's strengths and weaknesses and recommendations for practitioners and future researchers are also presented.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this mixed-method phenomenological concurrent triangulation study was to explore the “how” and “what” of college completion experiences of single mothers through the lens of grit, resilience, and positive deviance. Currently, there is limited research on single mothers who complete college. The research suggests that while single mothers recognize the importance of serving as a positive role model for their children and experience noticeable financial and career gains when they earn a college degree. However, the literature also showed that single mothers complete college degrees at low rates and often face financial strain, student loan debt, childcare affordability issues, marginalization, and difficulty balancing multiple competing priorities.

Recognizing that presently there is an incomplete picture of single mothers' lived experiences and the college completion behavioral and thought processes, this study’s significance lies in its attempt to address some gaps in the current body of knowledge. As such, two primary research questions were proposed. The first question was quantitative: are single mother college graduates significantly more resilient or "grittier" than non-single mother college graduates? The second question and three sub-questions were qualitative and phenomenological: What are the lived experiences of single mother college completers? How do single mothers finish college? What behaviors, strategies, and techniques do single mothers describe as contributing to their academic accomplishments and college completion? And What is the impact of college completion on single mothers and their children?

To address the quantitative research question related to the grit and resilience of single mothers, a 55-item online College History Survey asked college degree-earning participants to self-report their level of grit and resilience in terms of completing a college degree. Embedded in

the same questionnaire were the 8-item Grit Scale, or Short Grit Scale (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009), the 14-item Resilience Scale (RS-14) (Wagnild & Young, 1993), and a 2-item Conscientiousness Scale (Gosling et al., 2003). Single mothers' self-reported college grit and self-reported college resilience scores and their Short Grit scores and RS-14 scores were compared to the scores of married women with children. Due to small sample sizes, the researcher created a combined group of participants, including married women without children and single and married men, both with and without children, whose scores were also compared to single mothers. *T*-tests and one-way ANOVAs were run to determine a significant difference in the resilience and grit scores between single mothers and their non-single mother counterparts. Pearson pairwise correlations also tested the strength of relationships between scores.

The researcher identified 10 single mothers from diverse backgrounds through the online College History Survey to address the primary qualitative research question and three sub-questions. After the survey, the researcher asked prospective interview participants to contact her via text or email for additional screening to determine their study eligibility as a single mother while earning at least one college degree. By implementing a 60-minute semi-structured interview protocol, selected single mother participants described their successes and challenges and shared advice for other single mothers in college. After a thorough review of the interview transcripts, the researcher developed initial codes and themes. The participants were then asked to answer additional questions and provide further comments on two separate follow-up questionnaires. Research participants were encouraged to contribute their feedback to shape the emerging themes and develop narratives around single mother college completion experiences.

In the previous chapter, the triangulation of data occurred by comparing two sources. Overall, there was an agreement between the quantitative and qualitative data related to the grit

and resilience of single mothers when completing a college degree. However, there were some discrepancies of note in two areas: a) regarding the severity of single mothers reported childcare needs within the study compared to the childcare affordability crisis as described in the literature, and b) the source of single mother participants' marginalization as societal versus the "othering" stemming from their college environments as found by previous researchers. These contrasts indeed shed light on the need for more research to better understand the needs of single mothers and will be discussed further as part of the recommendations.

The remainder of this chapter summarizes the results and findings of the current study and presents conclusions supported by the data and the evidence from previous research. Next, the theoretical, practical, and future implications confirm the study's significance given the lack of research specifically focused on the grit, resilience, and positive deviance of single mothers who complete college. While there are strengths in the present study's design, discernable sampling and instrumentation weaknesses will be discussed. Finally, the chapter concludes with recommendations for future researchers to further explore the successes and challenges of single mothers in college and suggestions for practitioners to support their needs.

Summary of Findings and Study Conclusions

This section summarizes the quantitative results and qualitative findings for each research question and provides conclusions based upon the current data and literature where available. Given the small sample size, the study's conclusions are drawn with the recognition that more research is needed before these findings can be generalized to the larger population of single mothers with a college degree.

Single Mothers are Resilient College Degree Earners

To answer the research question “Are single mother college graduates significantly more resilient or "grittier" than non-single mother college graduates?”, the researcher compared the test scores between single mothers, married women with children, and a combined group across five measures: two for grit, two for resilience, and one for conscientiousness. Resilience refers to the ability to “bounce back” from adversity and overcome challenges. To date, limited research has been conducted on the resilience of single mothers regardless of situational context. The current study indicated significant differences in the mean self-reported college resilience scores between single mothers and the self-reported college resilience scores of the combined group.

These results are further supported by the qualitative findings within single mothers’ descriptions of their degree completion experiences related to the five characteristics of resilience: self-reliance, purpose, perseverance, equanimity, and existential aloneness, also known as authenticity (Wagnild & Young, 1993). Throughout the semi-structured interviews, single mothers consistently referenced and provided examples of the many ways in which they persevered and persisted to degree completion. They accomplished academic success despite divorces, financial insecurity, career transitions, both their own and their children’s illnesses, sacrifices of sleep and personal time, and the start-stop-restart pattern of some participants, leading to years of delay in finishing college. In conclusion, these results and findings suggest that single mothers are indeed resilient regarding college degree completion.

Single Mothers are Gritty College Degree Earners

The concept of grit refers to one’s long-term commitment to a goal with fidelity despite obstacles (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). To address the research question of whether single mothers are “grittier” than non-single mothers, the researcher implemented two quantitative

measures of grit, the Short Grit Scale (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009) and a self-reported college grit score. There were also qualitative interviews and questionnaires with member-checking to confirm emerging themes related to grit. Results from the analysis of quantitative grit scale and self-reported college grit data did not reveal significant differences between single mothers and non-single mothers. However, qualitative findings revealed that single mothers maintained a power-through mentality throughout their degree completion, which helped push them across the finish line.

Another finding in the current study was that single mothers owed their unwavering commitment to reaching their goals, in part, to their motivation stemming from both the short-term and anticipated long-term impacts of earning a degree. That is, in the short term, they were motivated by serving as a positive role model for their children in conjunction with the self-pride that stemmed from their hard work and semester-by-semester academic success. Further, single mothers also anticipated the long-term benefits of earning a degree. Many participants expected that their degree would eventually lead to improved career options and higher salaries, which served as critical factors in their grit-mentality and high levels of motivation to endure what was, at times, a long and grueling degree completion process. Participants' ability to maintain focus and motivation over the long term, despite setbacks, is the definition of grit.

Eskreis-Winkler et al. (2014) suggested a relationship between grit and conscientiousness. This interaction was the primary reason for including the 2-item Conscientiousness Scale (Gosling et al., 2003) as part of the College History Questionnaire in the present study. Similarly, there was a moderately positive relationship between participants' scores on the Short Grit Scale (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009) and the 2-Item Conscientiousness sub-scale (Gosling et al., 2003) for both single mothers and married women with children.

One of the criticisms leveled against grit theory was that it is too broad of a concept and lacks context for or consideration of the specific circumstances under which to study an individual's grit levels. In contrast, the current study inquired about single mothers' self-perceived grit in the context of working toward the completion of a college degree. Results indicated that while single mothers did not score significantly higher on the Short Grit Scale (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009) than other study participants, the findings showed that 100% of single mothers maintained a grit or power-through mentality throughout their degree completion journey. Similar to their resilience and ability to "bounce back" from adversities such as break-ups and illnesses, single mothers displayed unrelenting focus on their goals despite setbacks such as financial hardships that often lead to stopping out and starting up again, all while under the pressure of balancing competing priorities of motherhood, child-rearing, and working. Thus, in conclusion, single mothers are indeed gritty in the context of completing a college degree.

Single Mothers are Positive Deviants in Their College Degree Attainment

Of the theoretical frameworks presented in this study, the concept of positive deviance is likely the most unfamiliar compared to more well-known theories such as resilience and grit. Positive deviance refers to the idea that certain members of a community (in this instance, single mothers) engage in specific thoughts and behaviors. Such behaviors allow these individuals to create successful outcomes (college degree completion) when others in the same community may not have been able to do so, as evidenced by the low rates of single mothers who finish a degree. Another essential aspect of positive deviance is that those who successfully reach a goal or perform a task are deemed best equipped with the skills and knowledge to share advice on successful behaviors with others in their community.

To address the research question "In what thoughts, behaviors, and strategies do single mothers engage in completing their degree?" the study's semi-structured interviews asked participants to re-trace their thought processes and daily routines during their time in college. Findings indicated that single mothers engaged in several specific thoughts and behaviors that lead to their successful outcomes, including a) seeking and accepting support from their family and others in their community, b) maintaining faith and belief in God, c) setting very high academic standards, and d) making personal sacrifices.

Seeking and accepting social and financial support from family and others, including friends, neighbors, co-workers, classmates, and college personnel, was a shared experience of interviewed participants within this study. Single mothers made it very clear that their path to degree completion was paved with the social support of loved ones and other individuals who sincerely cared about their academic success and personal well-being. Knowing when to ask for and accept assistance appears to be a vital positive deviance behavior for single mothers throughout their successful degree completion efforts.

Maintaining faith and belief in God was another common theme that emerged from the analysis of qualitative data. During extremely difficult life circumstances, many single mothers turned to their faith, prayers, and attendance at church as sources of spiritual encouragement required to gather strength and move forward. Previous research on religion and education indicated a connection between religious commitment and academic achievement among university students (Byfield, 2008) and students in urban schools (Jeynes, 2003). Jeynes (2020) also found that the practice of prayer positively impacted student outcomes for children and young adults.

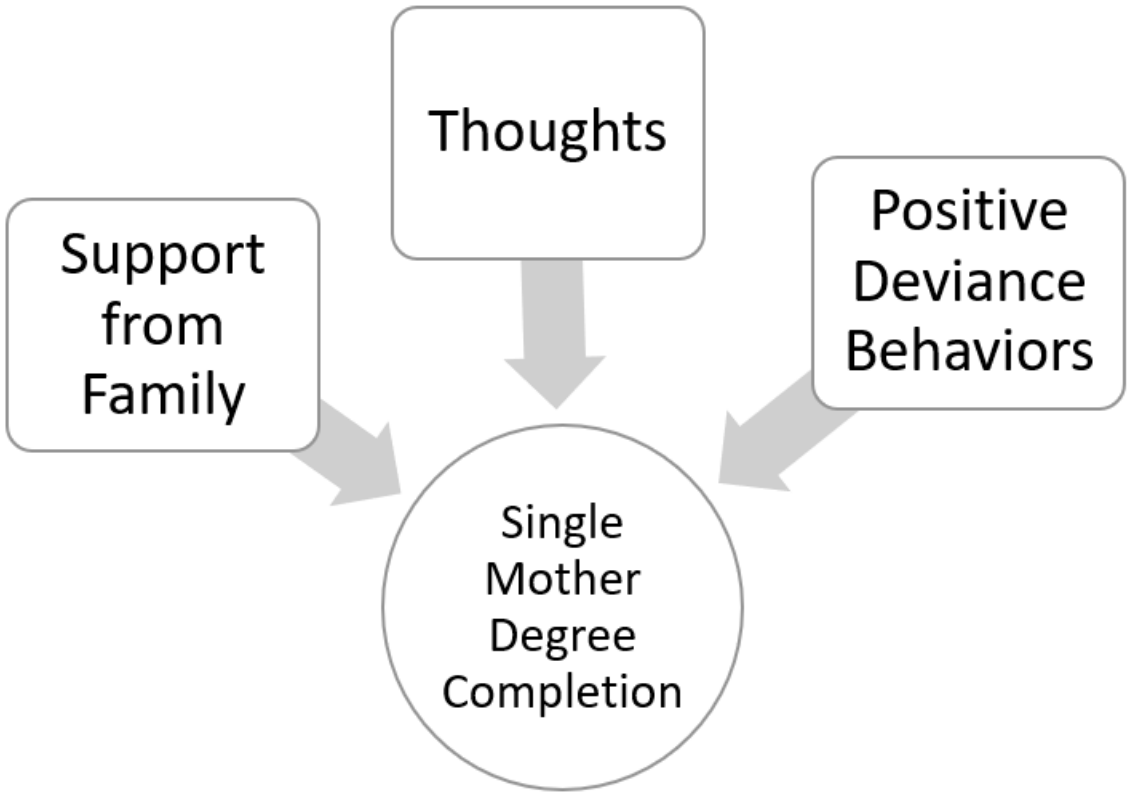
In this study, 90% of the single mother participants indicated they set very high academic standards. Each class or assignment was approached with the self-expectation that they would earn nothing less than a top score or grade of an "A." This behavior appeared to lead to other behaviors in their educational journey. To consistently strive for and perform at such high levels meant that single mothers spent countless hours studying, reading, writing, and researching. However, these high standards and dedication often came at a personal cost. Findings indicated that single mothers made sacrifices of their social lives, quality time with their children, and chose to forego getting enough sleep to accomplish their goal of earning a college degree with high standards. It should be noted that all participants described their sacrifices without any hint of regret or resentment. Single mothers conveyed that they were just doing what needed to be done.

Considering that they seek support from various sources when needed, set high academic standards, and make significant sacrifices, single mothers in this study successfully reached their goals. Some participants continued their educational pursuits beyond their degree of focus, having mastered the skills needed to navigate successfully yet another academic journey. Thus, with their grit and power-through mentality, single mothers in this study appear to have engaged in a set of specific behaviors that lead to their academic accomplishments and degree completion. In contrast, many other nontraditional student groups have attempted but have yet to complete a degree. When asked to offer advice to other single mothers in college, participants shared a combination of gritty and resilient words of encouragement. In conclusion, through their demonstrated academic successes and the relevant experiences needed to guide other students in similar communities, single mothers are exceptionally capable positive deviants in the context of

college degree attainment. Figure 3 represents the factors contributing to single mother college success based on the current study's findings.

Figure 3

Factors Contributing to Single Mother College Completion



Single Mothers Can Benefit from Online Degree Programs

Online education is growing (Burke, 2019; Seaman et al., 2018), and so is the number of nontraditional students (Stoessel et al., 2015). Given the flexibility (Baum & McPherson, 2019; Burke, 2019), accessibility (Swanson, 2005), and convenience (Grau-Valldosera et al., 2019; Muller, 2008) of online degree programs, they may serve as a viable educational option for busy single mothers who are balancing parenting, working, and the pursuit of a college degree.

Further, online degree programs may offer single parents a variety of cost savings (Going back to college as a single parent, 2020). Studying from home reduces commuting expenses such as purchasing gas and parking permits (Going back to college as a single parent, 2020). Online programs may also reduce the need for childcare, as parents can work on assignments from home at times that are most convenient for their schedules (Going back to college as a single parent, 2020). Lastly, there is less likelihood of the need for students to purchase expensive textbooks. Instead, books are usually offered as free or significantly reduced, such as online e-books or Open Education Resources (OER) (Going back to college as a single parent, 2020).

Challenges Persist, but So Do Single Mothers

While single mother participants accomplished impressive levels of academic success, many did so despite facing both personal and societal challenges. The current literature suggests that single mothers whether, in college or not, experience varying degrees of financial hardship, low wages, lack of access to affordable childcare, marginalization, and the stress of balancing competing priorities, or what is known as role strain.

Single mothers in college often find themselves saddled with another layer of financial challenge in the form of student loan debt. Previous research indicated that student parents, particularly single mothers, borrow more in student loans than other parents or students who do not have children (Cruse et al., 2019a). Other researchers report high amounts of debt for single mothers one year after earning a bachelor's degree compared to other students.

> Single mothers who do graduate have higher levels of debt than both their nonparent and married mother peers. On average, single mothers who earn a bachelor's degree have nearly $30,000 in student debt one year after graduation—$4,800 more than women

without children, and nearly $4,300 more than all women students. (Kruvelis et al., 2017, p. 3)

The current study found that single mothers generally experienced many of the same challenges presented in the literature. However, some participants' obstacles manifested in ways that were different than expected. First, as to the similarities, 7 (70%) of interviewed single mothers in the present study experienced financial hardships during their educational journey. Further, four participants, or 40 %, felt they regularly needed to secure the maximum student loan amount to meet their basic needs. Previous researchers found that despite concerns about the ability to repay, single mothers took on student loans as they felt doing so was necessary to remain enrolled in college (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018).

In addition to high rates of student loan debt, some single mothers are faced with at least initially earning low wages, thereby experiencing regular challenges with making ends meet. However, in the current study, of the single mothers who completed the College History Survey (n= 42), 33.3% reported earning between $100,000 and $150,000 per year, compared to married women with children (n = 53), the majority (28.6%) of whom earned between $75,000-$99,999. The majority (26.5%) of the combined group (n = 34 due to missing data) reported earning between $100,000 and $150,000 annually. Single mothers' expanded career options after earning their degrees may have contributed to earning high annual salaries. More research is needed to explore the career advancement opportunities and potential higher annual salary earnings of single mothers who earn a college degree.

In another similarity between the literature and the current study, single mothers experienced role strain. Having to navigate motherhood and work while taking college classes at times took a toll on single mothers. The impact of this juggling act often manifested itself as

varying levels of anxiety, but primarily as sheer exhaustion from carrying the weight of so many responsibilities. Single mothers reported receiving tremendous family and friend support for their childcare needs. However, there were still some tasks that no one else could do on their behalf, such as showing up to work, studying for exams, writing papers, and participating in class.

Where the literature and the current study differed somewhat related to childcare needs and marginalization. Previous research indicated that childcare affordability in the United States is at or is near crisis levels. None of the 10 interviewed participants indicated that the lack of access to affordable childcare was as dire as the literature suggested. Their relatively manageable child care experiences could be because many single mothers in this study relied on family and neighbors for free or very inexpensive childcare. Another consideration for the discrepancy is the age of their children when participants earned their degree of focus. Infants and toddlers need considerably more round-the-clock care and supervision than older children who attend public school for at least part of the day as well as after-school activities. Within the current study, seven out of 10 mothers had children who were already school aged by the time they started working on their degree of focus.

Finally, there was an unexpected difference in marginalization, which is the notion that an individual or group of individuals differing in some way from the majority group are pushed to the side or margins and whose needs and perspectives are less likely to be considered. Single mothers in the current study reported some experiences of marginalization. However, the source was not reported as being experienced from their college environment as found in the literature. Instead, marginalization was directed toward them from society at large. There is a possibility that college personnel were not aware of the participant's status as a single mother. Also, some

mothers may have deliberately chosen not to share their status with their classmates or faculty, thereby minimizing the likelihood of being "othered."

There are a growing number of anecdotal/graphical reports of college faculty very compassionately holding infants and young children during class or exams when a parent (not clear if single mothers) brings them to campus. Perhaps this trend indicates that some college personnel has been exposed to an increasing number of college students who are parents and chose to support instead of marginalizing or stigmatizing them.

In summary, the challenges faced by single mothers in college are both serious and complex, with no easy solutions or quick fixes. While study participants faced persistent concerns about their finances, debt, and role strain, they, too, were relentless in reaching their goals by responding with a gritty mindset, a resilient character, and a host of positive deviant behaviors.

Implications

Due to the limited research regarding single mothers with college degrees, the current study presents an array of possibilities of what could happen in light of the findings and conclusions discussed in the previous section. This section details the theoretical implications for grit theory, resilience theory, and the concept of positive deviance. Next, there are also practical and future implications for institutions and administrators of higher education to understand the needs and challenges of single mothers in college. Finally, the study's limitations, strengths, and weaknesses are addressed.

Theoretical Implications

Chapter 2 presented an in-depth examination of resilience theory, grit theory, and the concept of positive deviance. The researcher introduced these frameworks to explore and

understand the phenomenon of single mother college completion. First, as Wagnild and Young (1993) and Wagnild (2009) described, resilience theory takes a multi-faceted approach to explain how individuals respond to their life challenges. Not only did single mothers describe and display all five characteristics of resilience (purpose, perseverance, self-reliance, equanimity, and existential aloneness, also known as authenticity) to some degree, the current study also found that they self-reported their college resilience at levels that were significantly different than their counterparts. Wagnild and Young (1990) studied resilience within a health and wellness environment to explore how individuals responded to health setbacks. The current study expands the current knowledge base of resilience research to include college completion, during which many students face and overcome personal setbacks and external obstacles.

Second, there was limited previous research on grit theory connected to specific contexts or life circumstances. Grit is defined as maintaining a commitment to a goal despite obstacles. The current study intentionally included the context of college completion when inquiring about participants' grit levels on the College History Questionnaire. There were no significant differences in the Short Grit Scale scores or the self-reported grit levels of single mothers and non-single mother participants. However, the study revealed that 100% of the 10 interviewed single mothers maintained a grit or power-through mentality, essential for their eventual academic success and culminating degree completion. More research is needed surrounding grit in specific contexts, particularly as it relates to the long-term and often challenging journey of earning a college degree.

There were positive but moderate correlations between the grit levels and the conscientiousness of married women with children and single mother participants. A conscientious individual is defined as "thorough, careful, reliable, organized, industrious, and

self-controlled" (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1089). One interpretation of the connection between grit and conscientiousness is the possibility that consistently engaging in conscientious behaviors is more likely to lead to the accomplishment of one's short-term or intermediate goals. Thus, each minor success along the way has the potential to gradually increase one's grit which is necessary for sustained momentum to accomplish larger goals over the long term, such as, for example, completing a college degree despite personal setbacks and financial obstacles. More research is needed to explore the relationships between grit and conscientiousness in the context of academic achievement.

The third framework or lens through which the study viewed college completion was positive deviance. This concept refers to recognizing and understanding the behaviors of individuals that led to a successful outcome compared to individuals from similar backgrounds who experience similar circumstances but do not achieve the same success. The present study's findings indicated that single mothers are positive deviants in their college degree attainment. Participants engaged in positive deviant behaviors such as a) seeking and accepting support from their family and others in their community, b) maintaining faith and belief in God, c) setting very high academic standards, and d) making personal sacrifices. Thus, the single mothers in this study completed a college degree by overcoming numerous setbacks and challenges. Single mothers who face similar financial or child care challenges might benefit from learning about how the positive deviant single mothers in the present study navigated through their obstacles to realize successful college completion.

The finding that single mothers set very high academic standards aligns with previous research on students with children. Cruse et al. (2019a) suggested that student parents (not necessarily single mothers) tended to earn a higher grade point average (GPA) than students

without children. Hess et al. (2014) found that student parents were motivated to earn a college degree to improve their children's lives. As indicated by the findings of the present study, interviewed single mothers were also motivated by the need to create a better life for themselves and their children. More research is needed to understand a broader population of single mothers and their motivation for attending college and completing a degree with such high standards.

One principle of positive deviance is that successful individuals in a community are best equipped to share their knowledge and experiences with others in the same community. When asked to offer advice to other single mothers in college, while participants acknowledged the unique journey of every individual, they responded to the interview prompt with empathy and provided guidance and insights based on their experiences of navigating the challenges of degree completion as single mothers.

Presently, there is limited research on positive deviance, especially within a higher education context. The current study expands the limited body of literature on positive deviance and provides a framework for the initial phenomenological understanding of single mother degree completion. With a focus on studying specific behaviors by successful individuals, positive deviance provides implications for how colleges and administrators can support single mothers and other nontraditional students. These suggestions are presented in the next section.

Practical Implications

As discussed in Chapter 1, single mothers are considered nontraditional students, and the problem is that they tend to complete college degrees at lower rates than their married counterparts. The current study examined the participants' successful behaviors to accomplish their goals and explored the positive impacts of single mother college completion. Participants also shared sage advice with other single mothers. With descriptions of their successful

outcomes, they provided the outline of a road map for what colleges can do to support the success of future college students with children.

Previous research shows that the number of nontraditional students attending college is on the rise. Over time, if this trend continues, the nontraditional student might eventually become the majority student, making them, in essence, traditional. If the majority of enrolled college students shifts to a large population of women with children, who are 25 years and older, and who work full- or part-time, colleges will need to transition their primary focus from what was once the traditional student to the new majority population. Whether nontraditional students are the majority in college or not, institutions need to understand and address these students' needs to help them reach their college completion goals. It can be gleaned from the current study that, at least for single mothers, financial support and affordable childcare were the two most common requests.

First, as to the need for financial support, single mothers in this study reported taking out student loans, and at least three of them are still paying off their debt. For some mothers in this study, taking out loans meant assuming the maximum amount available, not only to pay for college but to meet their basic needs. Of significant importance, the personal and societal impacts of college graduates who are saddled with massive amounts of loan debt is a national conversation. In the United States, the student loan crisis is estimated at $1.7 trillion. Even after several years of repayments, students often owe more than their original loan amount, primarily due to the accumulation of interest (Sheffey, 2021). Debt-related issues such as defaulted loans, the potential for low personal credit ratings, and the inability or delayed ability to purchase a home or adequately save for retirement are likely exacerbated for single mothers.

As the cost of attending college continues to grow more expensive, colleges need to find ways to support nontraditional students, including single mothers, while minimizing the amount and number of loans needed to meet their basic needs. Some possible solutions might include: a) providing students with connections to local community resources, b) extending basic needs stipends or offering basic need centers, c) partnering with foundations that offer grants and scholarships, and d) arranging living wage work-study positions or similar employment as potential salary-earning opportunities for students.

It is well documented that food (Freudenberg et al., 2019; Innis et al., 2020; Spaid et al., 2021) and housing (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Goldrick-Rab & Cochrane, 2019) insecurities are a growing concern among college students, particularly those who attend community college. Based on Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs, addressing basic necessities is essential. Once lower-level physiological needs such as food, shelter, and security are met, individuals can access higher-level psychological needs such as esteem and mastery. Ultimately, the goal is to reach the highest need of self-actualization or realize one's maximum potential (Maslow, 1970). By offering basic needs services or connecting students to local community resources such as access to nutritious food and quality, low-cost housing, community colleges can decrease the high percentage of students struggling to meet their basic needs.

Colleges can partner with non-profit organizations or corporate foundations to offer sizable grants and scholarships as an alternative to securing financial resources besides student loans. Since grants and scholarships do not typically need to be repaid, this type of arrangement could minimize or even alleviate the accumulation of nearly insurmountable student loan debt. Further, as the conversation around living wages continues, an increase in the hourly salary earned from the Federal work-study program would provide students with an alternative to loans

or needing to string together two or three low-wage part-time jobs to make ends meet. Also, in another private-public partnership opportunity, colleges could seek collaborations with local businesses to provide students with well-paying entry-level part-time jobs or internships.

Secondly, in addition to financial resources for college tuition, affordable childcare needs to be addressed. Child care is considered one of the leading expenses that creates a financial hardship for student parents, especially for single mothers in college (Kruvelis et al., 2017). Although single mothers in the current study did not generally report having as dire a need for affordable child care as previous research indicates, this finding could be attributed to their dependence on family and friends for assistance at free or vastly reduced cost. Single mothers in college who may not experience the same fortune of having access to nearby and inexpensive child care resources still need support to care for their children while working and attending classes.

Previous research indicated a steady decline in college campus-provided childcare facilities (Carlson, 2015) and access to care in general (Beeler, 2016; Duquaine-Watson, 2017; Schumacher, 2013). Kruvelis et al. (2017) highlighted a study that found that access to quality child care has important implications for low-income single mothers. Available child care for these mothers increased the likelihood of their college degree persistence. If the goal is to ensure that students who wish to earn a degree can complete one, colleges need to implement viable solutions to address this problem. Possible remedies might include a) actively referring students with children to affordable alternative child care resources, b) partnering with quality local childcare agencies or, c) providing students with increased amounts in stipends and subsidies. Implementing even some of these options would offer single mothers a portion of the support they need to complete their degree.

It should be noted here that the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on society in general and women, in particular, remain to be seen. First, there was a steep national decline in college enrollments during the 2020-2021 academic year. Due to the major disruption of the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic, college students and their families made both rapid and significant adjustments to their lives as job losses, fatalities, campus closures, a preference for in-person instruction instead of online learning, and many other as yet unknown scenarios likely impacted the decision for many students to stop out from college in fall 2020. Also, while other would-be prospective college students never enrolled, some students did not return for the following spring 2021 term.

Further, American women were also profoundly impacted by the pandemic. Current estimates indicate women with young children decreased their work hours roughly four and a half times more than men (Collins et al., 2020). Some women with children were particularly hard hit as daycare centers, and most public and private schools remained closed for months on end, creating more dire childcare scenarios for an industry that was already struggling (Child Care Aware of America, 2020; Malik et al., 2020). It is anticipated that single mothers stand to face the most severe impact of the pandemic due to their already vulnerable financial status combined with child care challenges (Alon et al., 2020). Still, other parents faced the daunting reality of working remotely while balancing parenting and home-schooling their children.

Disconcertingly, the pandemic also laid bare the vast inequities in U.S. working conditions, including below living-wage salaries and the fact that many employers offered inadequate paid sick leave. There was also evidence of a lack of affordable healthcare and limited access to social and mental health services. At the same time, daycare centers and school closures left parents with few, if any, viable options for their childcare needs. More research and

resources are needed to address available and affordable childcare in the United States, directly and immediately impacting single mothers.

Future Implications

The current study suggested that single mothers are gritty, resilient, and positive deviants in their college completion. Grit theory was explored within the context of college completion, which few studies had previously examined. Single mothers in this study overwhelmingly maintained a grit or power-through mentality. They sustained their motivation by focusing on the short-term and long-term impacts of working on their degree. Single-mother participants also scored significantly higher in their self-reported resilience scores than married women with children and a combined group or participants. The 10 interviewed single mother participants consistently conveyed all five characteristics of resilience theory (Wagnild & Young, 1993) throughout the recounting of their degree completion journey. Participants also described their specific positive deviance behaviors, which provided insights into single mother college completion phenomenology. In combination, these findings have important future implications for addressing low single mother college completion rates.

First, it is clear from the current study's findings and conclusions that single mothers can and do succeed in earning college degrees with appropriate family and other social support. As such, there are important implications for what potential resources are required to support the degree completion of single mothers. For those moms who do not live or attend college within proximity to their families, assistance with forming social bonds with other families is vital. At least one study participant acknowledged her desire for social connection to other college students with children. Continued and increased opportunities for single mothers to create bonds with others is a critical aspect for the future success of these students. The cohort model and

learning communities offered by many colleges within specialized educational programs such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields are shown to be an effective retention tool (Dagley et al., 2016; Sithole et al., 2017). In California community colleges, expanding programs such CARE (Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education)/CalWORKs could offer increased resources for single mothers to support each other through their college retention and completion journey.

Second, the current study's findings indicated that some single mothers have "cracked the code" of college completion despite many challenges and setbacks. With resilient character, grit, and maintaining a power-though mentality, participants achieved their educational goals. While each student possesses unique circumstances, abilities, and challenges, learning from other individuals who have successfully navigated college might help pave a path for others to follow suit. If the goal is to increase the number of single mothers who complete college degrees, then incorporating the knowledge gained from their successful experiences into practice is one way to address the problem. More research is needed to explore how these students succeed and whether their experiences, behaviors, and suggestions can positively influence future college policies and practices.

Third, there are important public health, societal, educational, and economic implications for ensuring that single mothers who attempt a college degree eventually complete it. Kruvelis et al. (2017) outlined several advantages of improving the college completion outcomes for women and single mothers. Research findings suggest that individuals with more education experience better health outcomes (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2006). In addition, individuals who earn a college degree are more likely to have a pathway to employment opportunities that offer retirement plans and healthcare benefits. Further, mothers who earn a degree increase the

likelihood that their children will also attend college. Kruvelis et al. (2017) conclude, “given the socioeconomic challenges faced by single mothers in and outside of the college context, increasing their educational attainment is critical to strengthening family well-being and economic security” (p. 5). Thus, evidence suggests that there are too many advantages of degree-earning for women for the problem of currently low degree completion rates of single mothers to be ignored. As their college enrollment numbers are expected to increase, more studies are needed that focus on the benefits of single mother college completion.

In contrast, when single mothers attempt but do not complete a college degree, there are significant personal financial implications to consider. If a student takes out student loans but drops out of college before completing their degree, the debt they assumed is still owed plus interest. Given what is currently known about the higher earning potential of earning a postsecondary degree, it would behoove students to complete their degree and to realize the advantages it offers once they graduate. To accomplish this, students need colleges to improve their retention and completion rates by providing more financial resources that minimize loan debt in the first place.

Recently, student loan debt forgiveness has helped thousands of Americans who were burdened with high balances. It is estimated that U.S. students owe nearly $1.7 trillion in educational loan debt (Sheffey, 2021). While undoubtedly impactful for those receiving financial relief, not all students can expect to have their loan debt forgiven. Future college students who assume debt but leave their program before completion may not be fortunate enough to have the same debt cancellation opportunities. Since single mothers are likely to assume debt to pay for college, these students must have the support they need to complete their degree, be it childcare, financial resources, social outlets, or otherwise.

Not only can student success behaviors impact colleges' improvements from a positive deviance perspective, but the understanding of such behaviors may also have profound and long-lasting implications for other students. For example, colleges might currently offer orientations and college success courses that are more generic. These resources could be modified to include specific, practical advice along with first-hand suggestions as shared by single mothers who have earned a college degree. Incorporating messages and examples from successful individuals is an effective way to support others who wish to experience the same success through the positive deviance framework. By targeting resources for specific groups of students and by supporting students' individual needs, colleges can improve the practice of educational equity in their retention and completion efforts.

Ideally, what is learned from academically successful single mother college graduates would provide colleges with solutions to assist future single mothers who enroll in college. However, other nontraditional students need support, too. The design of the current study's conceptual framework involves positive deviance. This concept emphasizes the importance of finding solutions to societal problems based on input from those with firsthand experience with the issue under consideration.

Another future implication of the current study is that its methodology can be used as a guide for other researchers to develop a much deeper understanding of the successful behaviors of different types of students. For example, first-generation college students, foster youth, veterans, students with disabilities, or any other "nontraditional" or disproportionately impacted group of students whose experiences and advice to colleges can help other students succeed.

In addition to formal research, there may be other opportunities for students to share their needs and experiences. Venues such as student panel discussions, peer-to-peer connections

through student clubs, and strategically designed focus groups are just some of the avenues available to explore further and understand the behaviors and strategies engaged in by successful college completers.

The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Study

The following sections present a critical analysis of the study's strengths and weaknesses by detailing which aspects of the design worked well and which need improvements should future researchers implement a similar methodology.

Strengths

There were three primary strengths of the study, including a) the ethnic diversity of the interviewed participants, b) the ability of the study to begin addressing the gap in the literature on single mother college completion, and c) in alignment with a positive deviance approach, the study's design focused on and highlighted the successes and strengths of single mothers instead of viewing them through the lens of deficit and failure.

The Ethnic Diversity of Study Participants

Of the ten interviewed single mother participants, three (30%) identified as Caucasian, three (30%) identified as Hispanic/Latinx, two (20%) identified as Black/African American, one (10%) identified as Native American, and one (10%) identified as being of mixed ethnicity. Although this is a very small sample of single mothers, the diversity within of the participants begins to shed light on some of the common college completion successes and challenges that spanned across racial and ethnic lines. Much more research is needed that includes more participants and women from other ethnicities not included in the study, for example, Asian or Middle Eastern, to explore the college completion of single mothers further.

Addressing Gaps in the Literature

Chapters 1 and 2 emphasized the lack of literature about single mothers and, even further, the scarcity of research on single mothers in college. One goal of this study was to contribute to the limited body of knowledge on this topic. Findings suggested that single mothers are indeed resilient, gritty positive deviants in the context of earning a college degree. Initial outcomes of the research provided insights into *how* single mothers complete college and increased awareness of their thoughts and behaviors throughout their journey. More research is needed on single mothers and other nontraditional student groups to understand better how successful college completers think and behave. This understanding is essential for building programs and services or creating policies and processes that better meet the needs of these students.

Highlights of Successful Degree Completion

The purpose of the study was to address the problem of too few single mothers completing college. In their own words, single mother interviewed participants shared their successful degree completion stories without describing many of the obstacles they had to overcome. Since much of the literature about single mothers focused on their low rates of degree-earning, the present study instead focused attention on individuals who had achieved academic success through persistence, resilience, grit, and positive deviance.

Weaknesses

The three primary weaknesses of the study involved the amount of missing data, the small sample sizes, and the lack of gender diversity for more extensive comparisons between groups with and without children.

The Amount of Missing Data

Following guidance from the Institutional Review Board, researchers should design a study that allows participants to answer or not answer some survey items as they feel comfortable. Except for the age-qualifying item ("I am at least 18 years old") and the informed consent participation agreement item ("I have read, understood, and agree with the informed consent statement regarding my participation in this study"), all other items on the College History Survey were optional. Therefore, several prompts were not answered by all participants. As a result, the skipped questions led to missing data, which impacted the *n* for each item. Data analysis for each question took the missing data into account.

The length of the researcher-designed College History Survey was extensively considered during its creation. Thus, the shortest possible Grit Scale (Duckworth, 2020) 8-item vs. 12-item, the shorter Resilience Scale ™ Wagnild and Young (1993) (RS-14 vs. the RS-25 item version), and a 2-item Conscientiousness Scale (Gosling et al., 2003) were implemented. Also, using skip logic, participants without children could bypass questions about the number and age of children and be automatically directed to the next set of questions. A Survey Monkey-generated analysis estimated the average completion time was within eight minutes at an overall submission rate of 72%, calculated as those participants who clicked the "submit" button found on the last page of the survey.

However, despite these design efforts, the total length of the survey at 55 items may have remained too long and possibly led to participant fatigue, which caused parts of the survey to be incomplete. Future researchers using electronic surveys should use additional precautions to design a shorter survey and thereby increase the likelihood of capturing complete data. Also, since the data were collected virtually, future researchers conducting in-person surveys may

quickly identify missing data. While participants should always have the option to skip any question for any reason, an in-person researcher might remind participants to complete items that may have been missed due to an oversight.

The Number of Small Sample Sizes for Some Cells

The number of single mother participants chosen for qualitative semi-structured interviews was 10, typical in most qualitative studies. This small sample of single mothers means that extreme caution is warranted before generalizing to the larger population. Further, the majority of interviewed participants lived in the western United States. Given the disparities in the cost of living, college tuition fees and related expenses, available child care, and other geographic nuances, more research is needed to accurately capture the broader, national experiences of single mother college completion.

Another area of small sample size in the College History Survey data led to the creation of a combined group of participants made of married women with children and both single and married men with and without children to allow for comparison of grit, resilience, and conscientiousness scores with those of single mothers. While the initial goal of data collection was 385 responses to achieve a 95% confidence level, 257 responses were well short of the target. Additional data were needed in the various gender and marital status categories of participants for a more robust analysis of scores. Future researchers who collect data virtually and in-person should collect a more extensive data set for comparison at a high confidence level.

The Lack of Gender Diversity in Surveyed Participants

Of the 257 College History Surveys completed, just over 13% were by those participants who identified as male. In identifying the research study as focused on single mothers, prospective participants may not have understood that they were eligible to complete the survey,

although the instructions emphasized this information. More data from males, including married and single, those with and without children is needed to explore gender and marital status differences in grit, resilience, conscientiousness, and positive deviance.

Given the weaknesses of the study, extra care should be taken when examining the generalizability of the findings to the larger population of single mothers. Conclusions herein speak directly to the study's 10 interviewed participants' scores and experiences. At the same time, the implications and recommendations are meant to serve as a catalyst for additional exploration of single mother college completion.

Limitations

The study was limited in its' generalizability to the broader population of single mothers for two primary reasons: sample size and geography. Given the small number of interviewed participants (10), the study's findings were interpreted with caution. Also, due to the majority of interviewed single mother participants predominantly residing and attending college in the western United States, the study was limited in its generalizability regarding the overall national experience of single mothers who complete a college degree. Diversity in states' educational systems and associated tuition fees, policies, and financial support might impact students' experiences in different locations. Finally, the study was also limited by the researcher's current status as a married adult female without children who may not have faced the lived experiences of the population under study.

Delimitations

The study examined the successful college completion experiences of single mothers who responded to an initial online survey and were asked to volunteer in future one-on-one, semi-structured virtual interviews. Delimitations within a research context refer to the parameters or

boundaries of the study as set by the researcher. For this study, participants were at least 18 years of age, single (never married, divorced, or widowed), head of household, with at least one child living with them while earning their college degree. The 10 interviewed single mothers represented diverse ethnic backgrounds and ages and had earned the minimum of an associate's degree from an accredited college or university. Participants were either birth, foster, or adoptive parents of the child(ren) living with them at the time of degree completion. The types (2-year, 4-year, traditional, online) and locations of colleges attended by participants were varied to capture the essence of degree completion from different types of educational institutions.

Recommendations

According to Mahaffey et al. (2015), previous literature on nontraditional students, particularly single mothers, typically painted an extremely bleak picture focused on perceived deficits and failures. In contrast, the significance of the present study is that it illustrated single mothers' academic successes and personal accomplishments while acknowledging and exploring their many challenges. Single mother participants provided insights that, along with additional extensive research, can shape the future of support systems, programs, and services for nontraditional college students. Recommendations for future studies on single mothers include suggested participant samples and improved methodology.

The conclusion that single mothers are resilient and gritty in completing their college degrees is supported by the significant differences in self-reported college resilience scores between single mothers and other participant groups. This conclusion is also supported by 100% of participants' grit or power-through mentality throughout their degree process. However, much more data is needed to understand single mothers' regional and national college completion experiences and differences by type of colleges attended. Students who earn degrees from fully

online degree programs may possess different behaviors, utilize different strategies, and face different challenges than students who attend traditional, in-person colleges. A study with a larger sample of single mothers from across the United States who attend community colleges, 4-year universities, and online degree programs is needed to address this gap in the research.

The small sample size may have hindered significant findings in differences in grit levels. As such, additional research with a larger sample of participants is needed to understand grit in specific contexts, and college degree attainment provides an appropriate aspect for studying grit since it often requires a high level of commitment over time. Further, in her research Duckworth (2016) found that students who earned degrees from two-year institutions scored slightly higher on the grit scale than those who earned a degree from a four-year institution. Upon closer examination of the data, Duckworth learned that the dropout rate at some community colleges could soar high as 80 percent. She concluded that "those who defy the odds are especially gritty" (Duckworth, 2016, p. 11). Since a large percentage of single mothers (44%) attend community colleges (Kruvelis et al., 2017), a more in-depth study is needed specifically at community colleges to develop success and retention strategies designed to improve the completion rates of nontraditional students, including single mothers.

Study participants also expressed their grit and power-through mentality by focusing on earning a degree and the short-term and long-term impacts. In essence, they were both gritty and extremely motivated. For single mothers, their motivation primarily stemmed from the desire to create a better life for themselves and a brighter future for their children. There may be other sources of motivation for single mothers that were not fully explored in the current study. Thus, more research is needed to understand the relationships between grit and motivation theories and how these concepts might improve or decrease the likelihood of obtaining a goal (Crede, 2018).

The current study examined grit across participants as single mothers grit compared to non-single mothers. Another aspect of studying grit theory is to consider the change in grit over time. To standardize the comparison across participants, for those with more than one degree, the current study asked them to focus on only one degree, known as the degree of focus. If grit is expected to change, future studies might ask participants to rate their perceived grit levels as they reflect on each degree earned to analyze trends in growth, decline, or stasis over time and by type of degree earned.

Single mothers in this study are positive deviants in that that they completed college when many other single mothers have not, as indicated by previous research. More research is needed to understand if single moms' experiences, behaviors, and mindsets that lead to their successful college completion can be shared more extensively to support the success of other single moms and nontraditional students. A larger sample of single mothers who reached their academic goals could be surveyed and interviewed. Their advice and experiences are translated into three or four key concepts. Those concepts might then be integrated into a model for college support programs and services to analyze improved retention and completion amongst a cohort of students.

Another positive deviant behavior was single mothers' reliance on their religion and faith in God to overcome difficult obstacles during their college completion journey. The interactions between faith, grit, and resilience need further exploration to understand better their potential impacts on overcoming obstacles to reach goal completion. Participants who identify with either high or low faith in God or possess other religious beliefs could analyze their grit and resilience scores.

Several learning modalities are available for earning a college degree, ranging from traditional in-person to online-only degree programs. Initial findings of this study indicated that single mothers stand to benefit from certain aspects of online degree program offerings. As shared by some study participants, the ability to work on their degree at their convenience provided invaluable scheduling and studying flexibility while minimizing, if not eliminating, the need for regular child care. More research is needed to understand the impacts of online degree programs on single mothers.

Finally, single mothers in this study were gritty, resilient, and persistent when earning a college degree. However, the challenges they faced cannot be overlooked or understated. In alignment with current research, the study's findings indicated the prominence of financial instability and role strain among single mothers in college. Of the 10 interviewed participants, 100% overcame some level of financial insecurity during their degree completion process. Similarly, of the 10 participants, three (30%) detailed their anxiety around balancing their competing roles and responsibilities, also known as role strain (Goode, 1960).

The literature and study findings diverged somewhat in the intensity of the need for childcare and the source of marginalization. Participants in the study were highly appreciative of the support network they received from family and friends regarding childcare. Affordability of child care was a concern for single mothers related to their financial status. Still, they did not report that the availability of care was as dire as the research suggested. There is also the critical consideration of the age and number of children and their childcare needs. Some single mothers in this study had one or two very young children during their degree of focus, while others had older children, all with varying care needs. However, most single mothers in the present study also had extensive child care support from family and friends. For single mothers without family

support or with more than two children with child care needs, their experiences and expenses are likely to be very different.

As to marginalization, previous researchers found that single mothers in classes and on college campuses felt “othered” at times. The current study’s findings indicated that the marginalization stemmed mainly from the society at large and not from their educational institutions. Increased awareness of and sensitivity to the needs of nontraditional students over the years may have played a role in the discrepancy of findings. Another consideration is how much single mothers in the current study revealed their marital and parental status to others. Future researchers should examine how single mothers are perceived by their educational institutions and classmates. Doing so can provide clarity around potential sources of marginalization and assist with developing strategies to counteract the effects of “othering” in support of an inclusive academic environment.

Overall, more research is needed to understand and address the challenges faced by single mothers in the context of completing a college degree. Increasing the number of studies on this growing college population is one of the best ways to understand the barriers to education and improve degree completion rates.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Concordia University Irvine IRB Approval

TICKET ID:#5745

Date: **Aug 17, 2020 @ 06:14 pm**
Creator: stephanie.paramore@eagles.cui.edu
Summary: **EdD - IRB Application- Exempt - Paramore**

If you have any additional information regarding this case respond to this email. Please remember to keep "**[Ticket #5745]**" in email topic.

Hello stephanie.paramore@eagles.cui.edu,

This message is from the
Concordia University Irvine
Office of Institutional Research.

On Oct 08, 2020 @ 11:06 am IRB Reviewer wrote:

Ticket closed: Congratulations on your CUI site approval. Your study is now exempt from IRB review for CUI members as well. As always, please follow human subjects research regulations and COVID safety guidelines in your research and determine whether any further site authorizations are needed as they arise.

On Oct 08, 2020 @ 11:06 am your ticket was marked as closed,

This means your request was considered resolved. If it has not beeen resolved to your satisfaction, simply reply to this message to automatically reopen your ticket.

Please do not reply to this email unless your issue has not been resolved to your satisfaction. Any reply to this message will automatically reopen your ticket.

Appendix B: Concordia University Irvine Site Authorization

Appendix J

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY IRVINE

APPENDIX J: SITE AUTHORIZATION

Title of Study	"This is how we did it": A mixed method phenomenological study of grit, resilience, and positive deviance among single mother college grads.
Researcher/s	Stephanie M. Paramore, M.A.
Researcher/s' Affiliation with Site	EDD Student at Concordia University (Cohort 10)
Researcher/s' Phone Numbers	760.413.8954
Researcher/s' CUI Email (unless not from CUI)	stephanie.paramore@eagles.cui.edu
Researcher/s' University Supervisor	Dr. Barbara Howard, Dissertation Chair
Univ. Supervisor's Phone & Email	barbara.howard@cui.edu; 760.703.6988
Location/s where Study will Occur	Virtually (online surveys and virtual interviews)

Purpose of Study (1-2 paragraphs)

The purpose of this study is to describe the phenomenon of single mother college degree completion. It will address the problem of too few single mothers who graduate from college as well as contribute to the limited research on this population. Research questions are: 1. Are single mother college graduates significantly more resilient or "grittier" than non-single parents? 2. What are the lived experiences of single mother college graduates? The researcher would like to contact current CUI EDD students through personal contacts and social media to ask for their participation in the surveys and interviews to assist with pilot testing.

Procedures to be Followed

The researcher will contact her current CUI EDD cohort (10) to ask for their voluntary participation in the pilot study to review the survey questions for clarity and to assist with further development of the semi-structured interview protocol. Some members of cohort 10 may also participate in the approved study. CUI EDD students from other cohorts may also be contacted through personal contacts and social media to receive a link to participate in the approved study.

Time and Duration of Study

At the participants' convenience anytime between Sept. 8, 2020 to March 30, 2021 for pilot testing and data collection from surveys and semi-structured interviews.

Benefits of Study

There are no known direct health benefits of the study, but participants may experience a psychosocial "lift" from sharing their college-going experiences. This study will contribute to the generalizable knowledge about the behaviors, strategies, and techniques of single mothers who completed college. CUI EDD students who participate in the pilot study surveys or interviews will be entered into a random opportunity drawing for one (1) $20 gift card of their choice. Study participants will also be offered a .pdf version of the final publication.

Persons who will have access to the records, data, tapes, or other documentation (see Application Process Step C. 3 of Handbook)

Only the primary researcher will have access to the documents and will keep them in a locked cabinet and maintain password-encrypted files.

Appendix J

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY IRVINE

Date when the records, data, tapes, or other documentation will be destroyed: 12/31/22

Researcher's Signature [signature] Date 08/30/20

Authorization

I understand that participation in this study is confidential. Only the researcher, collaborators, and supervising professor will have access to participants' identities and to information that can be associated with their identities. Please check the appropriate box below and sign the form:

[x] **I give permission** for my organization to participate in this project. I understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form. I have read this form and understand it.

[ ] **I do not give permission** for my organization to participate in this project.

Authorized Signature [signature] Date 10/7/2020

Printed Name & Title Deborah Lee, Director of Institutional Research and Assessment

Appendix C: Rancho Santiago Canyon College District Research Office Approval

RANCHO SANTIAGO
Community College District

Building the future through quality education

2323 North Broadway • Santa Ana, CA 92706 -1640 • (714) 480-7300 • www.rsccd.edu
Santa Ana College • Santiago Canyon College

September 15, 2020

Ms. Stephanie Paramore
20146 Waverly Glen Street
Yorba Linda, CA 92886

Dear Ms. Paramore,

Your request to conduct your doctoral research, *This is How We Did it: A Mixed Method Phenomenological Study of Grit, Resilience, and Positive Deviance Among Single Mother College Graduates*, at Santa Ana College, as outlined in our local Rancho Santiago Community College District (RSCCD) Research Protocol (submitted via email on August 30, 2020 and revised September 10, 2020) and draft IRB proposal to Concordia University Irvine (submitted August 17, 2020) is provisionally approved. Once you receive IRB approval from Concordia University Irvine, please resubmit to this office for further review and final approval.

Ms. Christine Leon, Associate Dean of EOPS, will be your college contact. Though our office approved the research, participation from the college, counselors, faculty and students is voluntary. They have the right to decline your invitation and/or stop participation at any given moment within the research process. Taping interviews are only allowed after obtaining participant's consent. Also, research results tied to our college/district for presentations and publications are not allowed without the consent of our office. Please submit a copy of your findings to our office at the conclusion of your research.

Please feel free to contact me at (714) 480 -7467 should you have questions or concerns. We are happy to support research that supports our district's/colleges' vision and goals.

Sincerely,

Nga Pham
Executive Director
District Research, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness

BOARD OF TRUSTEES:
Claudia C. Alvarez • Arianna P. Barrios • John R. Hanna • Lawrence R. "Larry" Labrado • Jose Solorio • Nelida Mendoza Yanez • Phillip E. Yarbrough
CHANCELLOR:
Raúl Rodriguez, Ph.D.

Appendix D: CITI Behavioral Research Certificate

CITI PROGRAM

Completion Date 28-May-2020
Expiration Date 28-May-2023
Record ID 36235927

This is to certify that:

Stephanie Paramore

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME. Do not use for TransCelerate mutual recognition (see Completion Report).

Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher (Curriculum Group)
Social & Behavioral Research (Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course (Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Concordia University Irvine

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w2cd1ea26-d536-4939-bb57-353d75574b34-36235927

Appendix E: College History Survey

Informed Consent Statement

Please note: You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your survey completion serves as your voluntary agreement/consent to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 or older. This survey is anonymous. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity. No personally identifiable information is captured unless you voluntarily offer personal or contact information in the area that asks if you wish to be contacted for further research participation.
Additionally, your responses are combined with those of many others and summarized in a report to further protect your anonymity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to take this survey or to stop responding at any time. Estimated completion time: 10 minutes

Thank you for your participation.

* Required

1.) I am at least 18 years old. *

2.) I have read, understood, and agree with the above consent statement regarding my participation in this study. *

- Yes
- No (*skip to exit survey*)

3.) Have you ever attempted to earn a college degree or certificate?

- No, I have never attempted to earn a college degree or certificate. [will skip to section to exit the survey]
- Yes, I have attempted to earn a degree or certificate but did not complete at least one, and I am not currently enrolled in a program
- Yes, I am currently enrolled in a degree program
- Yes, I have attempted to earn a college degree or certificate and finished at least one.

4.) How many college degrees or certificates have you earned?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4 or more

5.) What is your degree of focus for this survey? The degree of focus is the one you earned that required the most grit or resilience.

- Certificate of completion (vocational, professional)
- Associate's Degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's
- Doctoral
- Other, please specify

6.) How old were you when you started working on your first degree?

7.) Approximately how many years did it take you to complete your first degree?

- Less than one year
- 2 years
- 3 years
- 4 years
- 5 years
- 6 years
- More than 7 years

8.) For your degree of focus, what was your completion timeline? (If you are still working on your degree of focus, please provide an estimate.)

- Completed early
- Completed on time
- Delayed completion

9.) With whom were you living while you were working on your first degree? Indicate your living situation during the majority (more than 50%) of the time you spent working on your first college degree.

- I lived alone.
- I lived with my parent(s) or guardian(s).
- I lived with family, but not my parents or guardian such as brother, aunt, grandparents, cousins.
- I lived with my friends or roommates in a residence hall, dormitory, or similar.
- I lived with my spouse or domestic partner.
- I lived with my child or children.
- I lived with my children AND spouse or domestic partner.
- I lived with my parent(s), child(ren), and spouse or domestic partner.
- I did not complete a college degree

10.) In what country or countries did you earn your degree(s)?

11.) Do you have any children?
- Yes
- No (will skip next 4 questions)
- Decline to state

12.) How many children (including adoptive and stepchildren) do you have?
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 or more

13.) How old were you when you had your first child? _____

14.) How old were your children when you started earning your degree of focus?
Child 1, age____
Child 2, age____
Child 3, age____
Child 4, age____
Child 5, age____

15.) During **any** time, you were working on a degree, were you a single parent (not married, divorced, or widowed)?
- Yes
- No

16.) What type of social support did you experience while you earned your first college degree? Check all that apply.
- My immediate family (for example, child, mother, father, brother, sister)
- My extended family (for example, aunt, uncle, cousin, niece, nephew, grandparent, in-laws)
- School officials (for example, counselor, advisor, instructor, administrator)
- Religious (for example, prayers, pastor, priest, minister, rabbi, attending church)
- Other students in some of my classes
- Other students at my school who were NOT in my classes
- I did NOT have any social support while I earned my first degree or certificate.

17.) I believe I received/am receiving an appropriate amount of social support while earning my degree of focus?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

18.) Did you experience any major challenges or setbacks while working on your first degree?

- Yes
- No
- I do not recall

19.) If you faced a major challenge or setback while working on your degree of focus, what was/is the primary nature of the challenge?

- Academic (e.g., grades; academic probation; course load)
- Medical related to you (e.g., illness, hospitalization)
- Financial (e.g., paying tuition, rent/mortgage, books, child care)
- Family/personal issues (e.g., related to parent/children/spouse/partner/other close relationships)
- Social (e.g., not “fitting in”)
- Psychological (e.g., depression/anxiety)

Other_____

20.) If, yes, you experienced challenges or setbacks while working on your first degree, please explain at least one in detail below. What was the specific situation, and what happened?

21.) If you experienced setbacks, to what extent did they impact your college completion goals?

1- did not impact me at all 7-completely impacted me

22.) Resilience can be defined as the ability to "bounce back" from challenges. How resilient would you rate yourself when it comes to working toward a college degree?

1-not resilient at all 7- completely resilient

23.) Grit can be defined as the overall ability to commit to a goal with loyalty and to demonstrate consistency over time. How would you rate your grit level when it comes to working toward a college degree?

1- not gritty at all 7-completely gritty

Questions 24- 31: Short Grit Scale (Appendix J)

Questions 32- 45: The 14-item Resilience Scale (Appendix I)_

Questions 46 -47: 2-Item Conscientiousness Scale (Appendix K)

48.) What is your age?

49.) What is your gender?
- Female
- Male
- Non-binary

50.) What is your current marital status?
- Single, never married
- Married
- Divorced
- Widowed
- Separated

51.) What is your ethnicity?
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Asian Indian, Laotian, Cambodian, Filipino, Hmong
- Black or African American
- Hispanic/Latinx
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Middle Eastern
- White or Caucasian
- Mixed Ethnicity
- Other:_____

52.) What is your current individual annual income before taxes?
- Less than $15,000
- $15,000-$29,999
- $30,000-$49,999
- $50,000-$74,999
- $75,0001-$99,999
- $100,000-150,000
- Over $150,00

53.) What is your highest level of education?

- No high school diploma or GED
- High school diploma or GED
- Vocational certificate
- Associate's or 2-year degree
- Bachelor's or 4-year degree
- Master's degree
- Doctorate (including medicine, law, education, philosophy)
- Professional certification
- Other:_____

54.) Are you now or were you ever a single mother who is: a) the Head of Household while completing a college degree; and b) willing to participate in virtual interviews for additional research?

55.) We appreciate your interest in further research! Please contact the researcher as soon as possible. Send an email (please copy and paste the address into your email account) stephanie.paramore@eagles.cui.edu or send a text message to 714-xxx-xxxx. You will be contacted within 48 hours for follow-up. Thank you!

Appendix F: Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

PROJECT TITLE: "Powering through": A mixed-method phenomenological study of resilience, grit, and positive deviance among single mother college graduates.

INTRODUCTION: The study you are being asked to participate in is designed to investigate single mother college completion. This study is being conducted by Stephanie M. Paramore, M.A., under the supervision of Dr. Barbara Howard, Director of Assessment and Accreditation, School of Education at Concordia University Irvine. The Institutional Review Board has approved this study, Concordia University Irvine, in Irvine, CA.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to explore and describe the behaviors of successful single mothers who complete college. Successful behaviors are generally defined as those actions, strategies, or techniques that lead to single mothers completing college.

DESCRIPTION: All participants will be asked to first complete a college completion survey anonymously. For the second part of the research study, those who meet the criteria (single mother, age 18 or above, who completed a college degree) will be asked to participate in one-on-one virtual interviews, which will be recorded.

PARTICIPATION: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may skip any question on the survey or during the interview. You may stop participating in the study at any time without penalty or negative consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY: There are two parts to this study. The first part asks for broad participation in an online college history survey, submitted anonymously through a Survey Monkey link. The second is focused on single mothers who completed a college degree. Data collected in part two of the study will be kept confidential through aliases and general geographic descriptions. ***Only a participant's actual age will be disclosed***. All electronic data collected will be stored in a password-encrypted file that is only accessible by the researcher. All printed data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet only accessible by the researcher. Both electronic and printed data will be permanently destroyed three (3) years after completing the study.

DURATION: It is anticipated that participants in the first part of the study can complete the college completion survey in less than 10 minutes. For the second part of the study, the first interview is expected to last at least 45 but not longer than 60 minutes. Up to two (2) follow-up video or phone interviews of less than 30 minutes each will be conducted for participant input, corrections, and clarifications. Thus, a total maximum of two (2) hours for part two of the study.

RISKS: The foreseeable risks or discomforts to participants may include possible feelings of anxiety or discomfort associated with recalling and explaining past experiences in college. Participants can discontinue the study at any time without penalty or negative consequences.

BENEFITS: Participants who complete part 2 of the research study will be provided with a .pdf of the final research product. Also, participants who complete all interviews (2 hours for initial and follow-up) will receive a $20 gift card of their choice, either for casual dining or a mass retailer.

Please check one:

- ☐ **I <u>agree</u> with the above and consent to participate in this study.**
- ☐ **I <u>do not</u> agree with the above and decline participation in this study.**

NAME:_____

CONTACT INFORMATION: For any questions or concerns about this research study, please contact:

Stephanie M. Paramore, M.A.
Primary Researcher
stephanie.paramore@eagles.cui.edu

Dr. Barbara Howard
Dissertation Committee Chair
barbara.howard@cui.edu

Please keep a copy of this consent form for your records.
Thank you for your participation.

Appendix G: Study Recruitment Protocol

Social Media Post- LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram

Hi! Have you earned a college degree or certificate? If you are 18 years or older, please consider participating in a doctoral research study on college completion. Your responses will remain anonymous.
Here's the link:
Thank you!

Professional Contacts via Email Message

Dear Colleagues,
Hello. I hope you and your families are doing well.

I am conducting doctoral research on the college completion experiences of anyone 18 years or older who has earned at least one college degree or certificate.

The study involves two parts: part one is an initial 10-minute online survey where the responses will remain completely anonymous. In part two, after completing the initial survey, contact information will be collected for those interested and who meet the requirements. More in-depth virtual interviews will be held at a later date and time.

If you, or someone you know, would be so kind as to take the initial online survey, it would be greatly appreciated. Please feel free to forward this email to as many friends, colleagues, family as possible.

Here is the link: (link provided)

Thank you for your help in collecting data for my study.
Sincerely,
Stephanie M. Paramore, Primary Researcher
Stephanie.paramore@eagles.cui.edu

Student Support- Email to CalWorks Office Contacts with Single Mothers

Dear (CalWorks Administrator, Faculty and Staff)

Hello! I hope you and your family, students, and staff are doing well.

I am conducting doctoral research on the college completion experiences of anyone 18 years or older who has earned at least one college degree or certificate while being a single parent.

The study involves two parts: part one is an initial 10-minute online survey where the responses will remain completely anonymous. For part two, I would like to connect with single mothers *who have completed a college degree or certificate* to engage with them through initial 45-to 60-minute virtual interviews to be held at a date and time that is convenient for them.
Would you be so kind as to connect with your network of former CalWorks students to ask them if they will participate? They can take only the online survey if they wish. However, if they also

would like to be considered for a virtual (Zoom or similar) interview, the end of the online survey will ask them to provide their contact information. Interviewed participants' identities will remain confidential with the use of aliases and general descriptions.

Graduates selected to participate in the study and complete interviews (up to 2 hours total) will be compensated one (1) $20.00 gift card to their choice of either fast-casual dining or mass retail. If they wish, they will also receive an electronic copy of the completed study.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Here's the link: (link provided)

Thank you so much for your assistance with my research study!

Sincerely,
Stephanie M. Paramore, Primary Researcher
Stephanie.paramore@eagles.cui.edu

Appendix H: 14-Item Resilience Scale Intellectual Property License Agreement

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY LICENSE AGREEMENT

This Intellectual Property License Agreement ("Agreement") is made and effective this 24 August 2020 ("Effective Date") by and between The Resilience Center, PLLP ("Licensor") and Stephanie Paramore ("Licensee").

Licensor has developed and licenses to users its Intellectual Property, marketed under the names "the Resilience Scale," "RS", "14-item Resilience Scale," "RS14," the "Resilience Scale for Children" and "RS10" (the "Intellectual Property").

Licensee desires to use the Intellectual Property.

NOW, THEREFORE, in consideration of the mutual promises set forth herein, Licensor and Licensee agree as follows:

1. License.
   Licensor hereby grants to Licensee a 1-year, non-exclusive, limited license to use the Intellectual Property as set forth in this Agreement.
2. Restrictions.
   Licensee shall not modify, license or sublicense the Intellectual Property, or transfer or convey the Intellectual Property or any right in the Intellectual Property to anyone else without the prior written consent of Licensor. Licensee may make sufficient copies of the Intellectual Property and the related Scoring Sheets to measure the individual resilience of up to 300 subjects, for non-commercial purposes only.
3. Fee.
   In consideration for the grant of the license and the use of the Intellectual Property, subject to the Restrictions above, Licensee agrees to pay Licensor the sum of US$75.
4. Term.
   This license is valid for twelve months, starting at midnight on the Effective Date.
5. Termination.
   This license will terminate at midnight on the date twelve months after the Effective Date.
6. Warranty of Title.
   Licensor hereby represents and warrants to Licensee that Licensor is the owner of the Intellectual Property or otherwise has the right to grant to Licensee the rights set forth in this Agreement. In the event any breach or threatened breach of the foregoing representation and warranty, Licensee's sole remedy shall be to require Licensor to do one of the following: i) procure, at Licensor's expense, the right to use the Intellectual Property, ii) replace the Intellectual Property or any part thereof that is in breach and replace it with Intellectual Property of comparable functionality that does not cause any breach, or iii) refund to Licensee the full amount of the license fee upon the return of the Intellectual Property and all copies thereof to Licensor.
7. Warranty of Functionality.
   Licensor provides to Licensee the Intellectual Property "as is" with no direct or implied warranty.
8. Payment.
   Any payment shall be made in full prior to shipment. Any other amount owed by Licensee to Licensor pursuant to this Agreement shall be paid within thirty (30) days following invoice from Licensor. In the event any overdue amount owed by Licensee is not paid following ten (10) days written notice from Licensor, then in addition to any other amount due, Licensor may impose and Licensee shall pay a late payment charge at the rate of one percent (1%) per month on any overdue amount.
9. Taxes.
   In addition to all other amounts due hereunder, Licensee shall also pay to Licensor, or reimburse Licensor as appropriate, all amounts due for tax on the Intellectual Property that are measured directly by payments made by Licensee to Licensor. In no event shall Licensee be obligated to pay any tax paid on the income of Licensor or paid for Licensor's privilege of doing business.
10. Warranty Disclaimer.
    LICENSOR'S WARRANTIES SET FORTH IN THIS AGREEMENT ARE EXCLUSIVE AND ARE IN LIEU OF ALL OTHER WARRANTIES, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO, THE IMPLIED WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY AND FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE.

11. Limitation of Liability.
    Licensor shall not be responsible for, and shall not pay, any amount of incidental, consequential or other indirect damages, whether based on lost revenue or otherwise, regardless of whether Licensor was advised of the possibility of such losses in advance. In no event shall Licensor's liability hereunder exceed the amount of license fees paid by Licensee, regardless of whether Licensee's claim is based on contract, tort, strict liability, product liability, or otherwise.
12. Support.
    Licensor agrees to provide limited, e-mail-only support for issues and questions raised by the Licensee that are not answered in the current version of the *Resilience Scale User's Guide*, available on www.resiliencescale.com, limited to the Term of this Agreement. Licensor will determine which issues and questions are or are not answered in the current *User's Guide*.
13. Notice.
    Any notice required by this Agreement or given in connection with it, shall be in writing and shall be given to the appropriate party by personal delivery or by certified mail, postage prepaid, or recognized overnight delivery services.
    If to Licensor:
    The Resilience Center
    PO Box 313
    Worden, MT 59088-0313
    If to Licensee:
    Name: Stephanie Paramore
    Concordia College Irvine
    Irvine, California
    United States

14. Governing Law.
    This Agreement shall be construed and enforced in accordance with the laws of the United States and the state of Montana. Licensee expressly consents to the exclusive forum, jurisdiction, and venue of the Courts of the State of Montana and the United States District Court for the District of Montana in any and all actions, disputes, or controversies relating to this Agreement.
15. No Assignment.
    Neither this Agreement nor any interest in this Agreement may be assigned by Licensee without the prior express written approval of Licensor.
16. Final Agreement.
    This Agreement terminates and supersedes all prior understandings or agreements on the subject matter hereof. This Agreement may be modified only by a further writing that is duly executed by both Parties.
17. Severability.
    If any term of this Agreement is held by a court of competent jurisdiction to be invalid or unenforceable, then this Agreement, including all of the remaining terms, will remain in full force and effect as if such invalid or unenforceable term had never been included.
18. Headings.
    Headings used in this Agreement are provided for convenience only and shall not be used to construe meaning or intent.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the Parties hereto have duly caused this Agreement to be executed in its name on its behalf, all as of the day and year first above written.

Licensee	**The Resilience Center**
Signature:	
Printed Name: Stephanie Paramore	Gail M. Wagnild, PhD
Title: Student	Owner and CEO
Date: 24 August 2020	24 August 2020

Appendix I: Resilience Scale 14 (RS-14) ™

The 14-Item Resilience Scale (RS-14)

Date_____

Please read each statement and circle the number to the right of each statement that best indicates your feelings about the statement. Respond to all statements.

Circle the number in the appropriate column	**Strongly Disagree**						**Strongly Agree**
1. I usually manage one way or another.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. I feel proud that I have accomplished things in life.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. I usually take things in stride.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I am friends with myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. I feel that I can handle many things at a time.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. I am determined.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. I can get through difficult times because I've experienced difficulty before.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. I have self-discipline.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. I keep interested in things.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. I can usually find something to laugh about.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. My belief in myself gets me through hard times.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. In an emergency, I'm someone people can generally rely on.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13. My life has meaning.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. When I'm in a difficult situation, I can usually find my way out of it.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

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Appendix J: Short Grit Scale

Short Grit Scale

Directions for taking the Grit Scale: Please respond to the following 8 items. Be honest – there are no right or wrong answers!

1. New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.*
   - ❑ Very much like me
   - ❑ Mostly like me
   - ❑ Somewhat like me
   - ❑ Not much like me
   - ❑ Not like me at all

2. Setbacks don't discourage me.
   - ❑ Very much like me
   - ❑ Mostly like me
   - ❑ Somewhat like me
   - ❑ Not much like me
   - ❑ Not like me at all

3. I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.*
   - ❑ Very much like me
   - ❑ Mostly like me
   - ❑ Somewhat like me
   - ❑ Not much like me
   - ❑ Not like me at all

4. I am a hard worker.
   - ❑ Very much like me
   - ❑ Mostly like me
   - ❑ Somewhat like me
   - ❑ Not much like me
   - ❑ Not like me at all

5. I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.*
   - ❑ Very much like me
   - ❑ Mostly like me
   - ❑ Somewhat like me
   - ❑ Not much like me
   - ❑ Not like me at all

6. I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.*
   - ❑ Very much like me
   - ❑ Mostly like me
   - ❑ Somewhat like me
   - ❑ Not much like me
   - ❑ Not like me at all

7. I finish whatever I begin.
   - Very much like me
   - Mostly like me
   - Somewhat like me
   - Not much like me
   - Not like me at all

8. I am diligent.
   - Very much like me
   - Mostly like me
   - Somewhat like me
   - Not much like me
   - Not like me at all

Scoring:

1. For questions 2, 4, 7 and 8 assign the following points:
   5 = Very much like me
   4 = Mostly like me
   3 = Somewhat like me
   2 = Not much like me
   1 = Not like me at all

2. For questions 1, 3, 5 and 6 assign the following points:
   1 = Very much like me
   2 = Mostly like me
   3 = Somewhat like me
   4 = Not much like me
   5 = Not like me at all

Add up all the points and divide by 8. The maximum score on this scale is 5 (extremely gritty), and the lowest score on this scale is 1 (not at all gritty).

Grit Scale citation

Duckworth, A.L, & Quinn, P.D. (2009). Development and validation of the Short Grit Scale (Grit-S). *Journal of Personality Assessment, 91,* 166-174. http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~duckwort/images/Duckworth%20and%20Quinn.pdf

Duckworth, A.L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M.D., & Kelly, D.R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 9*, 1087-1101. http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~duckwort/images/Grit%20JPSP.pdf

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Note: Item 2 of the Short Grit Scale was modified to read “Setbacks don’t discourage me. I don’t give up easily” based on recommendations from previous researchers (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014; Hardeman, 2016).

Appendix K: Conscientiousness 2-item Scale (Gosling et al., 2003)

Disagree Strongly						Agree Strongly
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I see myself as dependable, self-disciplined.

I see myself as disorganized, careless. (reverse-scored)

Appendix L: Virtual Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Welcome and Introductions

- Review of research consent form and purpose of the research study; answer questions

Interviewee Name:
Age:
Ethnicity:
Current Marital Status:
First College Degree and Institution:
Employment and Educational Status:

- First, let's start with you sharing about your current status in terms of employment and if you are pursuing additional education.
    - Probe: How long have you been doing x? What are your future career goals?
    - (If in school, what degree are you currently seeking?)

Children/Living arrangements:

- How many children do you have? How old were your children while finishing x degree?
- While you were completing college, what were your living arrangements?
    - Probe: Did you live on your own or with family/friends?

College/Campus Experience regarding your first degree

- When it comes to your experience in college, please tell me about your study habits. How did you manage/schedule it, and when?
- Did you interact with faculty outside of class?
- Some single mothers in college have expressed challenges with finding child care.
    - How did you address this when you were in college?
- Tell me about a person, office, or organization that impacted your college experience.

Challenges

- Think back to a moment during college that was particularly challenging for you.
    - What was the specific situation, and how did you handle it?
        - Probe: What did you do or say to yourself or others?
- Did you experience any financial hardships? If so, how did you manage your finances?
- Some single mothers have experienced challenges in *finishing* college.
    - What did you do to help you complete? Probe for specific examples of behaviors: How did you manage? What did you do, say, experience, think?

Motivation/Resilience:

- What was/were your reason(s) for going to college? What was/were your reason(s) for finishing college?
- Think back to your proudest moment in college.
    - What was the situation, and what did you experience?
- What does it mean to you/your family to have completed a college degree? How has it impacted you?
- What specific advice would you give to a single mother currently in college who is trying to finish?

Closing

- Is there anything else you would like to add that I did not ask you?

Next Steps: Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in this study. I will contact you to follow up and ask for your help clarifying anything I may have missed. I may also ask you to read through a summary of the initial themes to see if they align with your experiences. Once this is completed, I will send you your $20 gift card. *Would you like casual dining or mass retail?*

Appendix M: Profile Summary for April

Background

April is a 50-year-old Hispanic/Mexican American female with three children. For this study, her degree of focus is her Bachelor's degree in Communication Studies which she earned from a traditional, on-campus program. Her higher educational journey started several years ago when a counselor encouraged her to return to college to complete her degree.

Finances

April was employed full-time while completing her bachelor's, and she did not take out any student loans to pay for her degree. However, there were times when she took breaks in enrollment due to financial constraints.

Childcare

April's three children were teenagers during the time she was completing her degree of focus. As such, she reported that child care and the associated expenses were not issues for her.

Support

During her interview, April indicated that she received support from both her family and her faith. Her family's pride in her while working on her degree was a source of encouragement during difficult times. April also expressed that her faith was an inspiration in completing her degree and facing other challenges. She wrote, "praying, believing, and having faith in Jesus helped me get through school and other tough times in my life." April overall felt supported while earning her degree of focus but wished that her college's faculty were more sensitive to the difficulties surrounding completing outside-of-class assignments. April found that these requirements were sometimes excessive, unrealistic, and a strain for her as a single mother and other single parents raising families and working full-time.

Grit/Resilience

April shared her grit and power-through mentality during her interview and follow-up questionnaires when she described how she thought about finishing her degree and facing challenges. “I was determined to finish no matter what barrier was in the way and pushing harder when barriers came up.”

April’s resilience characteristics revealed during her interviews and follow-up surveys were: purpose, perseverance, and existential aloneness, also known as authenticity. While spending time going to class, studying, and working on assignments, April always remained focused on why she was pursuing her goals and worked diligently to use her time and money wisely. “I knew it was my money, it was my time, it was my family's time, like, I had a drive that no matter what, I was going to get through it once I made that decision, I was just going to get through it.” April described her perseverance as she returned to college in her early forties, despite her initial reluctance to pursue a bachelor’s degree which took her 4.5 years to complete. When advising other single mothers in college, April explained her viewpoint that everyone’s journey is unique. Her perspective aligns with what Wagnild (2009) identified as existential aloneness or authenticity.

Positive Deviance Behaviors

During her interview, April revealed that she would set very high academic standards for herself early in the semester to buffer against any potential challenges later in the class. As she wrote, “Also, I had a strategy that I would start really strong at the beginning and middle of the semester to get the highest grade, therefore, securing that I would pass the class by the final exam.” April also managed her time well by meal planning in advance so that her family would

have ready-made options during the week. Her advanced preparations saved her time amidst attending classes during the week and working full-time.

Advice to Other Single Moms in College

"Well, I would say…and I firmly believe this, is that… there are always obstacles for every single person, but some people have more obstacles than others. And, they just have to go through the obstacles, don't let the obstacles stop you because that is what happens. I've done it, I know because I let that happen to me a few times, let the obstacle stop you, but you just have to keep moving forward. Even if you take a break, and you have to take a break, just keep moving forward as soon as you can because sometimes you just have to. You have to stop school, for whatever reason, a kid is sick, or a financial or something emergency. Just have to keep, you know, moving forward, don't stop, don't let the obstacles stop you. That's all I can say".

Epilogue

After completing her bachelor's degree, April is now considering furthering her education to earn a Master's degree in Human Resources. She currently lives in Southern California with her three children.

Appendix N: Profile Summary for Araceli

Background

Araceli is a 34-year-old Hispanic/Latinx female with two daughters and is the second youngest of six siblings. For this study, Araceli's degree of focus was her associate's degree from a community college in Southern California.

Despite being an honors student with a high grade point average, numerous Advanced Placement classes, and receiving interest from top universities, Araceli was forced to drop out of high school at the end of her sophomore year to begin working in support of her family. After Araceli's parents divorced, her mother's boyfriend at the time owned a pet store where young Araceli and her siblings worked before and after school cleaning up the crates. Walking, sometimes running to get to school in the mornings after working in the store, became a regular occurrence for her. Araceli and her mother had a strained relationship which eventually led to Araceli seeking emancipation at 17. It was an accelerated degree program (8-week sessions, one night a week, and two Saturdays a month) that appealed to her and served as the catalyst for completing her associate's after a 3-year break.

Finances

Araceli worked at various full-and part-time jobs throughout completing her associate's degree. However, she found it extremely challenging when her primary position as a teacher's aide did not pay for sick leave, holidays, or during summers, and she was not eligible to file for unemployment. In addition, her youngest daughter's chronic medical condition meant she needed to take time off work for doctors' appointments and hospital visits. Ultimately, the financial strain caused her to start, then stop and restart her associate's degree. At one point, shortly after Araceli started working on earning her degree again, the relationship with her

youngest daughter's father ended, and she was a single mom living in a two-bedroom apartment she could not afford.

Child Care

Araceli found traditional child care not only expensive but at times challenging to get to and from because of the distance between her apartment, job, and daycare when her daughters were younger. However, she eventually discovered that a neighbor could provide daycare for her daughters at a very reasonable rate. Later in Araceli's educational journey, one of her "angel" co-workers offered to babysit several days a week at a rate far below that of traditional day care. This support allowed her to focus on completing her degree.

Support

There were various sources of support available to Araceli. For instance, her brother and his girlfriend needed a place to live and offered to share the two-bedroom apartment and related expenses. Her neighbor and co-worker provided low-cost childcare. A college professor served as both inspiration and encouragement when he acknowledged her academic accomplishments by recommending her for a scholarship that she won. Araceli also credits her faith in God as a form of solace and comfort during difficult times and combat feeling alone.

Grit/Resilience

Araceli conveyed grit and her power-through mentality when she shared how she consistently pushed herself to finish her degree. She believed that quitting was not an option, although there were detours and delays along the way. One part of her mindset stemmed from her status as a mother, such that motherhood served as a driving force to stay focused. Another aspect of her mentality related to being a single mother in particular: Araceli recognized that as the only parent, "there is no such thing as 'I'm trying.' You HAVE to make it work".

During the semi-structured interview and follow-up surveys, Araceli shared three resilience factors: self-reliance, purpose, perseverance. In describing her educational journey, Araceli was self-reliant. She remained confident in her strengths, such as her intelligence and ability to balance multiple priorities between raising her daughters, earning income, and finishing her degree. For Araceli, the purpose was defined as the importance of being a good role model for her daughters and recognizing the value of education and advanced degrees as a means to a better life. Despite an extremely challenging childhood, feelings that at times her family did not believe in her, combined with the ending of personal relationships, and intermittent college attendance, Araceli conveyed perseverance as she overcame adversities to reach her personal, educational, and career goals.

Positive Deviance Behaviors

Araceli implemented several behaviors that contributed to her educational success. Although she juggled family, college, and work, Araceli managed her time by scheduling herself to complete schoolwork after her daughters went to bed. She also intentionally and regularly conversed with her children about what it meant for her to attend college and why she was away from them for hours at a time. Araceli's daughters were understanding, and conceivably, this acknowledgment somewhat put her mind at ease, allowing her to focus on completion. Their understanding also drove her perseverance as she shared, "I'm taking time again from being with them, so I'm gonna make it count."

Advice to Other Single Moms

"First off, use your children as motivation. They are what pushes you and what will drive you, and when you're crying and struggling and thinking, I'm not going to make it. Just think of them. Think about the best…the better future that you can provide for them once you have

finished because definitely, a degree will advance you. And also, it does take a village. For me, particularly it was that my family being the village that offered that support, most of the time, it was friends. So, it takes a village because my friends didn't need to be babysitting my kids".

Epilogue

Once Araceli completed her associate's degree, she continued her educational journey to earn a Bachelor's degree in one-and-a-half years her master's degree. She is currently enrolled as a doctoral candidate with an anticipated May 2022 graduation date and lives in the Western United States with her two daughters.

Appendix O: Profile Summary for Callie

Background

Callie is a 47-year-old Black/African American mother of one son who was between the ages of 10- and 13-years-old during the time she earned her degree. For this study's purpose, Callie's degree of focus was her Master's in Business Administration (MBA) with a concentration in Human Resources.

Finances

During her master's degree program, Callie was in her early thirties and lived on her own with her son. She occasionally took out the maximum loan amounts to pay for living expenses, including child care, gas, and car repairs. Callie reports that she is still paying off her loans but that she is in the process of consolidation and changing loan servicers. Her current employer offers some form of partial payment for her education.

When her son was playing sports, there were times when she had to make the difficult decision to sometimes say "no" to his other extracurricular activities due to limited funds. During her interview, Callie shared that she remained mindful of her budget, and to save money, she and her son rarely ate out. As she said, "somehow, I found time to make sure I always cooked dinner." While Callie found creative ways to stretch her dollars and sought out inexpensive activities to enjoy with her son, she also shared how at times, it could be mentally taxing to go without and not be able to do all the things she wanted to.

Childcare

While Callie's son was not a toddler or young child during the time of her master's degree, he still needed supervision along with rides to and from his afterschool activities. Callie found that it worked well for her to collaborate with other parents. Therefore, she shared some of

the pick-up and drop-off duties with a single father of one of her son's friends. When her son was younger, her brother, sister-in-law, and grandmother assisted with childcare.

Support

Callie expressed appreciation for the support she received from her family throughout her educational career and while raising her son. She felt it was important to acknowledge that she had several sources of motivation to complete her master's degree. Callie perceived that earning her degree would benefit herself career-wise and allow her to provide for her son. However, she also saw college completion as a responsibility to her family, who gave their time and efforts to support her.

Grit/Resilience

Callie described her grit mentality when she explained her thought processes around completing her MBA through a football analogy of playing through the pain and powering through. It is important to note and credit Callie's insights and comments on grit which provided the researcher with the phrase "power-through," as used in the title and throughout this study.

During the interviews and follow-up surveys, Callie described three characteristics of resilience: self-reliance, perseverance, and existential aloneness. In explaining her periodic exhaustion from working toward her MBA, Callie revealed her focus on persistence, perseverance, and completion. She said, "I was like, okay, I'm done, I'm tired, you know I'm just…it's just so many hours, but you still you gotta cross the finish line". In her advice to other single mothers in college, Callie recommended going at one's own pace and finding what feels comfortable. This mindset aligns with existential aloneness in terms of acknowledging an individual's unique life journey.

Positive Deviance Behaviors

Callie's primary positive deviance behaviors centered around her organizational skills. She maintained a busy schedule but managed to find time to attend her son's athletic games and school events. Callie was intentional about her purpose for earning her MBA. She used her prospects for advancing her career and appreciation of family support as motivation to complete her degree despite the financial strains and degree workload she experienced while working full-time. She also set high academic standards for herself. She allotted more time for her studies as she adjusted to the more rigorous demands of her graduate program compared to her undergraduate degree.

Advice to Other Single Moms in College

"I would just say do what's comfortable for you. I guess, and I felt like I was trying to push myself too much, and then because I'm hard on myself, I wasn't finishing within the time that I had anticipated for myself was as an issue for me…but that's a personal struggle I have to deal with. Overall, just as long as you finish, you know, just kind of pace yourself. Take your time to learn as much as you can and get as much out of it. And don't just… take a bunch of classes just to be there and show up. Just try to get what you can from the classes and [understand that] trying to have some type of life work-life-school balance is really important".

Epilogue

After completing her MBA, Callie continued working at a large, international corporation where she has since earned several promotions, which she credits, in part, to her educational background. Callie currently resides in Southern California.

Appendix P: Profile Summary for Elizabeth

Background

Elizabeth is a 47-year-old Caucasian divorced mother of four children between the ages of 6 and 21 when she was in college. For this study, her degree of focus is her Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice. During her 20's, Elizabeth started college, where she earned high grades. However, when she was pregnant with her first child during her last semester of college, she experienced a serious medical condition causing her to stop out. Elizabeth remained determined to finish her degree to apply for positions with her current employer that would allow her to work more directly with students. After repeating some of the same courses she had previously taken, nearly 20 years later, Elizabeth earned her bachelor's degree two years after starting again at a different college.

Finances

Financial aid was available to Elizabeth to pay for her tuition, leaving her primary college expenses like books and supplies without taking out any student loans. She kept her financial strain to a minimum due to her strong budgeting skills, although she also paid for her oldest son's college tuition.

Childcare

When Elizabeth was completing her degree of focus, two of her four children were under 10. For childcare, Elizabeth's 21-year-old and 16-year-old sons assisted with her younger children, who were old enough to attend elementary school during the day. Elizabeth's parents would occasionally take her younger children to their house to study or work on her assignments.

Support

Elizabeth received support from various sources, including her children, her parents, her college counselor, and her faith. When her older children were available, they helped Elizabeth with caring for her two younger children. Elizabeth shared that she felt all of her children were understanding and supportive when she needed to study or take an exam. In addition, Elizabeth's parents provided occasional childcare and a respite from work and studying. The support she received extended beyond her immediate family as her college counselor encouraged and supported her. Elizabeth was grateful that she could restart and complete her bachelor's degree in two years, even by repeating some no longer valid classes. Finally, Elizabeth credited her faith in God with giving her both strength and endurance. She wrote, "I feel that knowing that God put me on this path helped me push through at times."

Grit/Resilience

Elizabeth demonstrated her grit and power-through mentality when she shared a story about the first few weeks of her statistics course. She was determined to do well in the class despite feeling a bit nervous about taking math. Elizabeth attended her in-person class one afternoon, then returned to work and began to feel ill. As her illness worsened, eventually, she was taken to the hospital with a high fever. Even while being admitted to the emergency room, she was adamant with her doctor that she did not want to miss class. However, her illness required surgery and a three-to-four-week, at-home recovery, which she described as very difficult. Fortunately, her instructor allowed her to continue in the course. Elizabeth kept pace with her assignments to the best of her ability while teaching herself statistics during her recovery. Through her determination and high academic standards, Elizabeth reported that she received the highest grade in the class that her instructor had ever awarded. She did so well that the instructor invited her to become a statistics tutor.

During her interview and follow-up surveys, Elizabeth described three characteristics of resilience: purpose, perseverance, and existential aloneness. Returning to college after starting a different institution 20 years earlier, Elizabeth felt what she described as a self-imposed embarrassment and self-consciousness about not having earned her bachelor's. Her purpose was to earn her degree and gain access to expanded career options that would allow her to work more closely with students. Elizabeth's perseverance was also related to her statistics class since she did not believe she was strong in math. Therefore, she studied diligently during the week, on Saturdays, Sundays, and during any spare moments she had. She also attended nearly every instructor-led study session available. In her advice to other single moms, Elizabeth conveyed existential aloneness (authenticity). Her perspective is that although different people might have similar situations, individuals have unique experiences that should not be compared to anyone else's.

Positive Deviance Behaviors

Elizabeth engaged in positive deviant behaviors, which helped her finish her degree. First, she remained organized between her home life, working full-time, and college. She enlisted help from her older children with meal planning and preparation while also scheduling her study time. She also credits her self-discipline and ability to stay laser-focused on completing her assignments, knowing it would lead to her ultimate goal of degree completion.

Advice to Other Single Moms in College

"Remain focused…on the goal, and not all of the steps that it takes to reach that goal. You know, everybody's journey is [different]…no matter if our situations are the same, our journeys aren't the same. So, if you take one class a semester or six, you know, do whatever you're going to be most successful with and…don't measure yourself against somebody else".

Epilogue

After earning her bachelor's degree, Elizabeth accepted an out-of-class assignment and realized her goal of working directly with students. She lives in Southern California with her four children, where her two oldest are attending college.

Appendix Q: Profile Summary for Lacey

Background

Lacey is a 40-year-old Mexican-American female with three children. During the two years she was in graduate school as a single mother, she had one son between 9 and 11-years-old. For this study, her degree of focus is her Master's degree in Nursing.

Finances

Lacey did not experience severe financial hardships during the time she was earning her degree of focus. Part of the reason for this was that she lived with family and, with her nursing background, earned a small stipend for providing in-home care giving to her grandmother and also earned a small income from a rental property. She described herself as having learned to live within minimal means. However, Lacey endured stressful financial situations when she did not have medical insurance, and her son experienced typical childhood injuries or illnesses.

Lacey also described her concerns about taking out student loans when she earned her master's degree. However, Lacey and her now-husband, along with what she described as a "phenomenal financial gesture" from her father, have since paid off her student loans in full.

Childcare

When Lacey attended classes and lived with her family, she was able to navigate her son's childcare needs with the help of her church family. Lacey, her mother, and a nearby friend homeschooled Lacey's son while working and attending college.

Support

Lacey received support from a variety of sources during the time she completed her degree of focus. As mentioned previously, Lacey's housing arrangements with close relatives allowed her to live virtually rent-free in exchange for her taking care of an elderly family member. Lacey also received support from her faith and church family, who provided everything

from emotional encouragement to spiritual sustenance to assistance with moving to a new residence.

Grit/Resilience

Lacey maintained her grit and power-through mentality when describing how she needed to keep her endurance to complete her master's thesis and thus her degree. During her interview, she shared, "I mean, it's just…an endurance race, right? It's kind of, among many other things, just to see if you've got what it takes to stick all the way through." Lacey also addressed her waning interest in her thesis topic. As she stated, "times I feel like we all picked our topics at the beginning, and we were all so excited about them, and then you get to the end or even like two-thirds of the way through, and yeah I [don't really] care about this anymore. I don't want to write about it. I don't want to talk about it…I'm done." Despite her feelings of disinterest, she managed to overcome them to complete her degree in two years.

During her interviews and follow-up questionnaires, Lacey described three characteristics of resilience: perseverance, self-reliance, and equanimity. She persevered through a challenging master's degree program while raising and homeschooling her son. Lacey also displayed self-reliance when recognizing her limitations and sought social and emotional support from her church and homeschooling community. Finally, Lacey's sense of equanimity was shown in her ability to convey that difficult times do not last forever and that keeping a balanced perspective is a way to achieve success.

Positive Deviance Behaviors

Lacey's positive deviance behaviors involved setting very high academic standards for herself. To accomplish this meant that she often stayed up late to finish her assignments or work on her thesis. She also divided large academic tasks into smaller, more manageable "bites,"

which required a fair amount of organization on her part. Then, to keep herself motivated, Lacey occasionally rewarded her progress with dinner out or a movie with her son.

Advice to Other Single Moms in College

Lacey shared a conversation she had with a church friend in college and who needed encouragement during a difficult stretch of her educational journey. “There's a woman in my home group at church. She has, I must say, her daughter's 13, maybe 12…14 somewhere in that range. And you know, we were just talking about how she doesn't have much free time, and she's just hungry for community…that the psychosocial [connection]. And she is just…hitting that spot that I think probably we all feel at some point where it's like, ‘I’m not sure that I can keep going’ and ‘is this even worth it?’…‘why did I do this to myself?’ And so, she's in that spot right now, and just being able to remind her if you need to see people, then you can find ways to leverage your community for that. So…she's been talking about she's taking a hiking class for her general education [classes]. She realizes she can have friends come hike with her, and then she's doing a school thing and doing a thing that feeds her soul. So, that kind of feels really encouraging and [understanding that] you have to speak up because no one can help to meet your needs. Then, the biggest piece was just reminding her…this is not forever. I know it feels unsustainable and intolerable, and you just [have] to get through the semester. And then you'll do it again for the next semester, right? But you won't do it forever. You will just do it until you get to the end of your degree.”

Epilogue

After earning her Master’s in Nursing, Lacey went on to work in various nursing facilities. She currently works part-time, is married with six children, and lives in Southern California.

Appendix R: Profile Summary for Lindsay

Background

Lindsay is a 40-year-old, single, Native American female with one child who was 3 years old when Lindsay finished college. For this study, her degree of focus is her Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice. Lindsay attended an online degree program and found that she appreciated working on assignments at her own pace. Her program also allowed her to better navigate her responsibilities as a mother and a full-time employee.

Finances

Although she was working full-time, Lindsay occasionally struggled with her finances while attending college. She attributed this to living in a one-income household. However, she made interest-free payments for her online degree and did not take out any student loans.

Childcare

Lindsay did not receive any financial assistance with the cost of daycare, and she felt it was expensive for the three days per week that her daughter attended. Lindsay thought her daughter's care was valuable since she could learn from and interact with other children. The remaining two days per week, Lindsay's mother would provide childcare.

Support

There were various forms of support available to Lindsay while she attended college. Her parents provided childcare while her co-workers were also supportive, encouraging and acknowledged her successful college completion by hosting a party for her. Lindsay relied on close friends for emotional support during challenging times. She also reached out to one of her instructors to ask for academic support. Overall, she felt supported by her online degree program.

Grit/Resilience

Lindsay described her grit and power-through mentality when she expressed how hard she worked and how much time she dedicated toward completing her degree. “I just felt like I was doing it [studying] every single free moment that I had because I wanted to get done and I wanted to finish, and I didn't have time for anything else besides parenting my daughter.”

During her interview and follow-up questionnaires, Lindsay described three characteristics of resilience: self-reliance, perseverance, and existential aloneness (authenticity). Lindsay’s self-reliance stemmed in part from her understanding of her limitations when it came to participating in social activities, and as such, she had little, if any, social life. When Lindsay gave birth to her daughter in the middle of finishing her degree, she persevered and remained determined not to quit while serving as a positive role model for her. “Even though it was hard, and I had big things going on, I had a baby in the middle of it [earning her degree]. But I didn't quit. I didn't let my grades slip. I did my best, and I did really well, and I want her [Lindsay’s daughter] to know that if you try and if you want something, to go for it, and you can make it happen.” As a single mother completing a college degree, Lindsay acknowledged her existential aloneness (authenticity) and expressed that the depth of the struggles she experienced as a single mother in college may not have been very well understood by others.

Positive Deviance Behaviors

Lindsay’s positive deviance behaviors stemmed primarily from her strict schedule between spending time with her daughter, studying, and working full-time. Organizing her time allowed her to balance many responsibilities while maintaining high academic standards, as evidenced by her appearance on the Dean’s List every semester. A related aspect of her positive deviance involved also involved late-night studying and sacrificing her time.

Advice to Other Single Moms in College

Lindsay encourages moms to be proud of the college journey because it was challenging, yet it is also such an amazing accomplishment. “Remind yourself that it's easy to be discouraged, but by doing a degree, you'll make your situation better…you'll better yourself”.

Epilogue

Lindsay is currently enrolled in another online degree program related to her career in the legal field. She lives in the northwestern United States with her daughter.

Appendix S: Profile Summary for Michelle

Background

Michelle is a 54-year-old Black female with a bachelor's and a master's degree. For this study, Michelle's degree of focus was her master's degree in a business-related discipline. While working in a full-time, temporary capacity at a higher educational institution in Central California, her supervisor told her she was at risk of losing her teaching assignment. Thus, she would not be eligible for the permanent position if she did not obtain a master's degree before a particular timeline. Stunned by this news, she enrolled in and began a 1-year, in-person, evening master's degree program at a nearby college. In her early twenties, Michelle was married with one 2-year-old daughter at the time. However, within a few months after starting her degree program, she became a single mother after a complicated divorce.

Finances

The biggest financial challenge for Michelle when she became a single mother was that she was young and inexperienced with managing a household budget. She had only lived with her parents before getting married and moving in with her husband. Over time, as she grew more confident, Michelle found that she was earning enough income to support herself and her daughter in her full-time position. While working on her degree of focus, she did not experience severe financial challenges and did not take out any student loans to pay for her master's degree.

Childcare

During some of the time Michelle was working full-time during the day and taking classes at night, she did not have a car. So, she and her daughter took the bus for transportation. They would leave the apartment early for morning daycare drop-off, then Michelle would take the bus to work. After work, Michelle took the bus back to daycare for pick up. On the evenings

she had class, a local hospital offered affordable evening childcare services to their staff and community members and available space for her daughter. After class one night, Michelle's classmate realized that she did not have transportation to get home and offered to give her a ride. They would drive Michelle to pick up her daughter from the evening childcare and drop them off at Michelle's apartment from that point forward. Overall, Michelle did not experience childcare availability issues or nor did she experience related challenges with finding it too expensive.

Support

Overall, Michelle experienced well-rounded support while finishing her master's degree. She was particularly buoyed by her faith in God, prayer, and church family during difficult times. The offer of rides from one of her classmates was another vital source of support. Although Michelle's parents lived some distance away, they consistently offered emotional and spiritual support while also providing financial assistance with the eventual purchase of a car.

Grit/Resilience

Michelle's grit and her power-through mentality stemmed primarily from her drive to heal from her divorce. When the relationship with her ex-husband was extremely contentious, she resolved not to let this challenging situation stop her from meeting her goals of finishing her master's degree and obtaining a permanent full-time position. Michelle expressed how much she needed to "win," meaning that she could not let her ex-husband's actions or the end of the relationship defeat her. With balancing raising her daughter, working in a full-time position, and attending a graduate program, Michelle felt there was no time to feel sad or distraught. Therefore, she pushed aside her grief and forged ahead because both her job and financial security were at stake.

Michelle revealed three resilience factors during the interview and follow-up surveys: perseverance, self-reliance, and purpose. She persevered through the end of her marriage while raising her young daughter and going to evening classes, for some of the time without a car, and managing to complete her degree. Michelle displayed self-reliance when she gradually gained confidence that she could depend on her ability to financially support herself and her daughter. Her sense of purpose was also clear: not only was she insistent on being a good mother, but she also intended to enhance her life and career options through higher education and by maintaining a teaching position that she genuinely enjoyed.

Positive Deviance Behaviors

Michelle described how important it was for her to maintain a structured schedule for getting to and from work and picking up her daughter from childcare while balancing time for studying and spending quality time with her daughter. Another aspect of her positive deviant behavior was, although difficult, consciously pushing aside painful emotions to concentrate on finishing her degree. She also found support and self-motivation through her faith by attending church regularly and focusing on encouraging quotes.

Advice to Other Single Moms in College

“I would probably just say, you know, you can do it. There's no reason that you can't, you know? There are enough resources out there to help you. If you have a family system, they're there to help you, hopefully, and in the end, it's about you as an individual. I think a lot of times, we forget, and we leave ourselves out of the equation. And, you know, well, ‘I'm doing it for my kids.’ But if I think if we begin to look at it as ‘I'm doing this for me because this is something I want or that I need and I can be proud of my progress in this.’ I think if we can look at it that way, it gives us…the grit or the encouragement that we need to kind of keep pushing through it. I

think the bonus is that when we're in a good place, and we accomplish the things that we need, that's when it benefits our kids.”

Epilogue

After finishing her master’s degree, Michelle obtained the permanent teaching position at the college, where she remained employed for several more years. Michelle is currently a higher education professional now remarried and lives with her husband and three children in Southern California.

Appendix T: Profile Summary for Rachel

Background

Rachel is a 54-year-old White/Caucasian female with two children. For this study, Rachel's degree of focus is her master's in a related educational field. After a ten-year journey to earn her Bachelor's degree in Social Science, Rachel became the first person in her family to graduate from college. When Rachel and her husband experienced marital problems while participating in marriage counseling, she realized that she was unhappy in an abusive marriage and displeased by her career. Her desire for a career change led her on a journey to return to college. However, throughout a difficult divorce, becoming a single mother with two children, and raising a daughter with special needs, Rachel took several years to complete her two-year master's degree program.

Finances

Rachel experienced financial challenges due in part to a reduction in salary resulting from her career change and also because she needed to work part-time. She took out the maximum loan amount to pay for living expenses and her master's degree. As of the writing of this profile, Rachel is still paying off her student loan debt. When her financial situation became untenable, she and her youngest daughter moved in with Rachel's friends for approximately two years until she stabilized her income.

Child Care

As Rachel's daughters were ages 20 and 13 when she was earning her master's degree, finding child care was not the main concern for her family. However, there were times when Rachel's youngest daughter needed to be picked up and dropped off after school, so a neighbor assisted.

Grit/Resilience

Rachel's grit and power-through mentality were demonstrated when she explained how inspired she felt by her youngest daughter. Although Ruth's daughter faced many challenges throughout high school, she anticipates earning her Bachelor's degree in Engineering. Rachel's determination to complete her master's degree grew even stronger when she witnessed her daughter's daily struggles. As Rachel states, "if she [her daughter] wasn't going to give up…how could I model for her giving up".

During the semi-structured interview and follow-up questionnaire, Rachel shared examples of three characteristics of resilience: self-reliance, perseverance, and purpose. She relied on her intuition and inner voice when she switched careers despite discouragement from her former co-workers. When earning her master's degree, Rachel persevered despite stopping and starting at three different universities, often repeating non-transferable courses, before completing a fourth institution that offered a fully online program. Rachel's purpose was to contribute to society with a more positive approach than her previous career and be the best parent to her daughters.

Support

Rachel experienced support from a variety of sources in her educational journey. Her friends provided housing when her finances were strained, and her mother offered emotional support from a long distance. In addition, an assigned mentor from her online degree program understood her needs and helped her navigate challenges. Co-workers in her new career field reassured her when she thought she might quit. Rachel also met families at church who provided spiritual support through prayer and encouragement.

Positive Deviance Behaviors

Rachel's positive deviance behaviors involved removing herself from the company of individuals who were not supportive of her career change and thus her educational journey towards completing a master's degree. Instead, she chose to surround herself with people who inspired and uplifted her. Rachel's ability to realize when she needed to ask for help was another behavior that contributed to her eventual academic and career success.

Advice to Other Single Mothers

"Don't be embarrassed to ask for help. Use every resource that there is, whatever it is, people that will help with childcare, finances, whatever it is. Just ask for help from all the resources that there are available".

Epilogue

After completing her master's degree, Rachel transitioned into full-time positions within a career field that brings her fulfillment. She is currently enrolled in a doctoral program and lives in Southern California with her youngest daughter.

Appendix U: Profile Summary for Samantha

Background

Samantha is a 44-year-old Caucasian mother of one child between the ages of four and eight during her time in college. For this study, her degree of focus was her two Bachelor of Science degrees.

Samantha had her son at the age of 18, and when he was four years old, they moved away from her hometown so she could attend college, where they lived in married student housing. At first, the major she chose was Chemical Engineering, but upon further research, she realized it would not lead to the kind of careers that truly interested her. After one year out of town, she and her son moved to their apartment closer to her parents' home and attended a local college. Samantha switched her major and earned two bachelor's degrees simultaneously in Microbiology and Medical Technology. Samantha decided to pursue a career in forensics and obtained a work-study crime lab position to gain experience and exposure to the field. She eventually received a part-time technician position in the lab and, a year later, worked full-time.

Finances

When she was in college, Samantha experienced that her finances were often strained when paying rent. She stated that she consistently took out the maximum student loan amount during her bachelor's degree programs, but her funds ran low at the end of each semester. Samantha found creative ways to manage her budget and still engage in quality time with her son by planning low-cost meals and inexpensive or free activities. Samantha is still paying her student loans from her law and undergraduate degrees, which she plans to pay off in a few years.

Childcare

Samantha utilized different childcare options while she was in college. When she and her son lived away from home, he attended a university-run childcare facility. Upon returning home, he attended a non-profit-run after-school childcare program. Also, a family friend with a son the same age as Samantha's provided care. Samantha received additional student loan funds to assist with childcare expenses. However, despite discounted care options, she found it to be expensive. While she also appreciated the assistance from a family friend, she was also aware that there were likely better learning opportunities for her son at more traditional child care.

Support

Samantha received support from various sources during her time in college, including her parents, extended family, and co-workers. Her parents provided financial assistance when her finances ran low at the end of the month or semester. They also watched her son when she needed to study or when she infrequently went out with friends. Her extended family was also helpful with childcare when she lived further away from home. When she worked in the crime lab, she surrounded herself with supportive, understanding, and encouraging co-workers.

Grit/Resilience

Samantha conveyed her grit and power-through mentality as an integral part of her college and career success. She essentially defined grit in her own words when she expressed, "You know, I've always been pretty focused, and once I decided that I wanted to be a forensic scientist and work at the crime lab…once I have a goal and a plan, I can really focus in… and move forward with that, and everything I do is about that goal".

Samantha described three resilience characteristics during her interview and follow-up questionnaires: self-reliance, equanimity, and existential aloneness (authenticity). Self-reliance

refers to not only being able to understand one's limitations but also understanding strengths. Samantha described her self-reliance when she decided to move away from home with her son to attend college, pursue two bachelor's degrees, and chose a career path that matched her interests and aligned with her potential. Equanimity refers to taking life as it comes. Samantha shared her advice to single mothers in college. She referenced this concept when she said, "So if you can just take it like one chunk at a time and know that things with your child are going to creep in and take over and take precedence, you know it's just… you just kind of got to be flexible. Existential aloneness is the understanding that everyone experiences a unique journey. For Samantha, attending college as a single mother was quite a different experience from her classmates as she explained her focus compared to theirs:

> I have to say, maybe I wouldn't have been so focused if I didn't have [son's name]. Like I tell everybody, we grew up together basically. I did not have the same social aspect of college as my classmates. I probably could have benefited from having more support on campus, but I also didn't have the same distractions and motivations as a lot of my fellow students, so that aspect of being a single mother benefitted me. I had a bigger reason to work hard and stay focused.

Positive Deviance Behaviors

Samantha's positive deviance behaviors surrounded developing and maintaining a routine schedule of activities such as exercising, spending quality time with her son every Friday night, and allocating specific times for studying. She also utilized positive self-talk to encourage herself and overcome challenging experiences.

Advice to Other Single Moms in College

"You take it one class at a time, one assignment, at a time, and you always have that end in sight. It looks so far away when you start school that it can be overwhelming. So, if you can just take it one chunk at a time and know that things with your child are going to creep in and take over and take precedence, but you'll get it done, and it will all be okay. You just kind of have to be flexible. And know it's going to work out and just keep doing the work. I…there was some tests that I did not have time to prepare for, and I was really angry with myself because I didn't get the grade. I knew I could have. But, you know, however, many years, what are we like…at almost 20 years out of that, I don't think about it as much (laughs)."

Epilogue

After finishing her bachelor's degree and working in the crime lab, Samantha continued her education by attending law school. She is married and lives with her husband in the northwestern United States. Her son is now an adult and lives on his own in a nearby city.

Appendix V: Profile Summary for Sonya

Background

Sonya is a 40-year-old bi-racial African-American and Latinx female with two sons. For this study, Sonya's degree of focus was her fully online Master's degree in Information Systems. Upon realizing that her teaching position was stressful and somewhat unfulfilling, Sonya decided to transition into a career with a broader array of industry opportunities. However, her pursuit of an advanced degree in IT was unrelated to her bachelor's degree and previous work history. Initially, Sonya faced challenges with learning programming languages at the master's level, while in contrast, many students in her cohort generally had some level of previous coding experience. Through teamwork and collaboration with a classmate, Sonya persisted and earned top grades in her program.

Finances

As a teacher, Sonya earned a modest income and at times struggled to meet her basic needs. With financial assistance from her mother and student loans, she could afford living expenses such as rent and groceries. Sonya remained motivated to complete her degree for improved career satisfaction, earn a higher salary, and provide a better standard of living for herself and her sons. Sonya is currently paying off her student loans.

Child Care

A significant advantage of her online master's degree program was that Sonya did not require childcare. She had the flexibility of completing assignments at her own pace and did not attend in-person classes. As her sons were old enough to attend school during the day, Sonya studied and completed her assignments later in the evenings. She expressed gratitude that her sons were relatively close in age and, being of the same gender, played and worked well together

while she studied. Her sons' father lived nearby. With joint custody, Sonya took full advantage of the weekends when she did not have her children by completing as many of her assignments and working ahead whenever possible.

Support

Sonya received emotional and financial support from her mother while earning her degree of focus. During the transition from teaching into a technical field, Sonya needed occasional assistance with her monthly expenses, although she was reluctant to ask for help. In addition, Sonya found moral support through building a friendship with another fellow cohort member who was also a mother. Their teamwork and collaboration were a source of encouragement for each other while experiencing the rigor of the master's level curriculum. When she needed to study, Sonya's children's father, who shared joint custody, supported her schedule, and they maintained a cooperative co-parenting relationship in raising their two sons. Sonya's mother and extended family of aunts also provided her with motivational and inspirational examples of successful female role models whom she sought to emulate.

Grit/Resilience

Sonya demonstrated her grit and power-through mentality when describing how challenged she was by her master's degree program. Despite sheer exhaustion from navigating such a complex subject matter and experiencing a frustrating interaction with one of her online professors that left her feeling defeated, Sonya maintained a positive attitude and persisted to completion. As she stated, "I just felt drained at all, all the time, all the time, so I don't think I wanted to give up, but there were times that I do think it was difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel."

During the interview process, Sonya described three characteristics of resilience: purpose, perseverance, and self-reliance. Sonya's purpose for undertaking such a demanding program was not only to find career enjoyment but to create opportunities for more extensive and higher-paying job options in information technology, thereby leading to an improved life for herself and her children. Sonya described her perseverance through the lens of sacrifice. She sacrificed countless hours of sleep as she regularly stayed up until 3:00 am working on programming solutions yet managed to report to work on time every day. Although self-reliance refers to understanding one's strengths and depending on oneself, it also entails knowing one's limitations. Sonya maintained self-awareness of her financial limits and, while she wanted to manage on her own, asked her mother for help with monthly expenses when needed.

Positive Deviance Behaviors

Sonya engaged in positive deviant behaviors that helped her complete her graduate degree. First, throughout her graduate school experience, she focused on being a good mother to her children and set expectations about what they might experience while she was in school. She spoke with them often about why she needed to earn a degree and, at least temporarily, would not be as available to take them on outings or engage in weekend activities. Sonya also constantly reminded herself of her purpose, which kept her buoyed during difficult times, especially during her late night/early morning study sessions.

Advice to Other Single Moms in College

"I think that other women, there are other women in the same boat, there are other women, and it is *rough*, but I think the payoff is worth it. I guess, like, it is rough now, you're not getting enough sleep now… and… all the things you feel like a mess now, but it *is* worth it, it is worth it in the end. I would hope that that would be a good motivator for people because I just

think, I don't know, two years feels like forever when you are starting your master's, it feels like forever, but I really think the payoff is worth it. In terms of getting a better career, a higher pay, and also your family seeing you…not only your children but anyone in your family seeing you really accomplish something really big. That felt *awesome* to have my family there seeing me. And, of course, people say, 'I'm very proud of you, but you can tell. As I crossed the stage, my family was there, and everyone was just so, so excited, and everyone came together to congratulate me, and that really felt amazing. Like, wow, they can see what a big task this was as well, and everyone was proud of me..."

Epilogue

After Sonya completed her master's degree with a 4.0 grade point average, she obtained a position to combine her teaching/presentation skills with her technology competencies. She currently assists local-area school districts with analyzing their data to engage in student learning outcomes improvements. She thoroughly enjoys her current educational consultant position and lives on the East Coast with her two sons.