“Student Parents, Counternarratives, and Campus Climate: An Examination into Improving the Experience of Student Parents in Higher Education”

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Abstract

Student parents, or those raising dependent children while in school, are a growing facet of nontraditional students present on college campuses; they currently represent a quarter of undergraduate students in the United States. Despite their growing numbers, student parents struggle to graduate and complete their postsecondary educations, which cuts them and their families off from the benefits of having a college degree. Contributing to their struggles with success in college is an unwelcoming campus climate. In the present study, campus climate for student parents was studied using data from public, online interviews with student parents published in educational resource blogs and newspapers in the United States. Using data from 27 student mothers that were interviewed in this format, the study analyzed relationships with faculty, non parent peers, and fellow student parents. The study also examined student parents’ feelings of role conflict and their ability to succeed in higher education. Applying the knowledge of counternarratives, content for a student parent counternarrative is suggested, along with a series of institutional-level policies for college administrators to make a more welcoming environment for student parents.
Introduction

While still a largely understudied population, current research has focused more on the experience of student parents in college. It has been discovered that student parents have a difficult time succeeding in higher education, as they have lower retention and attrition rates than their non parent counterparts (Eckerson et al., 2016; Noll, Gault, & Reichlin, 2017). Policy experts and higher education advocates have now taken an interest in developing policy and institutional-level change that can make colleges and universities a more supportive place that promotes the success of student parents. The current political scene has been looking at implementing child care and financial aid measures to support student parents (Eckerson et al., 2016; Schulman & Blank, 2015). These measures are extremely important and necessary, but given the current political climate, these measures are also largely up for debate.

Given this, colleges and universities need to consider institutional-level changes that can be implemented easily and at little-to-no cost. Upon examining the current culture for student parents, the literature suggests that student parents do not receive a lot of support from many facets of the college community. Professors do not understand the challenges student parents face or offer flexibility that is necessary for their success (Cerven, 2013; Costello, 2012; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2012; Schumacher, n.d.; Springer, Parker, & Leviten-Reid, 2009; Yakaboski, 2010). Non parent students see them as selfish for continuing their education (Mottarella, Fritzche, Whitten, & Bedsole, 2009). Student parents themselves may believe they are bad parents if they experience enough role conflict that their student role takes away from their parent role (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2012). Finding a way to promote a counternarrative that allows for student parents, faculty, and non parent peers to believe in the
potential of student parents in higher education is essential in gaining some more immediate support for student parents to perform in higher education.

The current study aimed to present a counternarrative for college campuses to make their institutions more welcoming for student parents. Analyzing the student parent experience through the lenses of role conflict and stereotype bias, data from published interviews in online educational resource blogs were studied to further examine student parent relationships with faculty, non parent peers, and fellow student parents. Student parent’s opinions on their ability to manage parenting and academics given their current level of support were also analyzed. From this analysis, a counternarrative for student parents is suggested along with a series of institutional changes for colleges and universities to promote such a counternarrative.

This thesis includes a review of the literature, an explanation of the aims of the current study and the methodology used, an analysis of the data collected, and a series of recommendations for counternarrative content, institutional changes, and future directions for research. Within the literature review, current student parent demographics, contemporary proposed solutions, research surrounding the campus climate for student parents, and research regarding the theoretical perspective are all examined. For theoretical perspectives, role conflict, stereotype bias, and counternarrative construction were all utilized.

**Literature Review**

**Student Parents in the United States: Demographics**

From 1995 to 2012, the number of parents going to college grew from 3.2 million to 4.8 million (Eckerson et al., 2016). Upon examination of data from the National Center for Education Statistic’s Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) study (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.), it is seen that these 4.8 million students represent 25.9 percent of
undergraduate students in the United States. Therefore, despite not receiving much attention or support from postsecondary institutions, one in four undergraduates in the United States are attending college while raising a dependent child. The number of student parents attending college makes it so it should become a priority for all institutions of higher learning to promote the retention and degree attainment of these students.

This drive to promote the success of student parents should be further inspired when one looks at the demographics of the students that are raising children during their college careers. Most higher education institutions place at least a verbal importance on supporting the retention and degree attainment of low-income students and students of color. However, by ignoring the achievement of student parents, colleges and universities also ignore the supports needed by many students of color and low-income students that intersect with the student parent population. Therefore, it is essential for colleges to take a more intersectional approach to their support services and further bolster the efforts of nontraditional students by recognizing and supporting many of their statuses as parents.

A large number of students of color also identify as student parents (see Graph 1). Analyzing data from the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly 2 in 5 (38.9 percent) of black undergraduates have dependent children, over a third (34.3 percent) of American Indian and Alaskan Native students are parents, and more than a quarter of both Hispanic/Latino students (25.7 percent) and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students (27.5 percent) are caring for dependent children. Therefore, it is important to consider the additional needs of student parents, as this is an important step in working towards the goal of increasing postsecondary success rates for students of color.
Single women also make up a large percentage of student parents. Almost a third of all women (32.2 percent) in undergraduate programs have dependent children, and 71 percent of all student parents are women. Furthermore, almost half of all student parents (48.1 percent) are single. When looking at these two demographics together, 53.7 percent of women undergraduates with children are single, meaning that single women do make up a large percentage of the student parent population in the United States. Given that these women do not have the additional support of a partner in caring for their children, these single women need the help and encouragement of their college communities to be able to handle the pressures of attending school and raising their children.

Student parents are more likely than their peers to be actively living below the poverty level (Noll et al., 2017). More than 50 percent of students who are raising children across the country have an estimated family contribution (EFC) of zero (Noll et al., 2017), meaning that they and their families do not earn enough income to be expected to contribute to paying for their
college education. With these statistics in mind, many student parents fall within the low-income bracket of postsecondary students, meaning that gaining a college degree is often vital for them to experience economic stability in their lives. Given that these students are also having to spend money and resources providing for children, it is even more essential for this portion of the student population to receive the higher wages and greater benefits that come from jobs that require a college education.

Student parents do not exist in a vacuum, but instead, they intersect with many other groups that colleges and universities often pledge to have a strong interest in. By focusing on the racial makeup, socioeconomic status, and gender of students but ignoring their familial status, institutions of higher learning are failing to fully support their students. This makes it extremely important to provide supports and a narrative of success for student parents, as they represent many underrepresented populations in higher education. If the success of student parents is focused upon, then women, low-income students, and people of color will also see a boost in their completion and success rates in higher education. This will provide many benefits towards future generations, and it will also add a much-needed diversity into the United States’ workforce. Considering the special concerns and extra supports that are needed by student parents, on top of the supports that women, low-income students, and people of color need to be successful in school, it is very important to ensure that student parents feel supported and confident in higher education to advance their chances for success.

The Benefits of Having Student Parents Succeed

Beyond the consideration of enabling many disadvantaged groups to better succeed in higher education by giving intersectional supports to women, low-income students, and people of color, supporting student parents allows for many additional benefits for the individual students
and society at large. By opening many doors to jobs and social capital advantages for student parents, student parents gain many distinct advantages for the economic mobility of individuals and society.

Holders of college degrees face many financial advantages over those that do not go on to any form of postsecondary education; they have higher salaries, lower levels of unemployment, and are less likely to be impoverished (Baum, Ma, & Kathleen, 2013). Additionally, holding a college degree and landing a job makes it so one is more likely to be able to provide other financial benefits for one’s family, such as being more likely to have health insurance and a pension plan that will allow for parents to care for their children’s well-being (Baum et al., 2013). This means that going to school will financially benefit student parents’ children, and therefore it is important to understand that supporting the educational efforts of student parents not only will benefit them but entire families as well. Therefore, having student parents succeed in college is something that colleges and society at large should invest in for the good of the student parents and their families as well.

Society should also be more largely concerned with the benefits that come from having student parents successfully obtain college degrees. Attending school makes it more likely that student parents will make positive choices that their children will be able to emulate. College degree holders are less likely to smoke, more likely to exercise, and less likely to be obese than their less-educated counterparts (Baum et al., 2013). Therefore, gaining an education is advantageous for student parents’ children becoming healthy and active people, which can benefit society by lessening medical costs in future generations.

Being a student parent also helps to make one’s child a productive and educated member of society. Student parents are serving as a role model and teaching their children that education
is an important accomplishment that holds immense value. Children of parents that have a college education are more likely to go to college themselves (“Effects of Parents’ Education on Child’s schooling,” 2011; Ruesink, 2014), showing that student parents are teaching their children the value of education even if they are not home as often to personally teach their children. Beyond just promoting a higher likelihood that their children will go to college, student parents are also providing their children with the social capital that comes from not being a first-generation college student. Their children will be able to go to their parents for help when navigating the higher education world, from applying for financial aid to understanding how to communicate with professors and other faculty and staff. Therefore, it is very advantageous for student parents to role model the importance of a college education to their children and give them the resources to understand how to navigate higher education.

Furthermore, parents with a college education are more likely to be engaged in their community, as they are more likely to vote and be civically involved (Baum et al., 2013). They will role model the importance of being an active member of one’s community to their children. Inspiring their children to be active in the decision making in their community makes them potential catalysts for social change when they are older. Going to school makes it so student parents make better decisions and can pass on more knowledge and information to their children. Student parents are inspiring and influencing their children to make good decisions and are being positive parenting role models, and therefore these actions should be supported by society and institutions of higher learning.

Children of student parents that are able to graduate will have a lot of additional knowledge and life advantages that their parents did not have. Educating student parents and offering these benefits to their children will therefore enable American families to start off in a
better position. Having healthier, better educated, and more involved people in future generations will continue to set up the United States for success, and therefore the advancement of student parents should be of interest to college administrators, policy makers, and all members of America’s communities.

The Struggle of Student Parents

Despite the many clear advantages that come from helping student parents graduate, institutions of higher education are not doing an adequate job of retaining student parents and helping them to finish their college education. While 56 percent of dependent, traditional college students obtain a degree within 6 years of enrollment, only 33 percent of student parents obtain a degree in that time frame. That statistic is even worse for single student parents, as only 27 percent of students within this population are able to graduate within 6 years (Noll et al., 2017). Therefore, colleges are not currently doing enough to support student parents’ attainment of college degrees.

Current Proposed Solutions

The topic of having more supports put into place for student parents to succeed in higher education is one that is growing within policy and higher education circles. For the most part, these conversations largely focus on the support services that college campuses should introduce to better help student parents balance the roles of student and parent. Child care and financial aid, for instance, have become a major focus for offering support for student parents in higher education.

Child Care

The focus on child care is an important one. In fact, research has shown that child care is one of the most important factors for student parents when they are attempting to complete a
college education (Noll et al., 2017). While the number of student parents in the nation has grown, the number of child care centers on college campuses has decreased. In fact, as of 2015, only 49 percent of four-year colleges had on-campus child care options, which was a decrease from 55 percent from 2003 to 2005. This trend was consistent at two-year colleges as well, as the percentage of campuses that provided child care dropped from 53 percent in 2004-2005 to just 44 percent in 2015 (Eckerson et al., 2016). These current levels of on-campus child care are not adequate in meeting the demands of student parents. A survey conducted by the Institute of Women’s Policy Research featuring 100 campus children’s center leaders showed that at two- and four-year colleges, 95 percent of these child care centers maintained a waiting list, which had an average length of 82 children (Eckerson et al., 2016).

Even though the current level of on-campus child care is not adequate for the number of student parents that are attempting to obtain college degrees, there is not much support for campuses to fix this issue and add more child care centers for student parents to use. A government program had been created for this purpose, the Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program (CCAMPIS) provided grants to higher education institutions to implement plans to introduce new and support existing campus-based child care (“Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program,” 2016). However, this program has been under recent attack, with the current Department of Education having plans to removing CCAMPIS’s funding for the 2018 fiscal year (Pattillo, 2017). Therefore, supporting student parents via on-campus child care may become even rarer without the government support of the CCAMPIS program.

Beyond the failure of campuses to provide actual child care for student parents, the government has not been adequate in providing stable access to stipends and grants for child care for student parents. The Child Care Development Fund is a block grant program in which low-
income families receive subsidies to use on child care for their children (Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). Because of its block grant status, states are given a series of federal guidelines they must adhere to, but they have the actual power in determining eligibility rules. Therefore, while some states do not provide restrictions for student parents to use these funds for going to school, other states do place certain limits on student parents. These limits include everything from making student parents work for a set number of hours each week to capping the amount of time that student parents may use the subsidies for educational pursuits to capping the type of degree that student parents may pursue while using subsidies (Eckerson et al., 2016). Even when student parents do meet the requirements that make them eligible for child care subsidies, they are not always guaranteed the child care they need. In 2015, 21 states had a waiting list or had frozen their intakes for the program (Schulman & Blank, 2015). Therefore, access to child care subsidies is not equal for all student parents across the country, making it so this solution, without further funding and a closer examination of acceptable eligibility requirements for states, is not effective.

Financial Aid

The financial burden of attending college is also something that weighs heavily on student parents. Current financial aid is not meeting the needs of a large percentage of student parents. While non parent students have an average unmet need of $3,650 per year, single student parents face a much higher amount of unmet need each year, having $6,117 that financial aid does not cover. This is in spite of the fact that these students receive more in Pell Grants than their non parent counterparts (Nelson, Froehner, & Gault, 2013). This large amount of unmet need is also combined with the fact that student parents, on average, have higher debt burdens. Single student parents have $5,000 more in annual cumulative debt than non parent students and
$3,000 more than married student parents (Nelson et al., 2013). Financial aid is also a needed support for student parents that is currently not being met.

Despite the need to increase financial aid funding and options for student parents, the types of institutions that student parents are likely to attend make this a more difficult task to accomplish. Student parents are more likely to attend for-profit colleges and community colleges than their non parent counterparts (Eckerson et al., 2016; Noll et al., 2017), making it is less likely that most student parents will receive these necessary aids soon. Financial aid is constantly under attack in congressional budget proposals, and institutional changes are not likely in these two higher education environments. For-profit colleges work to earn higher margins of profit; the additional funds to supply institutional aid or construct and staff a child care center is a costlier venture that would cut into highly-valued profits. And while community colleges do work to aid students through their associate’s degrees and potentially onwards to other postsecondary opportunities, these colleges often do not receive enough financial support in comparison to 4-year colleges to make it possible to offer student parents all the proposed services that would benefit their education. When examining per pupil spending, community colleges spend only a fifth compared to private 4-year universities and a third compared to public 4-year colleges (Kahlenberg, 2015). Community colleges could largely benefit from offering additional support services, considering the fact that they are culturally known as open-access institutions for minority and nontraditional student populations (Kahlenberg, 2015). They do not have the spending power to construct and maintain these services. While student parents need additional services such as child care and financial aid support, the institutions that they are attending may have challenges or even reluctances in putting forth the money to implement them.

The Current Culture on College Campuses for Student Parents
Rather than focus on the idea of adding in additional support services for student parents to make them feel better prepared and equipped to manage their student role while on campus, another strategy for colleges could be to examine making the campus culture more welcoming for student parents. After all, current research highlights the idea that the campus climate can be very hostile for student parents.

**Faculty**

While faculty members are often a large support system for college students, it is seen in the literature that they instead can serve as a source of discouragement for student parents. Professors are meant to serve as mentors to their students; they encourage and challenge them to think in new ways and tackle new materials, and they can serve as a source for advice and guidance that is pivotal for students to navigate the often-challenging world of higher education. However, despite being so important for the success of students in college, it is seen that student parent relationships with professors have been shown to be more complex and strained.

When interacting with college professors, a lot of student parents face challenges in finding a level of support that will encourage their success. When interviewing single mothers entering college for the first time, these mothers reported a lot of inflexibilities from professors—strict deadlines and an overall cold or “chilly environment” when working in the classroom made it seem as though their identities as parents made them unwelcome in the college environment (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). These cold interactions with professors can be a very influential experience on a student parent’s academic experience, causing them to back away from certain academic paths or by walking away from college altogether.

Science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields are notorious in higher education for being some of the most challenging and time consuming majors for college
students. It has been suggested that a needed support for student parents is to develop encouraging faculty relationships (Costello, 2012). For all student parents, inflexible and unsupportive faculty members provide a large source of discouragement. When professors enforce strict attendance policies or mandated out-of-class seminars/learning opportunities, the needs of student parents are ignored, resulting in these students feeling marginalized and unwanted (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Yakaboski, 2010). This marginalization results in student parents feeling dissuaded from working with a campus community. As professors ignore child care and family responsibilities and react negatively to missed class sessions or other commitments, student parents become less likely to complete courses and reach out for support (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Yakaboski, 2010).

When looking at further research examining the support from faculty for student parents, it is discovered that research examining undergraduate students is limited. This points out a great need to further examine the role that faculty can play in the support they offer student parents. When examining the research studying graduate student parents and faculty, it becomes clear that professors could be an extreme and necessary support for all student parents, including undergraduates.

For graduate students enrolled in doctoral programs within the University of California system, a study showed that 58% of students were dissatisfied with the level of departmental supports that were offered to help them manage parenting and pursuing their graduate studies (Springer et al., 2009). Furthermore, when a survey was distributed to the program directors of the top 63 sociology graduate programs in the country, the 63 percent that responded highlighted problematic trends for supporting student parents. While overall the programs had very few formal support systems for student parents, what was problematic in terms of faculty
relationships was that 93 percent of respondents stated that faculty did not receive training on supports that were offered for student parents (Springer et al., 2009). If a student parent were to be struggling in a professor’s course or on their independent graduate research and went to them for help, these professors would be ill-equipped to support them at the level in which they deserve. And while this study was focusing on professors for graduate students, it is likely that these faculty members are also working with and teaching undergraduate students as well. And even if they were not, it stands that if an institution is not providing training for its faculty members to provide support for graduate student parents—knowing that graduate students are often pursuing degrees during their prime child-bearing years (Springer et al., 2009)—that these institutions are not pushing for faculty of undergraduate students, who are characterized as being younger, to be trained in these subjects either.

Other literature echoed the need for colleges to better train their staff in understanding how to support student parents. In a report that makes a series of suggestions for policy and institutional-level changes that colleges can make to serve student parents, it is recommended that colleges better train their staffs in understanding the services that are offered on campus for student parents (Schumacher, n.d.). Beyond that, the report also suggests for staff to be trained in understanding the unique challenges that parents going to college face. This suggests that there is a current lack of faculty members that have a knowledge of the barriers that student parents face, resulting in a lack of empathy and support for students going through these problems.

This current lack of knowledge from faculty and staff members is further supported by a study that interviewed 60 single women attending school at a community college district in California (Cerven, 2013). Many of these women that successfully navigated their way through college highlighted the importance of the trained student parent counselors that were provided by
the school. Help from these trained staff was made even more significant because more general staff were unable to provide advice that was applicable to their unique situation as parents in college. Therefore, it is seen that large numbers of college faculty are not equipped to advise and support student parents.

Furthermore, an additional study of student parents showed that while some student parents had very supportive and beneficial relationships with their professors, other professors showed no leniency or flexibility to help students with late assignments or missed exams/lectures when they had to take care of legitimate family concerns (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2012). Some of these students highlighted the inexperience and ignorance that less-supportive professors had in dealing with student parents, as students in night classes experienced more positive faculty relationships because these professors were used to dealing with older students, nontraditional students, and student parents (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2012). From this literature, a lot of faculty members at colleges and universities are less-than understanding about the challenges that student parents face, and some of these misunderstandings stemmed from a lack of knowledge on how to support them best. The current literature supports the idea that faculty need to have more training to become better support systems for student parents.

Peers

Along with support from faculty, support from one’s peers also shows to be a significant predictor of academic success. In a study of 60 welfare-dependent single mothers attending a community college district in California, it was found that support from a significant other—be it a partner, family member, friend, or peer—was a major support system that helped propel these women through school (Cerven, 2013). However, the same study also highlighted that having a significant other who did not support one’s postsecondary pursuits was a large deterrent to being
able to get through higher education successfully. This is supported by another study that examined student parents and found that a “chilly” campus climate harmed the experience for single student parents (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). When student parents perceived cultural stereotyping and stigma around being a parent in college, they will be less likely to reach out for support from their community, and they may even hide their parent status (Duquaine-Watson, 2007).

The experience of being a student parent on a college campus can be a very isolating experience, as many struggle to find a community in which they feel accepted and understood (Katz, 2013). This inability to find a welcoming community may be due to the lack of overall understanding that exist between student parents and traditional college students. In a study of 205 undergraduate students who were given vignettes about a woman who either chose to go back to school following the birth of a child or chose to remain at home, these students rated the women who decided to become student parents much more harshly (Mottarella et al., 2009). Students rated the student parent as significantly less feminine, more dominant, more arrogant-calculating and cold-hearted, and less warm-agreeable than the mother that elected to discontinue her education following the birth of her child (Mottarella et al., 2009). Given this study, it seems likely that traditional students do not understand the decision-making processes that drive student parents to return to school. While student parents often return to school to benefit their children by serving as role models for them and creating a more financially stable future for their families, their peers view them as more selfish and cold for making this choice. The lack of understanding between student parents and their peers suggests that peers also need training in the experience of student parents.

The Narrative Around Parenting for Women: The Struggle of Balancing School and Family
Along with the struggle that student parents face in getting support and acceptance from faculty and their peers, it can also be seen that student parents may face difficulty in getting themselves to consistently support their decision of giving up time working and earning money for their families or raising their children in order to attend classes. Considering the pressure that is placed on parents to meet the ideal of a “good parent”, student parents are faced with additional pressures to succeed in school while still succeeding in supporting and caring for their families.

Balancing these two roles, both of which are very time-demanding and challenging, can be difficult, and student parents may have to make sacrifices in either role to maintain their status as both a student and a parent. This is an important aspect to remember about the identities of student parents. Balancing being a student and a parent can provide many challenges if a student parent feels they are sacrificing so much from one role that they are becoming a failure just to be able to survive in the other role. Success as a student is universally understood; one must be able to pass one’s classes, understand class material, and make advances towards graduation. Parenting, however, is much harder to define in terms of success, and therefore it is important to understand how student parents define their roles as parents.

Parenting is a very personal role, and it is one that those who care for dependent children take very seriously. The way in which one chooses to parent and how one evaluates their effectiveness in parenting is an important aspect of how a parent sees and feels about themselves. Cultural divisions exist in how a person is defined as a successful parent. Considering that most student parents are mothers, it is particularly important to examine the narratives around how women should be responsible for rearing children. Women take an especially important stake in making sure that they are viewed as successful parents, as American society has traditionally
defined the woman’s role in the family to be responsible for childrearing and the well-being of their children (Bernard, 1981).

For black women, the idea of being a successful mother has had a traditional stake in working to financially support one’s children. In fact, research has shown that black women commonly define a successful mother as those that work outside of the home over those that choose to stay at home and care for their children (Giele, 2008; Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Buchanan, 2008). This connects back to the historical need for black women to help support their families during a time when black men were heavily discriminated against, resulting in lower wages and lower levels of employment (Hayghe, 1986). Therefore, success in motherhood for these women is defined by being able to secure financial stability for one’s family.

For white and Hispanic women, however, motherhood is defined by physically caring for and raising children from within the home. White women have a strong investment in being able to stay at home and care for one’s children (Gemelli, 2008; Giele, 2008; Helms, Walls, Crouter, & McHale, 2010; Hood, 1983; Perry-Jenkins, Seery, & Crouter, 1992). Hispanic women also define the success of motherhood based off of the traditional role of women as being the main person to care for household responsibilities and childcare (Segura, 2000). Unlike black women, white and Hispanic mothers, therefore, view their success as parents by their ability to stay at home and care for their children.

In either regard, whether women value working and financially supporting their children or staying home and caring for them, women take an active role in ensuring that their children are well supported. Noticeably missing from all cultural narratives on the idea of motherhood, however, is the idea of attending school while caring for children. Therefore, attending school is likely seen as a sacrifice of one’s time that could be spent doing the more culturally accepted
activities of working or childrearing. If attending school is viewed as taking away time that could be spent supporting one’s children either financially or emotionally, then mothers could feel a conflict between their roles as students and as parents. This is extremely problematic because it has been shown that mothers that experience role conflict face extreme dissatisfaction and negative psychological effects (Hood, 1986; Perry-Jenkins, Seery & Crouter, 1992). This dissatisfaction could cause parents to lose motivation to remain in school when they could easily sacrifice this role to go back to work or remain home with their children, thus enabling them to see themselves as better parents. To prevent this from occurring, it is important for student parents to be able to define their success in school as success in parenting.

**Role Conflict**

Recognizing that parents largely do not consider attending school as positive parenting, it is important to examine how student parents feel regarding taking time away from their families to pursue a degree for themselves. This is especially important considering the pressures that come with role conflict and the negative psychological effects that come from feeling like one is unable to successfully navigate all of one’s life responsibilities. When examining the current literature, role conflict is a serious issue for student parents.

Role conflict is important to understand for a student parent who is balancing school, parenting and oftentimes work because the conflict results in a depletion effect, in which complying with one role results in an extreme difficulty to comply with another (L. Kahn, M. Wolfe, P. Quinn, Diedrick Snoek, & A. Rosenthal, 1965). This depletion effect causes a strain that can negatively impact the stress levels and health of those going through it; for example, this strain can result in depression or negative affect (Lenaghan & Sengupta, 2007). And it has been
seen that student parents do face this strain from role conflict, as time and economic constraints increase stress levels on student parents (Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2011).

These stressors can become extreme for student parents. In a study looking at hundreds of student parents, many cited that the attempt to balance work, family, and school was an extremely difficult process that resulted in a lot of built up stress; one participant even highlighted that they cried daily under the stress (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2012). When this stress grew to be too great, student parents often dropped a role to gain more control over their lives. In accordance with the cultural narratives around parenting, most often these student parents would drop out of school to focus on parenting and work (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2012).

These constraints can lead to not only personal frustration, but they can also lead to poor academic performance. Some student parents cited that personal concerns, mainly caring for family members during emergencies, resulted in a drop in academic performance that in some cases even caused students to fail a class (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2012). In another study of student parents enrolled at community colleges who had children that were not yet in preschool, student parents emphasized the difficulty in managing parent and student responsibilities. This resulted in them having to work harder to develop prioritization skills and time management skills than their peers have to, as these skills were critical in making it so they could experience academic success (Peterson, 2016).

With the challenges that are already present in attending and graduating from college, it is difficult to imagine combining these responsibilities with those of raising and providing for children and a family. Student parents must balance these roles constantly in their pursuit to acquire an education. Therefore it results in a lot of role conflict, which adds to stress and the
likelihood that these students will drop out. These challenges make it important for colleges and universities to de-escalate the conflict that exists between parenting and student roles. Considering that cultural narratives highlight the importance of childrearing and working over that of becoming educated for one’s child, decreasing this conflict is the best way to ensure that student parents do not drop out of school. Being a student is not currently seen as an action that makes a person a successful mother, and therefore if the strain becomes too great and student parents feel too depleted, they will drop their role as a student first to recommit their time and energies towards the roles that society’s narratives have made acceptable: caretaker and worker.

**Stereotype Bias**

In addition to role conflict, student parents are also highly susceptible to stereotype bias. Stereotype bias is a psychological phenomenon that occurs when a group is subjected to a common cultural narrative regarding themselves. When a group is knowledgeable about a stereotype that is commonly believed about them, then they become afraid that they will perpetuate the stereotype and bring shame onto their communities. As a result, those who are subject to stereotype bias will face so much fear that they will reinforce the stereotype that the added pressure causes them to perform worse, a phenomenon known as stereotype threat (Steele, 2010). Stereotype threat greatly impacts minority or nontraditional populations in education. For example, women who are given math or science tests and told that it measures their ability in these fields will perform worse (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999; Steele, 2010). Stereotype threat makes them fear that they will support the idea that women are worse than men in these fields. Additionally, black people will perform worse on a test that they believe is measuring their academic ability because of the cultural stereotype that they are less capable of performing
academically than their white counterparts (Steele, 2010; Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999). Stereotype threat can serve as a major barrier to success for disadvantaged populations.

In the current higher education system, student parents hear about the fact that it is extremely difficult for them to succeed. They currently see that the graduation rates for student parents are very low; only one-third of student parents attain a degree or certificate within 6 years of enrollment (Eckerson et al., 2016). With that low level of success being common knowledge for student parents, the current narrative is that student parents are not able to succeed in higher education. When a narrative shows that a group of students are unable to succeed in academics, a level of stereotype threat is commonly placed onto them (Steele, 2010). This stereotype threat causes underperformance. If a student parent believes that they are less likely to succeed because student parents are known to perform less adequately, then the amount of pressure that student parents will feel to prove that stereotype wrong will often result in lower performance than if student parents were not aware of this narrative (Steele, 2010).

Student parents are likely to be faced with the stereotype of not performing well in school, along with the stereotype that making sacrifices to focus on their academics makes them poor parents. With the lack of support from faculty and peers, student parents are subjected to the idea that their role as a parent does not make them welcome as a student. When they continue to face inevitable crises and emergencies that come with raising children, that stereotype will be reinforced. Therefore student parents are subjected to the fear that they will prove others right in their assumptions that they, as parents, were not meant to be in school. Stereotypes attack student parents’ performance in higher education from multiple angles, a fact that can be confirmed from a study that shows that student parents recognize and perceive discrimination and a chilly reception from faculty and peers on campus (Duquaine-Watson, 2007).
Even if student parents are not aware of the stereotypes that are present in the general cultural narrative, perceived judgments can also create an environment of stereotype threat (Steele, 2010). If an individual feels as though they are less talented in a subject, and they do not feel the support or encouragement of those around them, then stereotype threat can still emerge in that individual scenario. Knowing that student parents feel a cold or chilly response from faculty and peers in college (Duquaine-Watson, 2007) and that student parents experience role conflict that takes away time from their studies, it can be deduced that any college classroom has the potential to create a stereotype threat for student parents. Under the current cultural environment of college campuses, student parents are set up to think poorly of themselves, and therefore they are set up to fail. College administrators must do better at creating environments where student parents are not as easily subjected to stereotype threat.

Counternarratives

In response to the stereotype threat that student parents are subjected to, it is important that colleges and universities work to promote a culture that goes against these stereotypes and trains faculty, peers, and student parents themselves to believe in the potential of student parents to succeed in higher education. A powerful tool in doing this would be to come up with a counternarrative, or a narrative that promotes a more positive, counter pedagogy than what is present in popular culture (Perry, Steele, & Hillard, 2003). Counternarratives are extremely useful tools that can help populations of students that are overlooked or seen as less capable find an avenue to develop confidence and success in education.

Counternarratives have largely been applied to the experiences of students of color, a group that faces a lot of stereotypes regarding their ability to be successful in school. The stereotypes surrounding students of color are that they are less intelligent and less capable of
doing well on academic tasks, such as tests, than their white counterparts (Perry et al., 2003). Therefore, students of color have been held subject to stereotype threat; when they are presented with a task that will measure their intelligence and academic capabilities, their fear of upholding the stereotype that people from their community are less intelligent than their white peers makes it so they actually perform worse on the task (Steele, 2010). The cultural pedagogy regarding their ability to succeed in academia puts so much pressure on them that they inadvertently support those stereotypes.

However, this pressure can be alleviated by using a counternarrative that instead promotes the opposite ideology that is present in the largely accepted cultural narrative. Within communities of color, it can be seen that working to promote the idea that education is an opportunity for students of color to have freedom from oppression and embrace the strength of their communities actually benefits the performance of students of color (Kirp, 2013; Perry et al., 2003). When students of color understand that they have the capabilities of finding success in academics, they begin to have less fear in upholding stereotypes and more confidence that they are in the right place.

To create a counternarrative, a school or community must work to train and educate its members on the faults of the popular pedagogy and how to support members that are at risk of stereotype threat. For students of color, being told that education is a place for them and that it will open doors to freedom, self-advocacy and power helps for these students to overcome the threat of stereotype bias and break the boundaries that most thought they could not cross. This counternarrative is promoted through various means. First, it is important that these students develop support networks in which they can connect with others that come from similar backgrounds. When these students can work with one another, there is a feeling of positivity that
can overwrite the pressures that these students experience when they feel like they are alone and against other students who are believed to be more capable than them. For example, a team of low-income, Latinx students, some of which battle with issues surrounding their immigration status, were able to compete with collegiate teams in a robotics competition when they worked on a team together (Palos, 2011). Peer networks are an important source of support for nontraditional students and students at risk for stereotype threat.

Community networks are also important in combatting stereotypes. During the segregation era, black schools worked to incorporate entire communities into the support network for black children to succeed. This relied on educating and preparing parents and other town members to further reinforce the idea that these students could be successful in academics so that students could earn support both inside and outside the classroom (Kirp, 2013). It takes an entire community for students to feel consistently believed in, allowing a counternarrative to have a stronger effect and the threat of stereotype bias to be further reduced.

Faculty also play a key role in producing and perpetuating a counternarrative. When faculty members are given trainings about minority groups of students and taught to promote their successes, students are able to connect and feel supported by faculty, resulting in greater success for students (Harper & Davis, 2012; Kirp, 2013; Walker, 2000). When students feel that their faculty members believe in their abilities and think they can succeed, then this gives further motivation for those students to work in school and do well. For example, a group of high school students from a low-income, urban community were able to compete with schools from more affluent backgrounds in forensics, a type of debate style, because they had a teacher who believed in them and pushed them to perform at a caliber that most others did not think they were
capable (DeBono & Rosen, 2001). A faculty member really does have the capability of combatting stereotype threat by eliminating a student’s doubts and fears.

Current research does not explicitly look into the idea of promoting a defined counternarrative in a college campus environment for student parents. However, given the fact that literature shows a lack of support and understanding from faculty and peers, the current narrative for student parents is that their role as a parent is a hindrance to their performance as a student. Furthermore, student parents are also facing a stereotype threat that their work towards their academics is taking away from their ability to be there to provide for and care for their children. With both issues, student parents are faced with an enormous amount of pressure to perform both as a student and as a parent. Therefore, it is important to understand how those stereotypes work to affect the performance of student parents and what measures could be put in place to produce a counternarrative to counteract those effects.

**The Current Study**

The present study aims to further examine the impact that campus culture and acceptance can have on student parents’ ability to be successful in their postsecondary aims. The threat of role conflict and stereotype bias can negatively impact a student parent’s ability to complete their education. It is important for faculty and administrators to understand the current campus culture for student parents and work to implement policies and procedures to make the environment more welcoming for this population. The current study aims to study campus culture in its entirety, and therefore perceptions on faculty support, peer understanding, and student-parent success at juggling parenting and academics were all considered.

Using public interviews from educational resource blogs and newspapers, the present study considered themes regarding perceived faculty and peer support from non parents and
fellow student parents, along with student parent attitudes of what keeps them motivated to continue with their education. Based on these themes, the present study examines necessary cultural changes and proposes a counternarrative that will produce a more student parent positive climate. The present study then makes recommendations for institutional level policy change to help institutions of higher learning create this student-parent positive culture.

Methods

To collect new data to inform the suggestions made in this study, public interview data was collected and analyzed. Public interview data was chosen for this study, despite its limitations (See “Limitations of the Present Study”, pg. 56) because of its ability to garner a wider range of respondents. Given its free availability, this data allowed the present study to analyze student parents of various ages, races, educational statuses, and beyond from across the United States of America. Given that many studies in the current literature collect data using student parents from a singular institution, district, or, in some cases, region of the United States, using interview data allows for the current study to get a broader range of student parent opinion.

Interviews were located using various search terms in the search engine Google, including “student parents in college”, “resources for moms in college”, and “resources for dads in college”. For the interviews to be included in the study for analysis, the writer of the piece and/or subject of the piece had to be a person who was actively or had previously been enrolled in a postsecondary program while either pregnant or raising a dependent child. Mainly, the data was collected from pieces that were published on educational resource blogs, which ranged from those that were specifically targeting student parents and nontraditional students to those that were broadly covering higher education. Given the cultural narrative around parenting that served as a theoretical basis for this study, student parents attending college in the United States
were the only ones that were included for analysis. Ultimately, the perspectives of 27 mothers who did or currently identify as student parents were included in this study.

The Use of Grounded Theory

In order to analyze the themes present in the interviews, grounded theory was utilized. Grounded theory was selected because this method is typically utilized by a single researcher (Rennie, Phillips, & Quartaro, 1988), which in the case of this study is the author. Grounded theory is an approach that made the author of this paper read the interviews in their entirety, and then took units of meaning from each interview. These units of meaning from each interview were gathered to analyze overall themes regarding the campus climate for student parents; namely, interactions with non parent peers, relationships with faculty, and feelings about role conflict while balancing parenting and academic responsibilities.

Results

In each of the blogs included, aspects regarding the struggles of role conflict and quotes speaking on the experience of interacting with faculty and non parent peers were addressed.

Faculty Support

Supportive Relationships

In several of the interviews, student parents highlighted the importance that positive relationships with faculty had on their academic experience. When student parents were able to find a professor that was supportive and encouraging of their academic pursuits, they forged extremely strong bonds with those professors. Many student parents stated that they would take numerous courses with a single professor when they found that they were supportive of their academic pursuits, and another common theme was developing a mentor relationship with
positive professors and having these faculty members serve as the biggest source of academic encouragement in their pursuit of higher education.

The importance that faculty members had on student parents being able to navigate their way through higher education was constantly touched on by many of the student parents. The positive relationships with professors enabled certain student parents to be able to complete their education successfully and on time.

“[My college] has highly educated faculty and staff, fully aware of the real-world issues that can arise. Instead of having to drop out I had professors asking, ‘How can I help you succeed?’ I cannot truly tell you how much that touched my heart and at the same time also drove me to keep on keeping on. I didn’t want to defer graduation, I didn’t want to be an undergrad for one more semester. And guess what? I didn’t have to.”

The presence of supportive faculty is a necessary and vital support system for student parents to have access to on their campuses. In fact, one student parent stated that it was necessary for professors to verbally communicate their belief in student parents’ abilities because they shouldn’t “expect them [student parents] to believe it for themselves” and “they need that cheerleader in their corner”. With all the doubts that student parents are forced to confront because of their traditional lack of success in higher education, the presence of someone they look up to and admire that encourages them and believes in them can be the driving force that allows for a student parent to feel as though they belong on campus.

**Lack of Support from Professors**

While some student parents were able to highlight the many positives that come from having supportive and mentoring relationships with professors, other student parents were unable to find this from many professors in their communities. In fact, this is what drove many student parents to continue to repeatedly take classes with professors they found to be supportive; a faculty member who was in their corner and willing to support them through their unique
challenges in higher education was so valued that student parents were unwilling to sacrifice it when they found it.

In terms of the lack of support from other professors, a lot of student parents cited that their individual concerns were not seen or were ignored by many faculty members. For example, many student parents stated that a lot of professors needed to learn how to be flexible for students unable to always meet strict deadlines and requirements because of family obligations. Deadlines were a common topic and grievance for student parents. The unexpected challenges and time-consuming nature of raising children make it so that student parents may occasionally need flexibility with deadlines. Furthermore, attendance requirements are also difficult for student parents to adhere to in a world where child care plans may fall through. Children may become unexpectedly sick and therefore mandatory attendance requirements that have little to no flexibility are not welcoming to student parents being able to successfully complete their classes. One student parent highlighted this in their account of being able to fit in on campus:

“The school wasn’t working well with me and the professors tried to dock me points for missing class. It was honestly the worst experience of my life. I took it up with the President of my school and we figured things out, but they were not equipped to work with a young mom in college. It was really disappointing.”

A professor fighting a student’s obligations outside of the classroom is an occurrence that makes student parents feel unwelcome in a campus environment. Should a student parent feel as though their campus and faculty are ill-equipped to handle their needs, it will only drive away such students from participating in postsecondary classes.

There were several other ways in which the syllabi that professors provided to students were not supportive of student parents. For example, some student parents stated that professors would make trips to off-campus destinations outside of class time mandatory, which blatantly ignores the fact that child care is expensive and can be hard to come by and that student parents
may have a strict work schedule that they rely on to support their families. Additionally, another student parent highlighted the frustration of having professors that enforced a no cell phone policy, as it ignored the need for a student parent to check their phone occasionally, so they can respond should their child be going through an emergency. From many of these complaints, a lot of the frustrations stemmed from professors building their requirements and policies around a framework that is only considerate of the needs of traditional students.

With the complaints about many professors being related to their flexibility in dealing with challenges that student parents may face, clearly the support that is needed from professors is two-fold for student parents. While having a supportive, mentor relationship with certain faculty members can be the make or break point for some student parents being able to succeed in higher education, all professors can work to make student parents feel welcome and understood on campus. Professors with strict policies and syllabi are not being considerate of the unique challenges that student parents have in completing their education. Therefore, making sure to factor in additional flexibility for nontraditional students, including student parents, is an important step for professors to take that will enable student parents to feel supported and welcome in college classrooms.

*Connection to Peers*

*Non parent Peers*

The connection to non-parent peers was another series of relationships that were complicated for student parents to form but were very important for student parents to feel welcome onto campus. After all, fellow students make up a majority of people a student interacts with on a college campus. Feeling a sense of support and camaraderie amongst this population
can be vital for nontraditional students who are already pushed into feeling doubts about their capabilities to succeed and fit in in college.

**Judgment from Non Parent Peers**

And from the data, it is clear a lot of student parents do not immediately feel this sense of support from their non parent peers when they walk into a classroom. Several student parents cited the judgment that is perceived when they walk into a space that is dominated by traditional students. For instance, one student parent highlighted the anxiety that they experienced when they would walk into a classroom that was dominated by traditional students:

“I go through these phases during the semester where at times I feel like just another student no different than the person next to me and then other days I feel like I stick out like a sore thumb. I become hyper-aware of my surroundings and suddenly every single traditional student I pass is judging me. It’s really dumb. It’s very self-centered too. But am I the only one who goes through this? I doubt it. After talking to a few students who are also moms attending college it seems to be a common thing.”

With the understanding of stereotype threat, this perception of judgment is dangerous for student parents. If they are not able to find that their fellow peers are supportive and understanding of their situation, they will feel as if they are not welcome or not worthy of being there. This stereotype may drive student parents away from their educational pursuits if they struggle and cannot find a network to encourage them to continue.

This anxiety about judgment from non parent peers was unfortunately justified in some of the experiences of student parents. One student parent highlighted an experience of attempting to join in on a very traditional and popular activity for college students: joining a sorority. When the student was pledging, she chose to disclose her student parent status to the current members of the sorority. Members then began to refer to her as “the girl with the kid”, stripping her of her identity outside of her status as a mother, and the student parent was eventually denied access into the sorority. When this sort of reaction happens, the student parent stated that it turned an
identity that she was proud of—that of being a mother attending college—into something that brought her shame and embarrassment. These are the type of interactions that led some student parents to not disclose their student parent status to their college communities.

Lack of Connection to Non Parent Peers

The most common theme that occurred in explaining the lack of connection between non parent students and student parents was a lack of being able to relate to one another. Several student parents mentioned that despite their attempts to connect with non parent peers in their college communities, many struggled to find things in common with them. Student parents stated that their priorities did not match up with non parent peers, which left them with few points to connect with them and an inability to forge deeper relationships. Other student parents noted that they were unable to engage in the traditional student lifestyle, which further contributed to the lack of opportunities that student parents had to connect with their non parent peers. Ultimately, it seemed that student parents did not feel like they had a lot to connect with their non parent peers about in the current campus climate.

Benefits of Friendships with Non Parent Peers

Despite a large number of student parents that reported an inability to connect with non parent peers due to judgment or lack of connection, some student parents were able to form friendships with their non parent peers. For the student parents that were able to do this, these relationships proved to be beneficial to a student parent feeling like they belonged on campus. One student parent was able to receive a board position in a student organization alongside a non parent peer. Through this experience, the two were able to form a connection and a friendship in which they continued to motivate one another to perform in classes. Based on this friendship with a non parent peer, the student parent felt as if they were accepted on their college campus.
and especially within the community of their student organization. This sentiment was shared by two other student parents that were able to forge friendships with their non parent peers, as they cited these relationships to be a great source of support when they were going through struggles of balancing both parenthood and being a student. Non parent peer support proved to not be extremely common in the themes presented by student parents, but when these relationships existed they helped student parents have an extra sense of support and belonging in their communities. This supports the idea that it is important to develop ways to change campus climate in ways that further promote these relationships.

**Fellow Student Parents**

While non parent peers proved to be an unstable source of support for student parents, student parents being able to connect with one another is a great support network that enables them to motivate and encourage one another to keep progressing to the finish line. One student parent expressed this feeling of motivation that they received from their student parent friends very explicitly:

“[My student-parent peer] is a constant inspiration to me as she balances her “first job” – being a wife and mother, with her “second job” – working full time, and still finding time to be an A student and very active in the community! I am also awed by [another student parent peer], a single working mom to two young children who continuously reaches out to support other student mothers and still manages to stay on top of her studies.”

Reaching out and finding connections to fellow student parents gave student parents an important support system that allowed for them to feel as though someone understood them. Having that level of understanding allowed student parents to support one another and also gave a sense that they were not struggling through this experience alone, which gave them even more motivation to keep pushing through to graduation.

Connections to other student parents also gave these students a vital network in a college community that does not always welcome them. One student parent highlighted a group of
student parents that they used as a network on campus. One of the main benefits was that the student parents were able to study together and eat dinner together while giving their children a chance to play and interact with one another. These meetings gave student parents and their children an opportunity to build a community within a higher education setting, and this enables student parents to feel like there is a place for them. When a student has access to a supportive community, they are able to have a protective barrier from the negative influences on campus that may push harmful stereotypes at them.

*Role Conflict*

**Juggling Parenting and Going to School**

Outside of the lack of understanding that student parents felt from professors and the judgment that several of them felt from non parent peers, student parents also received a lot of pressure from themselves. Many student parents had statements that showed a very clear experience of role conflict; studying and attending classes had them pulling away from their families and at times sacrificing time with their children. This conflict between the roles of student and parent led to a few distinct emotions, namely, guilt and fear of failure.

The balance of juggling the roles of student and parent made many student parents feel as though they were not doing all that they could for their children. A lot of guilt came forth as parents made the decision to focus some of their priorities on school and not on caring for their children. These student parents discussed a lot of decisions that they were forced to make to continue their studies, like moving 500 miles away from family and friends to be able to attend school, leaving one’s child with their parents and missing major developmental milestones, and putting their child in child care all day so they could focus on attending classes and study. Along with sharing these difficult decisions, student parents also described the feelings of guilt and
conflict. One student parent highlighted the guilt that came from leaving their daughter behind all day when she clearly missed them, as their daughter would continue to nurse throughout the night to spend some time with her mother. Another mother struggled with supporting their child with learning disabilities while also trying to succeed in their own studies, explaining:

“"My current fear while I am completing a couple of classes in order to transfer is that I am sacrificing my children’s education for my academic goals. My oldest son has a learning disability that requires my constant involvement and attention. Trying to get my son the help he needs to succeed and then having to make sure I maintain my GPA has been very stressful. Here I am excelling at school while my son is struggling through high school, makes me feel I am failing my son.”

Student parents must give up time caring for children or working to study and attend classes, and that comes with making some sacrifices to parenting to the standards that a student parent may have in their head. Especially when considering the cultural ideologies about parenting focuses on mothers caring for their children or supporting them financially by working, student parents are highly susceptible to believing that they are failing in their roles as parents when they focus on their roles as students. And this guilt and sense of being overwhelmed were very prevalent in the narratives of student parents.

Along with guilt, the conflict between raising children and attending school also instilled a lot of fear in these student parents; they wondered if the time they needed to allocate to their children would mean they could not be successful in college. A lot of these student parents explicitly mentioned the fear that went through them as they returned to school with a child in tow. They discussed that they had initial fears that they would be unable to complete their assignments or handle the workload on top of parenting. Others’ fear went beyond just the fear of being able to do the work and expanded to being able to successfully graduate and get a degree. Considering the low attrition rates of student parents, it is no surprise that this stereotype
of parents being less capable of succeeding in college would result in a fear of failure for student parents.

**Motivations for Remaining in School**

Even though many student parents had difficulty with grappling with the need of giving up some time with their children to try to get through school, their children served as a main motivation for continuing on with their education. Student parents want to serve as role models for their children by teaching them the importance of education as well as the rewards of perseverance and determination. Believing that this act of going to school was positive role modeling kept student parents in the pursuit of higher education. One student parent expressed this sentiment very specifically:

“Most research (and opinion) seems to focus on the negative aspect of a mother who is attending college. This could be coming more from the idea of the “good mother” stereotype we have talked about in the past, but I can’t say that for sure. Whatever the reason, there hasn’t always been a positive message toward the idea of a mother who attends college. As such a person I have searched for information on this topic because I want to know if being a student is harming my child. Well, according to studies done it doesn’t harm my child but helps him.”

Other student parents mimicked this sentiment of helping their children by continuing on with their education. This served to be a large piece of why student parents even enrolled in postsecondary education in the first place; they wanted to have a better, more stable life for their children. So, while the doubts and lack of support may cause student parents to feel as though they are inadequate parents by giving up family time to attend school, at the core, these student parents know that their choices can greatly benefit their children. Understanding that student parents do know that their decision to go to school makes them good parents to their children, it is important that all campus community members share this sentiment. Furthermore, campus narratives should focus on this thought so that student parents can remember and focus on this fact rather than letting negative stereotypes pervade their thoughts.
Discussion

Student parents can find some supports in their campus communities, but these supports are inconsistent. While some professors were willing to step in and become mentors for student parents, a lot of student parents found that faculty members did not consider their challenges and were not willing to produce policies in their classes that were conducive to a student also being a parent. Certain student parents were able to forge networks with non parent peers, and these relationships were very important in helping these student parents feel supported and validated in their pursuit of higher education. However, most student parents stated that they felt judged by student parents or that they were unable to form these vital connections. And while some student parents were able to find community with other student parents, a more common theme was that these student parents feared failure and faced the guilt of not being as present for their children.

In the current climate of a campus, some student parents can feel supported if they find the right professor or group of students, but this is not consistent enough to be an acceptable norm for student parents. Work must be done to change the experience for student parents in higher education; there needs to be the consistent support that is founded by a policy-driven campus culture.

Content for a Counternarrative

Given the results of the current study, the campus narrative surrounding student parents’ participation in higher education is largely negative. They feel unseen by their professors, unable to connect with their non parent peers, and they also give themselves a hard time about splitting their time between school and their families. Student parents are already lacking in many vital resources such as child care and financial aid; this makes the absence of a welcoming environment an even harsher reality for student parents. Without proper support services, student
parents rely on a campus community that can encourage them and be a source of strength when they may be struggling to balance all their roles. It is important that campus communities have a narrative in place that works to promote student parents’ feelings that they can succeed.

The current narrative around student parents attending higher education shows that they cannot be simultaneously successful at parenting and attending school. It is known that their graduation rates are much lower than their non parent peers (Eckerson et al., 2016), and student parents also face immense role conflict that emerges from them giving up time with their kids (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2012). Therefore, student parents typically must make sacrifices in one arena or another, which makes them feel more inadequate. However, this study shows that student parents know that their parenting benefits from their pursuit of an education. By obtaining a postsecondary degree, student parents know that their children will value education and live a more stable life. In order to fight the role conflict and lack of support, it is important for colleges to promote a counternarrative that helps student parents be reminded that the work they are doing in the classroom is one of the best things that they can be doing for their children.

Student parents better the lives of their children if they can navigate their way through the world of higher education. Factually, the children of student parents face a lot of benefits from having college-educated parents. They are more likely to pursue postsecondary education, and they are able to grow up in homes that are less likely to be in poverty and more likely to have health insurance and other benefits (Baum et al., 2013). Knowing this, a successful counternarrative would be one in which the role of a student parent is lauded as a parent that is working hard and being an excellent role model for their children.

Parents are traditionally not seen as being able to balance parenting and schooling and be successful at both. Faculty members and non parent peers have been shown to not be supportive
and warm because they do not understand what student parents are going through and what is at stake for themselves and their families (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). A counternarrative that could make a campus community acknowledge the fact that going to school is a piece of being a caring and successful parent could help student parents feel less conflict and help faculty and non parents become more receptive and supportive of the student parents they interact with. There is not a current dialogue on campuses that student parents are doing such hard and important work to elevate American families. With such conversations, campus partners can become educated enough to be real partners in the fight to help student parents graduate.

A counternarrative in which a student parent is taught that their role in academics makes them a successful parent will work to push them towards success. It is clear from both previous research and the current analysis of published interview data that student parents feel a divide that pulls them between focusing on their children and focusing on their studies. This does not need to be the case. If students were given encouragement that they were being good parents by gaining a more stable future and role modeling the importance of education, the campus environment could feel a lot more welcoming for a student parent population.

Such a counternarrative would allow for stereotype threat to be reduced for student parents. Currently, student parents feel judgment and a lack of acknowledgment from other members of the campus community. This lack of a support network adds to student parents’ feelings that they are not welcome and do not belong on college campuses. If faculty and non parent peers were equipped with a counternarrative that encouraged them to be supportive of student parents, then this feeling of not belonging would be diminished, and student parents would feel validated on campus. With this validation, student parents will no longer face the feeling that they have something to prove, and therefore stereotype threats would be far less. In
addition, if student parents received outside encouragement and reminders that going to school is good for their children, then student parents will receive reminders that their role as a student is adding to their role as a parent. Thinking that their student role is benefitting their parenting will thus reduce the role conflict that student parents experience. Overall, this counternarrative will promote student parent success in higher education.

**Policies to be Implemented to Promote a Counternarrative**

To promote the idea that student parents are successful parents that are not only encouraging the wellbeing of themselves but also that of their families, many actions must be taken by the campus community. A counternarrative must be pervasive in an environment for it to take hold, and therefore all members of a campus community must be aware of a counternarrative’s content and be willing to work with it for it to be successful. Counternarratives surrounding students of color highlight this best; it takes a lot of effort to make these narratives take hold in a community. Faculty must be trained regarding the challenges that students face and how to better support them and the entire community must also be prepared in offering their services to perpetuate the counternarrative (Kirp, 2013; Perry et al., 2003; Walker, 2000). Students must also have access to a network of others like them so that they can build an internal network in which they can find encouragement and motivation (Palos, 2011). For a college community to be able to build a counternarrative that takes hold and helps student parents, administrators must implement policies that build a culture in which everyone is on board to adopt the counternarrative’s content. The following section outlines suggestions for policies that college administrators can implement to make such a counternarrative take hole throughout the college community.

*Faculty Training*
Faculty are an essential piece of the puzzle in implementing counternarratives in education. Students look up to those that are teaching them, and they need their support and encouragement to feel as though they belong in academia. Traditional counternarrative research for students of color show that this is the case; the education of teachers is important to make sure that students have the best shot at success in the classroom (Glenn, 2012; Milner, 2007). Professors are thus key in the development of a long-lasting counternarrative on campus.

The education of professors is lacking in terms of their understanding of student parent support. While some are successful as mentors, most do not offer the flexibility and encouragement that is needed by student parents. Therefore, professors need to undergo trainings on how to better support these students. Luckily, there are several trainings that already exist in the higher education realm for faculty members to learn more about the experience of student parents in higher education.

Title IX and diversity trainings are two key, already-existing, training mechanisms that can be used by colleges to train faculty members regarding the challenges facing student parents. Title IX is a policy dictating that no student should be subject to sex or gender-based discrimination in education or recreational activities receiving federal funding (“Title IX Basics,” n.d.). The vague language has left higher education experts to interpret what is covered by Title IX protections, and currently pregnant students receive certain rights from Title IX. Pregnant students can take leave or have excused absences for childbirth and pregnancy-related occurrences. Professors and the institution must allow pregnant students to have the opportunity to make up any missed work and return to campus at the same academic status as when they took their leave (“Title IX Basics,” n.d.). Therefore, professors must provide accommodations for pregnant students following leave, and they also must make the time to provide them
accommodations in class, such as unlimited bathroom breaks. Title IX trainings should therefore go into describing these protections for pregnant students, so professors are fully equipped to support them.

Not only can these trainings lead to an understanding about pregnant students’ needed accommodations, but this training could also lead into an additional conversation about appropriate accommodations for students after they give birth or return from parental leave. If the school must make accommodations for students who need to go to the doctor to check on their pregnancy, then why is it acceptable for a professor to punish a student for missing class to take their child to the doctor after they were born? While student parent experience post childbirth and parental leave are not explicitly covered via Title IX, it is commonly understood that parenting is a very gendered experience, particularly for mothers. And since mothers do make up a large percentage of student parents, holding conversations about accommodations that will help student parents respond to their parenting responsibilities would be a beneficial experience that will lead to them feeling more welcome and supported in the classroom.

Diversity trainings are also an excellent opportunity for faculty members to be trained on the needs of student parents. While current diversity conversations in higher education focus on identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, and even first-generation status, a student’s status as a parent is not common in diversity-dialogue in higher education. If schools were to incorporate data on student parent experience in higher education into their diversity trainings, then the challenges that come from financial hardship, lack of childcare, and lower attrition rates would be better understood by professors. This understanding would then allow for conversations about how to support student parents in the classroom to become more common. Student parents would be able to experience a higher frequency of professors that
would be supportive of their needs to make up a test because their child care fell through for a
day, which would enable them to feel like they were able to manage both roles and develop
honest and communicative relationships with their professors.

By implementing talks about student parents into two key sets of trainings, colleges make
a stance that they want student parents to be successful on their college campuses. Discussing the
needed accommodations in Title IX trainings and going over the obstacles that student parents
face in diversity trainings will allow for professors to see student parents in a new light; they will
gain an understanding that student parents are hardworking students that go through extreme
difficulties to care for and support their children. With this knowledge, college administrators are
equipping professors to become better supporters of student parents who will perpetuate the
counternarrative and help them be successful as both students and parents.

*Welcoming Student Parents Through Syllabi*

Outside of these trainings, faculty could also be pushed by administration to develop a
standard regarding their classroom policy. Current syllabi, according to the student parent quotes
analyzed in this study, are not flexible and do not consider students with family obligations.
Professors must get their syllabi approved, and therefore college administrators and department
heads could easily require that classroom policy offer explicit and specific exceptions for
students with familial obligations. Should this occur, student parents would be able to walk into
any classrooms on campus and feel confident that they can converse with a professor about what
they need to succeed in school as they manage to care for their child. Furthermore, by stating that
professors are willing to work with student parents on a document that every student receives in
each class normalizes the presence of student parents on campus for all professors and all
students. This normalization and public acceptance of student parents will further increase their
ability to feel welcome and have their presence validated, which will allow for student parents to feel as though they can be successful as students and reduce stereotype threat. Syllabi would be an easy yet effective move in helping bridge the gap between faculty and student parents.

Faculty Mentorship

Mentorship was also seen to be the other aspect of the faculty relationship that was important for student parents. Knowing this, college administrators should be making informed choices about who they are allowing to advise and mentor student parents. For colleges that have advising and mentoring offices, there should be at least one advisor that specializes in the support of nontraditional students, including student parents. Other colleges allow for students to have specific faculty advisors and therefore should have professors that designate themselves as wishing to work with student parents. These specific advisors and mentors should be advertised to students at orientation, which will allow for student parents to easily be able to find a source of positive encouragement and motivation. With these changes, student parents can be guaranteed to have at least one person in their corner who is willing to perpetuate the idea that they are supporting their families by attending classes and that they are capable of graduating. As was seen in the current study’s data, this can be the difference between walking across the stage or walking out the door.

Faculty at college campuses play an important role in students’ lives because they are imparting the knowledge and the skills that student parents will utilize every day in their careers. They look up to their professors, and they trust their guidance. Professors that are unsupportive of students can, therefore, draw students away from a class or major, and in the case of disadvantaged student populations, away from higher education altogether. College administrators should, therefore, devote energies to making sure that student parents are
discussed in current training and policy discussions. If faculty members understand the challenges that student parents face and are equipped to motivate them through these barriers, it will greatly benefit student parents. When professors believe that student parents are working to better themselves and their families and that they belong in higher education, student parents believe it as well. And when student parents have their abilities validated and they know that there are others who also think that they belong in academia, then stereotype threat is less likely to have an impact on them.

*Student Leader/Peer Training*

Student parents also reported that non parent peers were a very inconsistent source of support for them during their time in higher education. While connections with non parent peers were very important and meaningful relationships, they were not common amongst the stories used in the current study. Instead, non parent peers were sources of judgment that made student parents feel less connected to campus. Considering that student parents are under the threat of stereotype bias, this judgment further exacerbates the fear of failure that can push student parents to perform worse. Non parent peers must be also trained in working with student parents and supporting them to limit this threat.

Similar to faculty trainings, students often receive diversity trainings and undergo conversations about living in a diverse and inclusive community upon arriving on campus during orientation. Along with discussing race and gender and class, parental status needs to be included in these campus conversations. Non parent peers could discuss parental status and become educated on how to interact with student parents and how to make them feel welcome on campus. This would further work to normalize student parent presence on campus and make a
clear stance that the college expects all students to work towards welcoming these students and supporting their academic efforts.

To make sure that student parent perspective is considered beyond just these initial campus conversations, training student leaders will set a standard for all students that student parents are to be respected and that their voices are to be appreciated and heard. If members of the student leadership community, such as Resident Advisors, Orientation Leaders, and Student Government officers gained additional training about student parent experiences and their lack of a community on college campuses, then they can continue to educate other students as well as make decisions that would be considerate of their needs and open opportunities to involve student parents in the community. For example, Student Government could choose to hold their meetings on weekends or weeknights following night classes so that student parents could potentially run and serve in the Student Government and find that space on campus. Because student leaders are meant to open up opportunities for others to lead and participate on campus, they are an important key to creating peer connections for student parents in a college community.

Along with training student leaders, it may also be effective for a college campus to hold ally trainings for student parents and other non-traditional student populations. Some campuses already hold ally trainings for groups such as the queer community and undocumented immigrants on campus (“Active Ally | Office of Intercultural Education | Bates College,” n.d.; Diversity et al., n.d.). These trainings allow for these students to understand how members of these groups want to be supported and in what ways they can make their campus experience more welcoming and inclusive. Holding these courses to train people on how to be allies for student parents would do multiple things to help student parents on campus. Ally trainings would
further normalize the idea that student parents are present on campus and that it is the responsibility of the entire community to encourage them rather than judge them. They would also help student parents when walking into the classroom. According to the data from the current study, student parents feel as though non parent peers are judging them as soon as they walk into a space. If student parents knew that allies were present, the idea of being surrounded by non parent peers may be less intimidating, thus lessening the threat of stereotype bias.

Changing the Social Climate

Non parent peers are sources of perceived judgment, but they also hold different lifestyles that make it so that student parents have difficulty connecting with them. This lack of an ability to connect with peers makes it hard to build a network and a sense of belonging on campus, which further contributes to student parents distancing themselves from their student roles. It may be difficult for student parents to change their lifestyle to be able to connect with their non parent peers, but a shift in a piece of the social climate on campus could give them new opportunities to connect. While student parents may not enjoy the same extra-curricular activities, they do enjoy the same academic activities. Therefore, having faculty and non-student parents encourage groups of students to congregate before or after class to talk about the readings, or creating networking and meeting events for students to discuss their future goals and aspirations may introduce new opportunities for student parents to connect with their peers in a way that will help them to realize that they are not so different after all.

The importance of non parent peers lies in student parents’ ability to feel as though they have a place on campus. The proposed counternarrative is hoping to make student parents feel as though their responsibilities as parents do not negate their ability to be a successful student and vice versa. When student parents feel stark contrasts between themselves and their non parent
peers, it exacerbates the feeling that they are not meant to be students. Furthermore, the judgment that they perceive from their peers makes it so that they are further afraid of failing and having everyone around them notice their failure, intensifying the stereotype bias that can push student parents’ performance to suffer. However, a supportive environment would help student parents not fear the stereotypes that plague their educational experience, making it so they feel more confident in their abilities to succeed in school.

*Student Parent Networking*

The consistent positive relationship that student parents described was amongst other student parents. When student parents networked with one another, they were able to find motivation and encouragement from others who were going through the same struggles. Because of this, student parents were able to believe in themselves as a student since they saw others succeeding and thriving. This network is therefore extremely important, and it should be promoted on college campuses in a few possible ways.

A student parent organization is an excellent way for student parents to easily connect with one another on a regular basis. Student parents would have access to a regular meeting time to speak with one another and offer support. Furthermore, a student organization does hold some power on a college campus. Representatives from student organizations typically meet with student government officials regularly, which allows for student parents to advocate for themselves in their campus community. Even without the connection to student government, student parents coming together to support one another gives them a chance to organize to develop further suggestions for systemic change. Along with the support and advocacy opportunities, an organization designed for student parents further normalizes their presence on campus. Other students would be able to recognize that these student parents are present and
active within the campus community, and this would make it so both student parents and non-parent peers felt that student parents on campus were legitimate.

Running a student organization does require a certain level of commitment as well as a consistent number of participants to keep going and maintain the organization. If a college campus cannot gather this level of activity, then another way of allowing student parents to connect must be made available. Should a campus adopt a student parent advisor or team of advisors, then this team could hold semi-regular networking nights to allow student parents to connect and talk. Because these advisors would also have access to all of the student parents on campus, a voluntary mentorship program between first-year student parents and senior or alumni student parents could also be started to help form connections amongst student parents on campus. These efforts would allow for student parents to connect with one another even in the absence of a formalized group.

Offering opportunities for student parents to connect is also very important for a counternarrative to take hold. For student parents to believe that they can be successful students and therefore successful and supportive parents, they need to see others doing it and doing well. Therefore, allowing student parents to connect and share resources and advice with one another as well as encouragement will give student parents opportunities to see others that they can relate to and mirror themselves off. Having these role models will allow for them to believe that student parents can be successful in school, and they will be able to apply these beliefs to themselves. By providing student parents an opportunity to lift one another up, it will become easier for the entire group to invest in the content of a counternarrative that they are worthy of success in higher education.

*Campus Climate*
In addition to all of the work surrounding different campus community members, it is also important that the physical space feels welcoming for student parents on campus. And while campuses may not have the resources to construct and staff an official child care center, they can help student parents feel as though some spaces on campus are meant for them as students and as parents. By opening certain spaces to be child-friendly, campuses can make student parents feel as though their families are welcomed into the student sphere of their identities; when student parents can combine their student and parenting roles, the role conflict they experience will likely decrease.

The efforts to introduce child-friendly spaces for student parents on campus is something that can be done with the reconfiguring of current spaces. For example, an easily accessible space in the library or main academic building could be made into a child-friendly study space, so parents could bring their children onto campus and do homework while their child stayed with them. Family restrooms with changing stations could be added in various locations on campus so that way parents knew they had a space to care for their children when they were on campus. Campus dining locations could make a policy about students’ children eating at free or reduced rates, or they could host semi-regular family nights in which student parents were encouraged to bring their children to eat on campus. To further boost this initiative, college dining facilities could even store a small number of booster seats and high chairs to make these spaces more accessible to student parents. While setting up an official child care center would be the most effective means of creating a space where parents feel they can bring their families onto campus and have campus be a place that welcomes their children and supports them, these smaller scale initiatives are a great place to start.
By welcoming children into spaces such as the library or dining facilities, colleges can decrease the role conflict that student parents are experiencing. Currently, student parents feel as though they are not always able to disclose that they are parents; disclosing puts them in the vulnerable position of facing the judgment of their peers or misunderstanding from their professors. This further isolates their student experience from their parent experience, and it means that students must either sacrifice time at home or time away from their studies more frequently. However, if student parents were able to spend time with their children as they studied or share a meal with them before or after class, then student parents may feel less conflicted in having to leave them to go to that class. Furthermore, if non parent peers and faculty see these children-friendly spaces on campus, it will normalize the idea that student-parents exist and that supporting them should be the standard that all college communities promote.

Summary of Changes

These recommendations are being made to help colleges become more welcoming to student parents. Currently, student parents are intimidated by many aspects of the college experience; they fear judgment from their peers, they often feel as though professors do not understand their lives, they experience guilt from being taken away from their children, and they are greatly intimidated by the workload of a college curriculum when it is combined with the workload of raising a child. While many support services could be added to help with this, such as adding in a child care facility for student parents so they did not have to worry about their child when they are in class, to adding in financial aid so that they did not have to be concerned about their family not being financially supported while they are in school, these efforts require a level of support for student parents from administrators and the college community.
That level of support is not yet present, as was seen from the interviews that were analyzed in the present study. Student parents do not receive a lot of internal encouragement—as they often doubt their own abilities and right to be in school while raising a child—or external encouragement—as professors and non parent peers do not currently do enough to welcome and encourage them on campus. And without this support, student parents do not have enough advocates for them to get the services they need. On-campus child care facilities have grown fewer. Financial supports and child care vouchers have come under attack. Meanwhile, student parents continue to increase their numbers on college campuses and face the judgment and lack of understanding that comes from it. They use what little support they can find to survive. This is no longer enough. More needs to be done to promote and narrative that tells student parents that they can thrive in college and build a community that makes that narrative a reality.

Colleges and college administrators must begin at the first step of support: normalizing and encouraging the presence of student parents on their campus. The fact that some college students go home and care for children should not be swept under the rug; it should not be so taboo and unusual that non parent peers refer to them as “the girl/person with the kid”. Conversations need to be held in a campus community that acknowledges student parents’ existence; trainings then need to follow to talk about the importance of supporting these students and their children; campus needs to be a place in which student parents feel safe including their families in their academic identities. By doing this, colleges can create a place where student parents have allies and advocates across the community who encourage and bolster their potential. With the existence of these advocates, colleges will have a strong foundation to build upon, as the community will be more willing to invest in long-term supports for student parents and government officials will see the benefits that come to student parents and their children.
when they get enough support to graduate. Creating a community of acceptance and encouragement is the first step, and these policy suggestions will help college administrators to create a counternarrative that helps student parents feel seen and understood.

**Limitations of the Present Study**

The main challenges of this study are the use of interview data from educational resource sites. While the perks of using this data were described in the methods section—in that it allowed for the current study to expand the geographical location of the student parents studied in a singular piece of research—the use of this data also comes with some limitations that must be noted. First, only mothers were included in this study, as interviews with student parent fathers are even more limited than the focus given to student parent mothers. This makes it so the findings in this study are not inclusive of student parents of other gender identities. Additionally, only 27 student parent opinions were analyzed in this study, making it impossible to generalize these experiences for all the mothers in college in the United States.

One must also think about the quality of data that comes from interview selection processes; a student parent had to be connected to the author of the article in order to be considered, and therefore the author’s bias from each piece may have skewed which student parents were selected for study. Additionally, mothers would have to give the time to interview and be willing for their stories to be published and accessed by others, meaning that student parents that were experiencing too much role conflict may not have had the time or the pride to share their stories for print. This makes it so the data that was included in this study could not be including the full range of student parent perspectives. Also, it is important to note that using published interview data is also difficult in that the present study was unable to ask follow-up questions or gain additional details that were not included in the published article. Therefore, the
current study was only able to work with limited data that could have been expanded on with original interview data.

In addition to the data, it is also important to note that the themes in this study were analyzed and reported by a singular person, the author of this study. Biases coming from a white, non parent graduate student may present in the collection and reporting of the data should therefore also be considered.

Future Directions

Despite its limitations, the study finds themes amongst the 27 mothers’ stories that were analyzed that the findings of this study should be considered for future directions for both research and campus administrators.

For researchers, the idea of building a counternarrative for student parents is an idea that should be further developed in future studies. Acknowledging the limitations of using public interview data, additional studies with original, in-person interview data could be useful in confirming the directions of a possible counternarrative and the policy changes that could make such a counternarrative take hold. Student father opinions should also be gathered in future research to make sure that all student parents are considered and supported when making suggestions for change.

In terms of college administrators, the policy suggestions given in this study cover a broad range of subjects, and therefore research should be done on what would benefit the college most. College administrators should analyze what is already being done on their campus to support student parents and gain insight from the student parents about what is effective and what they need more of in order to be successful. The suggestions toward policy changes in this study should give them a good groundwork of possible changes to discuss and implement, and
should any of these changes be implemented, follow-up assessment should be conducted to measure their effectiveness and what future directions could be taken.

Overall, it is clear from previous research and the current study that more support is needed for student parents. Even though they make up a quarter of undergraduates, they are still largely invisible in a lot of the dialogue surrounding higher education and nontraditional students. More effort needs to be made in researching and discussing these students, as leaving them in the dark does not do them any service when the government weighs in on the supports they receive or when they walk onto campus. By shedding light on their current experiences and the benefits of educating these students, hopefully, college administrators and entire campus communities will support student parents and encourage their attempts to pursue postsecondary education.
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