

# Single Mother Students are Lacking Sufficient Support to Persist to Graduation in Community Colleges

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## ABSTRACT

Despite high levels of motivation, only 8% of single mothers who attend a community college will graduate (Cruse, Milli et al., 2019). As a component of this Dissertation in Practice, a systematic literature review was conducted to explore the reasons behind these unacceptably low success rates. Based on data from empathy interviews, peer-reviewed research, and public scholarship sources, several root causes for low single mother graduation rates were discovered. First, there is a lack of institutional support and engagement. Most colleges do not have staff or offices dedicated to working with this population and typically offer services such as tutoring or activities to connect with other students at times that do not align with student mother schedules. Another key finding was that the lack of reliable childcare makes it very challenging for these students. Finally, care-blind federal policies that require students to work and institutional policies that do not offer flexibility for absences or late work also contribute to low success rates. Each factor is described, and recommendations are provided to address these issues. Additionally, further recommendations to increase degree and certificate attainment for single mother students are provided.

## KEYWORDS

*student parents, single mothers, community college*

Single mother students make up a substantial portion of the undergraduate college population. According to Cruse, Holtzman et al. (2019), a total of 1.7 million single mother students were enrolled in college in 2015-2016, with the largest share (42%) of student parents enrolled in community colleges. According to multiple reports and policy briefs from the Institute for Women's Policy Research, one in five community college students are parents, and 70% of college parents are women (Cruse, Holtzman et al., 2019).

However, only 30% of single mothers in the United States hold an associate degree or higher (Cruse, Holtzman et al., 2019). Although many single mother students desire to improve their lives and the lives of their children, many are undereducated (Beeler, 2016; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010). Single parents may enroll in college, yet most are not earning a credential or degree. Only 8% of single mother students leave college with an associate or bachelor's degree within six years of enrollment compared to nearly 50% of college women who are not mothers (Cruse, Milli et al. 2019).

Single mother students are a marginalized group that is often overlooked and requires specialized support due to their unique needs as both parents and as students. According to Beeler (2016), single student parents, who are disproportionately single mothers (73.5%), have difficulties maintaining their enrollment for consecutive terms, thus delaying degree completion, if ever completing.

Additionally, Beeler (2016) points out that consecutive enrollment tends to be an issue for this population due to competing needs and prioritizing survival over academics. Single mother students often have difficulty navigating the numerous hurdles required to maintain enrollment, such as planning schedules for themselves and their children and working (Goodman & Reddy, 2019; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010). As a result, they may opt to stop out and return at a later time when their lives are more manageable. These hurdles inevitably prolong completion times to more than the six-year benchmark (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Beeler, 2016; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010).

Single mother students commonly have financial obligations such as rent or childcare fees that force them to obtain employment (Gault et al., 2014). Additionally, some government policies, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), require that recipients meet work requirements to maintain benefits (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Duquaine-Watson, 2007). The need to work can lead to conflicts between schooling and being a mother, which adds to an already stressful academic career. Single student parents are also more likely to take out extra loans if they do decide to stay in school because they see the loans as a means of paying for expenses as they attempt to earn a degree (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Cruse, Milli et al., 2019; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Gault et al.,



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2014). The use of student loan funds to supplement living expenses, in turn, increases overall student debt that compounds the problem of poverty and increases the urgency to offer meaningful support to these students (Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

Furthermore, single mothers of color or of more than one race are more likely than White single mothers to start college but not finish (Cruse, Milli et al., 2019). Because single mother students of color are more likely to live in poverty (Cruse et al., 2018; Lovell, 2014; Wladis et al., 2018), financial challenges often contribute to lower completion rates. Addressing this disparity is necessary to help single mother students and especially single mother students of color achieve persistence to a degree or certificate completion. "The fact that so many single mothers enter college, yet so few make it to graduation day, demonstrates the critical need for greater policy and institutional supports that can help them persist" (Cruse, Milli et al., 2019, p. 9).

Generational poverty could be averted with the attainment of a college degree or certificate. According to Cruse, Milli et al. (2019), 35% of all single mothers in the United States aged 25 or older live in poverty, with 88% having income below 200% of the federal poverty level. Ensuring that single mother students have adequate support to persist and complete a community college degree or certificate is imperative and can lead to upward socioeconomic mobility for this marginalized group. Earning a degree or certificate will likely have a multigenerational impact, including positive outcomes on their children's academic success and influencing their future socioeconomic status (Cruse, Holtzman et al., 2019; Dodson & Deprez, 2019). Single mothers with an associate degree can earn upwards of \$200,000 more in their lifetime than a single mother with some college. (Carnevale et al., 2011; Cruse, Milli et al., 2019), increasing their chances of pulling themselves out of poverty. Knowing that a college degree or certificate can lead to upward socioeconomic mobility, colleges need to examine ways to enrich these students' experiences to improve outcomes for this group. The purpose of this literature review is to determine the root causes of the low graduation rates so that colleges can identify interventions that address these issues.

## METHOD

To gain a better understanding of the factors that contribute to the low persistence rates of single mothers, a literature review was conducted. The literature review is a key component of the program's Dissertation in Practice. It included three search methods: a literature review of peer-reviewed articles relevant to the topic found in library databases, empathy interviews, and the review and evaluation of public scholarship. These three sources of data provide a comprehensive picture of the factors that contribute to low graduation rates for single mothers.

### Empathy Interviews

Four empathy interviews were conducted to discover the needs of single mothers as they relate to persistence and completion in community college. Interviews were conducted with a Director of Advisement and Retention, an Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) counselor, a nursing student, and a previous nursing program graduate. This convenience group of interviewees was chosen because of their unique positions, either as student services professionals or as current or former single mother students. The

goal was to gather information from those with first-hand experience or expertise related to single mothers' persistence and completion in the community college setting. Questions pertained to what they perceived as the needs of single mothers in community colleges to help them to persist. The sample size of the interviews was small, so there are limitations to the generalizability of the information collected through these interviews.

### Peer-reviewed Articles

The following databases were used in the search: Academic Search Premier, APA Psych Info, e-Book, Academic Collection (EBSCOhost), e-Book Collection (EBSCOhost), and Education Source. The following search terms were used: single mother student or single parents or student parents and community college. This search yielded 248 full-text articles from 1934 to 2020. The search was narrowed down to scholarly peer-reviewed journals from 2005 to 2020, which yielded 91 articles. After exact duplicates were removed, the search was further reduced to 59 articles.

Additional inclusion and exclusion criteria related to relevancy were then applied. To be included, articles needed to focus on single mothers and their experiences. Several articles were excluded because they did not specifically refer to the single mother's experience in college. For example, several articles found in the initial search focused on the experience of the children of single mothers. On a review of the remaining article titles and abstracts, many did not meet the criteria or address the intended literature review topic. An additional 43 articles were removed based on a title and abstract review resulting in a final count of 11 articles for this review.

### Public Scholarship

A significant amount of valuable information on the topic of single parent students was available via public scholarship. For example, relevant data and information were found on government websites, professional organization websites, blogs, and social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook, or Twitter. Many of these professional organizations were found via clicking on hashtags, which led to organization postings.

Achieving the Dream, The Institute for Women's Policy Research, The National College Transition Network, The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, The Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success, The Hechinger Report website, and other social media posts, provided valuable data on single mother students. These organizations produced reports, webinars, videos, or other useful data sources that directly addressed single mother students. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Community College Daily* were also used to collect useful data.

Inclusion criteria for professional organization data and public scholarship were based on the relevance to single mother students and community college or higher education. If there were articles, webinars, or videos related to single mother students, the organization website or LinkedIn posts were explored for titles, and then the content was reviewed for relevance. Overall, 12 articles, policy briefs, reports, videos, and webinars were obtained through public scholarship and are included in this literature review.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The lack of persistence of single mother students to completion of a degree or certificate is unacceptable. It is essential that community college professionals understand the reasons behind these low success rates so that actions can be taken to support single mother students (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). Several themes emerged from this literature review. The first theme was the lack of institutional support and engagement, such as the ability to connect with other single mother students and the lack of opportunities to become a part of the broader college community. The second theme identified was the lack of reliable childcare. The final theme was the impact of policies on student success. These factors have been found to contribute to the low persistence and graduation rates for single mothers.

### Lack of Institutional Support and Engagement

Institutional policies are typically designed with the childless traditional student in mind. "Low-income mothers, racing between jobs, childcare arrangements, and classes are the antithesis of the "ideal" college student" (Dodson & Deprez, 2019, p. 39). Because there are few programs aimed at supporting student parents' unique needs, including single mother students, colleges encourage single parents to take advantage of the academic and student support structures already available at the college. However, these services often do not accommodate the schedules and needs of single mothers (Sallee & Cox, 2019). For example, tutoring services are typically only offered during limited hours and may not be accessible virtually. The lack of support services explicitly aimed at student parents creates "care-blind postsecondary environments [that] operate under the assumption that students are free of parenting or other caregiving responsibilities" (Sallee & Cox, 2019, p. 623). Unfortunately, the one size fits all student services models typically do not meet these students' needs.

The competing role of mother and student commonly requires mothers to choose between study time and time with their children. As part of a webinar sponsored by Achieving the Dream, one student parent reported that study time usually occurs late at night when their children are in bed or occurs very early in the morning before they arise. (Archer Hatch et al., 2020). Two of the empathy interviews conducted identified similar issues. The current and former nursing students also discussed the challenges faced while studying and trying to juggle time with children. Competing roles are highlighted in the literature with single mother students working as managers of their families and schooling and having to choose between studying and cleaning their homes and cooking meals for their families (Beeler, 2016; Crispin & Nikolaou, 2019; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018).

Campus engagement is essential for single mothers to feel like they are a vital part of the college community. Feeling like part of a community can positively impact completion rates (Goodman & Reddy, 2019). Although colleges often have dedicated spaces and offices for other special populations such as veterans, this is not typically the case for single parents (Sallee & Cox, 2019). Student parents need family-friendly places to utilize to engage with others who share similar challenges and access needed services (Ashford, 2020; Sallee & Cox, 2019).

Single mother students are also frequently unable to attend activities that facilitate engagement, such as sporting events, clubs,

or organizations, outside of their scheduled classes due to their role as the sole caregiver to their children (Austin & McDermott, 2003). The inability to attend campus activities limits their ability to engage with classmates outside of the classroom and develop students' networks in similar situations (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Beeler, 2016). The inability to engage with other single mother students limits the size of their on-campus networks. Collaboration on this level can reduce feelings of social isolation, promote a positive sense of well-being, and support persistence (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Dodson & Deprez, 2019).

### The Need for Childcare Support

Childcare support is a common theme in the literature as single mothers' success commonly depends on quality, reliable, and affordable childcare (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Beeler, 2016; Carlson, 2015). Childcare is essential, but the cost and availability of quality childcare is often a challenge for these women. Some colleges offer on-campus childcare, but frequently, single-parent students are not made aware of this service, and many times the child care centers have waitlists due to limited spots for students to enroll their children (Salee & Cox, 2019). The unavailability of childcare spots is due to faculty and staff and the broader community also utilizing the on-campus childcare centers (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). Furthermore, childcare centers on campus are decreasing due to either being eliminated from college budgets or being privatized (Beeler, 2016; Carlson, 2015; Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010).

In childcare centers that are still available on campus, the service options may not fit single parents' needs. For example, childcare may only be available as a full day or even monthly service when students may need drop-in services during their classes. Services are often offered during the day when students may need evening childcare while attending class or working (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). The nursing school graduate who participated in the empathy interview noted that she did utilize on-campus childcare for her scheduled nursing classes that met on campus, but that her clinical schedule started earlier than the daycare opened. Therefore, she was not able to utilize the service on clinical days which were eight-hour days. This posed a problem with obtaining reliable childcare during clinical days. These factors must be taken into consideration when addressing the needs of the single mother student population. "The large majority of student parents have one or two children (nearly 80 percent) and over half have children who are preschool-age or younger" (Cruse, Holtzman et al., 2019, p. 5). Their children's ages can pose an issue with study time as younger children typically require more parental attention (Wladis et al., 2018). Academic success can be negatively impacted by the lack of adequate study time due to their competing role as mothers and students, especially when childcare is not available when single mothers need to study (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Beeler, 2016).

According to Carlson (2015), who interviewed student parents from community colleges, "Students say that if they don't have childcare, then the other support services just don't mean that much" (para. 8). One of the students interviewed stated, "If you don't have childcare, then you can't go to tutoring or a mentoring program or any other number of support services that schools offer" (Carlson, 2015, para. 7). The disappearance of this essential service challenges the ability of student parents and especially single



student mothers to take advantage of support services and to engage in the college community.

### Policy Impacts on Persistence

Public and governmental policies designed to aid women who received public assistance to become employed, such as the TANF work first programs are not student-friendly. Due to the grueling stipulations required to maintain benefits, such as working at least 20 hours per week, student parents have been faced with additional stress related to work requirements. These requirements often cause single mother students to lose time with their children and experience time poverty or “insufficient time to devote to college work” (Wladis et al., 2018, p. 810). Because student mothers often have to work to receive benefits, students have less time to dedicate to schoolwork, which ultimately impacts persistence (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Beeler, 2016).

Single mother students frequently depend on some level of state or government assistance while in pursuit of their college education (Beeler, 2016; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Goldrick- Rab & Sorensen, 2010). However, some of these support policies, such as TANF, have time limits and are not designed to support educational attainment other than short career-related programs (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Goodman & Reddy, 2019). Thus, single mother students who wish to pursue college degrees are challenged with meeting eligibility requirements.

Since the development of welfare reform in 1996, single mothers that receive state benefits have been forced to engage in work-related activities to maintain eligibility for state TANF benefits (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Duquaine-Watson, 2007). Because 35% of all single mothers live at or below the poverty line (Cruse, Milli, et al., 2019), many rely on TANF assistance for basic survival. Some states do not include postsecondary education as an acceptable TANF work activity.

The TANF reauthorization of 2006 limited the use of TANF funds toward postsecondary education and instead recipients were steered toward vocational education. This is due to reluctance by the Department of Health and Human Services to see TANF as a “college scholarship for postsecondary education” (Pearson, 2007, p. 725). The TANF work requirement forces recipients to complete the original 20-hour work requirements while in school to maintain benefits. States have the flexibility to regulate their TANF policies, and some have allowed postsecondary hours related to job training to count toward work requirements or the Work Performance Rate (WPR) once recipients have met the 20 hours per week requirement (Lower-Basch et al., 2014). Because states that fail to meet their WPRs can lose a portion of their funding, many states discourage local TANF offices or contractors from assigning recipients to activities that cannot be counted toward the work participation rate, and higher education commonly does not count as a full-time work activity (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2020; Lower-Basch et al., 2014). Although TANF requirements have become less restrictive in most states, the implementation and administration of benefits by caseworkers are challenging to students who are required to check in frequently with caseworkers on top of their already cumbersome schedules as students and mothers (Goodman & Reddy, 2019).

One single mother nursing student who participated in an empathy interview worked part-time while going to school to be a nurse. She received a childcare subsidy through TANF for her

required work hours during the day, but she could not get any additional childcare help during her school hours in the evening. Ultimately, she relied on friends and family for childcare. Having day and evening childcare adds additional strain and stress on a typical day. She would leave work, pick up her child from daycare, and then take her child to family while attending class. After class, she had to pick up her child from the evening caregiver and then go home and study. This demonstrates the typical routine for many single mother students who struggle to meet TANF work requirements. Moreover, single mother students that receive TANF are commonly required to frequently check with a caseworker on top of attending class, shuttling children to and from daycare, and working. (Duquaine-Watson; Goodman & Reddy, 2019; Pearson, 2007). These frequent appointments with caseworkers further compound these students’ time constraints, and the added strain of working while attending college negatively affects completion rates.

Institutional policies also negatively impact the performance of student mothers. Single mother students have reported that they felt invisible due to institutional policies that are “care-blind, or [that] operate under the assumption that students are free of parenting or other caregiving responsibilities” (Sallee & Cox, 2019, p. 623). For example, attendance policies often do not consider that single mother students may need to be absent or late due to issues with childcare or child illness (Austin & McDermott, 2003). Another example of a care blind policy is a no children on campus policy at one college in Chicago (Flaherty, 2021). Additionally, some students are required to participate in mandatory activities or event that occur outside of regular class times (Beeler, 2016). These policies also may not consider that single mother students cannot attend mandated class outings due to caregiver responsibilities.

### CONCLUSION

The persistence rates of single parent students are unacceptable. The lagging persistence rates are due to multiple factors such as the lack of institutional support and engagement opportunities, unmet childcare needs, and the care-blind policies that do not address the unique needs of single mother students and often place additional burdens on students. Most community colleges do not offer spaces or offices designed for this student population. Also, many campuses do not provide childcare services that are needed, and if they do, student parents may not be able to use these services because of long waitlists or the lack of drop-in service availability.

Addressing the issues that emerged from this literature review could positively impact degree completion and persistence rates and elevate the socioeconomic status among single mother students (Beeler, 2016). There are multiple areas of support services that may assist single mother students to persist to graduation, such as targeted student support services like support for navigating governmental and institutional policies, as well as academic support, and institutional support that encourages engagement (Goodman & Reddy, 2019). Single mothers also require support with childcare services because available childcare on campus has decreased over the years, even though the number of student parents has increased (Beeler, 2016; Carlson, 2015; Cruse, Milli et al., 2019). In addition to these supports, student parents need support that recognizes them as part of the college community (Beeler, 2016; Dodson & Deprez, 2019; Sallee & Cox, 2019).



Many community college institutional policies, processes, and activities are designed for the ideal traditional student. Traditional institutional policies do not lead to a child or family-friendly environment (Dodson & Deprez, 2019). At many community colleges, waiting areas for student service, computer lounges, and general study areas are not child-friendly (Sallee & Cox, 2019).

Providing childcare or childcare vouchers for on or off-campus childcare assistance may be one way to meet the needs of this group because childcare is not only needed for college class attendance, but it is also commonly required for these mothers to study, work, and attend any kind of extracurricular activities such as clubs and organizations (Sallee & Cox, 2019). Having childcare available on campus can limit the multiple trips between school and daycares that many single mothers face when trying to juggle theirs and their children's schedules. Another salient point regarding childcare is to make sure that the childcare centers can accommodate the students' needs for drop-in hours and to prioritize these students' children for enrollment (Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018).

Offering specialized support services tailored to this population's needs is another way to address this population's unique needs. One way to do this may be to assign one student support personnel as a single mother navigator who is trained in the unique needs of this population. For example, this navigator could help students learn about the TANF requirements, complete the FAFSA with dependent children, explore childcare options, and connect students to community resources as needed. (Beeler, 2016; Goodman & Reddy, 2019)

Single mother student and student parent-friendly institutional policies are also imperative for the success of these students. Single mother students should be considered in institutional and classroom policies such as attendance policies and course scheduling including multiple sections of essential courses. This will provide single mother students with some flexibility when choosing courses that fit into theirs and their children's schedules. Putting these support interventions into practice can positively impact the persistence rates of single mother students.

Support services targeted toward single mother students, including childcare support, institutional support, and governmental support, are necessary to increase this population's graduation rates. Understanding that without childcare support for single mother students, many will not succeed is a start to addressing this barrier that these women face when attempting to complete college degrees or certificate programs. Institutional support, such as recognizing single mother students as a vulnerable group that needs specialized support, can impact this group positively by developing institutional and classroom policies with single mother students in mind. Hiring or appointing a navigator trained in the specialized needs of this population as well as governmental policies will give single mother students a sense that the college is aware of their needs and is working to address them. All of these support services designed for the success of single mother students has the potential to encourage engagement and to positively impact the persistence to graduation for this group.

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