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# The Lived Experience of Community College Student-Parents

Brenda Coronel

**Abstract:** The number of student-parents in higher education is increasing substantially, yet their graduation rates continue to decline. I focus on the barriers and privileges that student-parents with different socioeconomic backgrounds experience through the theoretical framework of intersectionality. I examine the lived experiences of Rio Hondo and Santa Monica community college student-parents using detailed interviews that asked open-ended questions about their educational experiences. Their counterstories exposed their perceptions of both institutional barriers and privileges. This study illuminates how local forms of racial disparities have been the underlying reasons why student-parents in Los Angeles lack institutional resources. Such disadvantages, especially the lack of awareness about resources, hinders them in postsecondary pathways. Still, student-parents share motives to push through structural barriers and remain resilient during their educational trajectory. Policymakers, college administrators, and faculty could practice equity and inclusion for student-parents by offering services that specifically address their needs as parents and those that arise from racial inequality. I suggest this could be implemented by providing more available times for students to access tutoring, counseling, and childcare services.

**Keywords:** *student-parents, community college, counter-storytelling, academic attainment, intersectionality, resilience*

## Introduction

This study enriches the existing literature about student-parents by highlighting their counterstories. The term *counterstory* will be defined in a later section; its essential role in this study, however, is to go beyond the statistics of low educational attainment and show the sacrifices and motivations of student-parents for high academic achievement.

The main research question of the present study is: What are the barriers and privileges that student-parents from different socioeconomic groups experience in Los Angeles community colleges? Exploring the challenges student-parents face because of the multiple identities that they are responsible for, such as being a parent, employee, and student, helps us to understand the privileges and barriers they experience.

The concept of intersectionality is a useful tool in examining student-parents because considering all social categories that they identify with provides a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. Student-parents' success may be defined in terms of the ability to provide for their family in conjunction with their education as opposed to solely merit-based academic achievement. This definition reflects what success means for student-parents throughout the paper.

Dominant sociological theories suggest that individuals should earn a college degree to provide for their children. Yet, accessing successful support programs for student-parents are challenging because of institutional obstacles such as a lack of childcare and welfare requirements. They are thus not beneficial unless the services can be accessed by all student-parents, regardless of their socioeconomic background.

This study focuses on the challenges student-parents in Los Angeles face, regardless of academic performance. Research that has examined this group does not usually mention their other identities and seldom measures different forms of success, such as fulfilling basic familial needs (e.g., housing, food, childcare) and overall mental health. Analysis of the conducted interviews reveals barriers student-parents face and further shifts the responsibility to the infrastructure of higher education.

## Literature Review

Although many community college campuses have student-parent support programs, some student participation requirements create barriers that ultimately prevent them from graduating. Studies show how welfare programs such as California Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs), which provides cash aid to student-parents, both negatively and positively affect their academic performance in different ways. However, the evidence regarding the influence that welfare programs have on academic performance is conflicting, and thus largely inconclusive.

Sandra Austin's study on college persistence among single mothers suggests that low-income parents attending public universities face difficulty fulfilling the academic requirements tied to welfare eligibility, particularly good grades and employment (Austin, 2013). Findings suggest that the primary reason low-income parents do not continue their higher education is due to the criteria instituted in federally-funded welfare programs.

The welfare program previously mentioned, known as both Transitional Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and CalWORKs allows low-income parents to receive cash aid for up to four years if they maintain their student enrollment status and work at least 20 hours per week. The required time commitment negatively impacts academic performance, and thus acts as a barrier for parents; parents must comply with the programs' requirements to receive and perpetuate their financial aid, yet the requirements become a significant obstacle to achieving those very academic outcomes meant to help them support their families (Austin, 2003, p.100).

Working to fulfill welfare requirements while attending college also creates collateral damage to the family unit. The long hours required to participate in both work and school, and the stress involved in juggling such responsibilities can contribute to the neglect of young children. Furthermore, wages from this work combined with financial aid may not even be enough to cover living expenses for single parents and their children. Due to the fear of housing insecurity, many of these students withdraw from college altogether in order to work full-time and be able to

afford a better living situation. With all of these factors, work and enrollment requirements for federal assistance allow student-parents neither academic nor financial stability.

However, in other studies of student-parents, CalWORKs recipients who were parents achieved higher grades than students without children (Fenster, 2004). Judy Fenster, who measures academic success by grades and the number of times each student made the Dean's List, argued that welfare requirements do not act as a barrier to academic performance but rather improve grades by motivating students so they can continue to receive temporary cash aid assistance (2004). Of the 106 students who participated in Fenster's study, 81 (76%) of students did not identify as a parent or welfare recipient, and 25 (24%) identified as a student-parent welfare recipient (2004, p.424). The findings showed that parents receiving cash aid earned higher grades and achieved the Dean's List more often than students who did not identify as a parent. Fenster's research suggests that the CalWORKs program provides an effective support system that gives low-income student-parents proper resources to succeed academically.

Her findings also suggest that if students are given the resources and choose to utilize support systems, graduation rates will improve (Fenster, 2004). Previously mentioned research shows that low-income student-parents can achieve high merit-based academic success, but there is a gap in the literature that does not explain why student-parents have lower graduation rates than students without children. I will seek to answer this question by focusing on the experiences of student-parents in Los Angeles.

Building on the findings of previous scholarship, my study will focus on the mental health of student-parents, as well as their identities as parents and racial minorities. Scholars have identified student-parents as feeling at odds with their academic institution, such as feeling isolated, and even feeling threatened (Austin, 2013, p. 95). As a result of negative encounters at school, student-parents were less likely to become more involved in academia because they did not feel that they belonged to an academic institution. According to Claude Steele's study, anxiety results from stereotype threats about minority students, such as student-parents, and when students became aware of existing

stereotypes, they tended to perform more poorly on exams and in coursework (1997). In the previous studies mentioned, the grades of student-parents were a primary factor in determining educational success, but researchers did not address the mental state of student-parents.

The adverse effects of discrimination against pregnant students and student-parents can impact their mental health and overall academic performance (Ling, 2001, p. 2408). Unlike the previous studies that focused on the academic performance of student-parents, new research has focused on their mental health. The findings from Tamera Ling's study on pregnant and parenting students suggest that stress rose when parents felt stigmatized as incapable of academic success. The factor of stress explains why a large number of student-parents have dropped out of school. The study from Virginia Brown on student-parents on campus suggests that a population of student-parents experienced stress when attempting to balance school and work to provide for their children (2013). Individuals react to stress differently depending on the connection of the event to the person's values and goals (Park, 1997). Student-parents have different values and goals than traditional students because they have to provide for their children (Brown, 2007).

Still, stress is not always viewed as unfavorable because stressful situations could lead to personal growth (Park, 1997). Therefore, although student-parents experienced pressure as a result of multiple responsibilities, they still performed academically well. However, when a lack of social integration caused stress, student-parents were less likely to remain in school because they felt they did not belong there (Jiménez, 2017). Although student-parents can achieve high academic performance despite the high levels of stress that accompanied their multiple responsibilities, they still need a social support system to feel motivated to continue their studies.

There are valid scholarly reasons for why student-parents do not succeed in higher education, such as a lack of social integration, welfare requirements, and stress on their children (Fenster, 2004). Research suggests that academic and social resources were needed to tackle the barriers that student-

parents faced. Student-parents experienced overwhelming levels of stress when they believed their attempt to balance work and school successfully was causing their children to feel neglected (Austin, 2003). This is largely due to the clashing consequences of meeting welfare requirements.

### **Limitations of previous work**

Previous research does not consider the challenges parents face increase when they are students of color. For example, the majority of student-parents in past research do not have the same struggles as underrepresented minority students. When the social categories that student-parents identify with are combined together, challenges can be seen as more prominent for some parents than others. Because factors such as racial discrepancies are not noted, academic attainment alone is not a good indicator of understanding the experience of marginalized student-parents.

Further research is needed to discover better ways to support student-parents. Exploring the intersectional challenges that they face because of their multiple identities will provide an understanding of the privileges and barriers they experience and help us move towards embedding reliable support systems in educational institutions. Additionally, to provide a deeper understanding of which solutions work for some student-parents and which work for others, studies on student-parents should target participants from different schools and different socioeconomic backgrounds.

### **An Intersectional Framework**

To employ an intersectional framework when conducting and analyzing research about student-parents, the following terms will be crucial for understanding the methodology and outcomes of the present study.

### ***Counter-storytelling***

To understand and appreciate student-parents' counterstories, the term first needs to be defined. Delgado, Solórzano, and Yosso (1989) use counter-storytelling and argue that it is "both a method of telling the story of those experiences

that are not often told and a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power and whose story is a natural part of the majoritarian narrative" (2001, p. 475). By sharing student-parents counterstories with an intersectional lens and context, an alternative view of the majoritarian narrative of student-parent success can be seen and may explain why, despite increasing rates of parents in higher education, they continue to have low rates of degree attainment (Jiménez, 2017). Using the counterstorytelling method helps highlight alternative ways that student-parents define success.

### ***Intersectionality***

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework for understanding how aspects of one's social identity, such as gender, race, and class, intersect at the micro-level of individual experience to reflect multiple interlocking systems of privilege and oppression at the macro, social-structural level to produce modes of discrimination (Bowleg, 2012 & Cho, 2013). For example, a low-income student-parent who identifies as a Latina may face discrimination due to a combination of her multiple social identities, such as her race, gender, and socioeconomic position.

### ***Student-parent***

"Student-parent" refers to parents that are enrolled in school and have dependent children. They are responsible for both their student and parental obligations, which may cause pressure to balance multiple duties. These are just two of the multiple social categories that they identify with.

## **Methodology**

### ***Overview***

This study uses a basic interpretive qualitative research design to investigate student-parents perceptions and explain how they believe their social class, employment, parental identity, and involvement in welfare programs mediate their access to postsecondary institutions. According to Merriam (2002), this methodological approach "exemplifies all the characteristics of



qualitative research,” in which “the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon, this meaning is mediated through the researcher as an instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive” (p. 6).

The data collected consists of twelve in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between March 2019 and May 2019 with a convenience sample of parent community college students from Santa Monica College (SMC) and Rio Hondo College (RHC). The participant group consisted of four women and two men from RHC, and three women and three men from SMC. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher and Otter, a voice recording transcription application. Each participant provided verbal consent to be interviewed and acknowledged that their stories would be shared, but their names would remain anonymous. Open-ended questions encouraged student-parents to share their experience in higher education. The average interview duration was one hour. The shortest was fifty minutes, and the longest was two hours.

In employing an intersectional lens, I examined the barriers and privileges that student-parents face in their particular socioeconomic backgrounds. The ethnic status of participants was self-reported using a questionnaire that asked about their demographics.

### ***Data, recruitment, and sample***

Since individuals with high socioeconomic status obtain more college degrees than individuals with low socioeconomic status (Fenster, 2004), I interviewed community college students from different socioeconomic statuses. I selected field sites at RHC and SMC because of demographic differences. For instance, although tuition was identical at both institutions (\$46.00 per academic unit), other essentials needed for successful graduation, such as parking permits, cost twice as much at SMC than at RHC. The differences in socioeconomic backgrounds were a significant factor in academic performance because some student-parents could afford to pay for childcare, while others could not.

## RIO HONDO COLLEGE (RHC)

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<b>Sex</b>	
Male	33%
Female	67%
<b>Student Status</b>	
Full-time Student	50%
Part-time Student	66%
Not Currently Enrolled	17%
<b>Employment Status</b>	
Full-time Employee	17%
Part-time Employee	66%
Unemployed	17%
<b>Government Welfare Assistance</b>	
CalWORKs Recipient	67%
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Married	17%
Single	66%
Partner	17%
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
Latinx	100%
<b>Central Tendencies</b>	
<b>Age</b>	
Mean	26.43
Minimum	24
Maximum	30

## SANTA MONICA COLLEGE (SMC)

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<b>Sex</b>	
Male	50%
Female	50%
<b>Student Status</b>	
Full-time Student	0%
Part-time Student	100%
<b>Employment Status</b>	
Full-time Employee	83%
Part-time Employee	0%
Unemployed	17%
<b>Government Welfare Assistance</b>	
CalWORKs Recipient	33%
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Married	50%
Single	50%
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
Black	33%
White	50%
Samoan	17%
<b>Central Tendencies</b>	
<b>Age</b>	
Mean	38.6
Minimum	24
Maximum	53

As Tables 1 and 2 show, the age of participants ranged from 24 to 53 years old.

**Table 1** shows that one-hundred percent of RHC interviewees identified as Latinx, and sixty-six percent of parents led single parent households. To support their families, sixty-six percent of interviewees worked part-time, and sixty-seven percent received government cash aid assistance through the welfare program, CalWORKs.

**Table 2** shows that SMC participants received less cash aid (33%) than RHC participants; therefore, a majority of them (83%) reported working forty hours or more per week to support their family and pay for the cost of school. As a result of schedule conflicts and responsibilities, no SMC students were enrolled in school full-time (twelve units or more).

The initial group of student-parents were recruited at RHC's student-parents' support offices, such as the offices for CalWORKs and C.A.R.E.. CalWORKs and C.A.R.E. offices welcome student-parents to walk in and utilize the resources offered, such as the computer lab and free printing. These student-parents recommended other student-parents at RHC who they believed would be willing to share their educational experiences, so more participants signed up using the snowball technique.

A limitation of this technique was that sixty-seven percent of these student-parents were recipients of government assistance, which did not reflect all student-parents at RHC and created a selective issue. To be eligible as a recipient of the government assistance programs, CalWORKs, and C.A.R.E., students must qualify as low-income. Sixty-seven percent of participants received government cash aid, and sixty percent of participants led single parent households. Given the limitations of snowball sampling, the selectivity issue made it difficult to find RHC participants from other socioeconomic backgrounds.

The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics survey, taken during the academic years 2017-2018 and 2016-2017, reported that the percent of Hispanic students at RHC was seventy-seven (Collegesimply, 2019), which might explain why one hundred percent of the

participants interviewed at RHC identified as Latinx. Parents of color, specifically those from Latinx backgrounds, are a growing demographic in community colleges (Jiménez, 2017). However, although Latino students represent the second-largest student population behind their white counterparts, their graduation rates are disproportionately lower than their attendance rates (Perez, 2015). This gap illuminates the segregation that student-parents of color experience.

Though there was a snowball effect when recruiting student-parent participants at RHC, SMC's CalWORKs and C.A.R.E. offices did not provide computers or printing services for students, so student-parents could not be found at those locations. During SMC's college fair, participants were recruited through a sign at a table that requested student-parent participation in a study and listed compensation for their time.

### ***Semi-structured, in-depth interview methodology***

The semi-structured, in-depth interviews used open-ended questions, introduced ideas such as "Stereotype threat", and asked whether student-parents felt that the stereotype threat of being a student-parent had a negative or positive impact on them. Open-ended questions facilitated in-depth interviews that examined the participants' perspectives of the structural barriers and privileges.

The in-depth interviews asked about the lived experiences of student-parents and revealed why they had higher dropout rates than students without children (IWPR, 2016). The student-parents' narratives included counterstories that did not follow the dominant belief that student-parents do not succeed academically. Dominant ideologies about the education system, which are in fact socially constructed, cause society to believe that degree attainment is the only measure of academic success. These untold stories of student-parents helped to explain why this subpopulation of students had low degree attainment and showed alternative ways that they defined academic success. The outcome of school administrators acknowledging the lived experience of student-parents may influence colleges to embed reliable support programs for student-parents, which can increase the graduation

rates of the subgroup.

## **Findings**

### ***Rio Hondo***

All participants from RHC identified as Latinx, and all reported living at home with their parents. Studies show that 82% of Mexican-American students live at home with their families rather than independently (Del Pilar, 2009). Intersectional identities that the interviewees identified with included being a parent and low-income student of color. Sixty-seven percent of students participated in CalWORKs to receive government welfare assistance. Sixty-six percent of parents also worked part-time jobs to fulfill the minimum welfare requirements of working twenty hours per week. While pursuing a degree, CalWORKs recipients were eligible for covered childcare during the hours that they reported being in class or working. A common challenge that they faced was being unable to focus on their homework at home, so they worked on it outside the home, either during their on-campus job or while their children slept. Angie, a single mother, described a typical day with her daughter: "Peak study/homework hours for me are from 10:00 pm to 3:00 am, and we roughly start our days at about 6:30 am." Natalie, another RHC mother, shared:

I'll have some time [to study] during the week after I feed them dinner, bathe them, and get them ready for bed. Then, by that time, I'm exhausted. Jason goes with me everywhere. If he's not in school, then he's with me. It's hard not having his dad in his life. And me being the only disciplinary person.

Angie and Natalie shared a typical day in the life of a single student-parent. Both parents lack childcare services during the times that they have to fulfill student responsibilities, such as homework. They then sacrifice the time that they could have been sleeping to work on their school assignments, putting their physical health in jeopardy.

As shown in Table 1, 66% of RHC students raised their children in single parent households and 67% were recipients of the government cash aid programs, CalWORKs, and C.A.R.E. Welfare social workers encouraged some single parents to attend college after they experienced domestic violence; fulfilling the twenty-hour CalWORKs employment requirement at school through work-study, while simultaneously obtaining a college degree, was a better option than to work anywhere else. Single parents who experienced financial hardship felt pushed towards pursuing higher education in the hopes of making up for lost income with a better paying job.

Erika, a survivor of domestic assault, shares her experience:

I ended up receiving CalWORKs after an extremely violent domestic dispute with my child's father, resulting in me and my child being homeless and me without a job. I was told to go back to school per my caseworker and was set up with the CalWorks program at my community college campus.

Sara also shared her experience of domestic violence: "I started college right after high school and was taking it very seriously, but I was not able to complete college because of domestic violence." Erika's and Sara's stories reflected the shared experiences of many RHC student-parents. These findings suggest that domestic assault could be a factor to explain why sixty-six percent of the participants identified as a single parent, and sixty-seven percent of them participated in CalWORKs.

Violence in the home was not the only academic barrier that student-parents reported. Jenny described the institutional shortcomings that student-parents face on campus:

There are also many stigmas that surround being a parenting student and not many resources for students with children outside of CalWORKs or C.A.R.E. The education system is not necessarily

designed for us [student-parents] to succeed, and we see that right away.

Student-parents experience self-doubt through social institutions because of the multiple social categories that they identify with. RHC student-parents express that their responsibilities as a parent and employee do not fit in with their school and study schedule, and therefore, they do not feel capable of completing college. Self-doubt can make students believe that they do not belong in college, which can negatively affect their academic performance. Studies by Hortencia Jiménez and Nancy Acevedo-Gil both refer to self-doubt as deficit thinking. They describe deficit thinking as thoughts that discourage individuals from believing that they can excel in their studies, which impacts them to feel as if they do not belong in school (2015, 2017).

The RHC student-parents interviewed expressed deficit thinking as a result of the limited student services available to parents on campus. For example, as a mother to a new-born baby, Maria was not eligible to access childcare services on campus, and her boyfriend was only available to take care of their baby during the night time when the RHC tutoring department was closed. Maria expressed that she struggled to pass her college algebra exams because tutoring services were not available during the times that she could access them. Although Maria was desperate to learn, she did not feel welcome to take her newborn son on campus to seek tutoring. She did not want him to disrupt the learning of other students, and he was too young to be taken care of at the campus childcare center. Maria mentioned that she was also discouraged from seeking tutoring services elsewhere because she felt as if she did not belong in college due to the institution's limited student services offered to parents. A combination of her deficit thinking and lack of institutional childcare services eventually caused her to drop out of the college algebra course and school altogether. Maria's story helps explain why students with deficit thinking do not seek alternative student services and generally do poorly in school because they feel as if they do not belong in the institution and are eventually pushed out. Note that all the participants from RHC identified as Latinx,

and a popular example of deficit thinking among most Latinx students is the belief of intellectual inferiority—that they did not belong in college because they are parents (Acevedo-Gil, 2015).

This shifts my focus to mental barriers in relation to race. Latina mothers are especially susceptible to deficit thinking because of their domesticated culture, in which women traditionally stay home with the children (Jiménez, 2017). All participants expressed feeling guilty for not spending much time with their child. Iris conveyed the struggle of being a single mother while being a student:

Having to balance it all while working and guiltting myself about the fact that I can't afford more for my child, or that she is always at school, or just generally worrying that being in school means I am missing out on giving her what she needs or wants is a lot on me emotionally and mentally. I think this aspect of it is the most stressful for me. Homework and things like that are hard but not as hard as worrying that I'm taking away from my child by being in school.

The feeling of guilt that accompanies being a student-parent negatively affects Iris's mental health. Two more RHC student-parents can relate to the stress that comes from a constrained schedule:

To be a parenting student is to constantly be code-switching and wearing different hats at any given moment. You always have to pack snacks, ask permission for your child to enter spaces, be prepared for a meltdown, have a meltdown yourself, reject opportunities due to no babysitting and having to prove that you are just as academic and capable as all of the students in your classes who do not have children. ~ Christine



I had to go through my education completely self-sufficient, meaning there was no one I could call to watch my child while I studied, I didn't know how to explain the other mental health barriers that came along with my violence from the other parent, as well as receiving push backs from professors who did not understand what [it means to be] a parenting student.... Also, not having a space designated to the environment for a parenting student to be on campus or having access to changing stations accessible in every building I had classes in. ~Denise

The stress that Iris, Christine, and Denise expressed highlights the challenges that having multiple responsibilities creates for the interviewees. These stories also challenge the belief that parents are not capable enough for school, but rather that the mental-health of student-parents hindered them from focusing on their studies. Educational performance is adversely affected when students think of themselves as inferior, so factors that affect their mental health should be addressed (Núñez & García, 2017).

### ***Santa Monica College***

The patterns at SMC show that the student-parents worked full-time, and because they were not considered low-income, they did not qualify for many financial aid programs. SMC covered the cost for their classes, but many were upset that they did not receive additional financial aid funds. To my surprise, many student-parents were unaware of the on-campus student-parent programs that SMC offered, such as the CalWORKs or C.A.R.E. departments. During the office hours that CalWORKs and C.A.R.E. operated, the student-parents were working at a full-time job, therefore unable to utilize their services. They did not bother to utilize on-campus student support programs like EOP&S and C.A.R.E. since their class status disqualifies them for assistance. SMC student-parents, who struggled to work full-time while enrolled as part-time students, shared that their

time commitments stretched them thin. Karen, a student-parent at SMC, expressed frustration when describing her workload: "Through my time in college, I have to drop off, pick up [my child], cook, clean, finance, and provide emotional labor for my child." As can be seen, SMC student-parents who worked full-time had more competing responsibilities than parents who did not, and they expressed that their job was a major part of their identity.

Despite the packed schedules of student-parents, they remained resilient through college. Nancy, a full-time employee, and SMC student-parent, describes how having a child has made her resilient:

The impact [that] becoming a parent has had on my academic performance is that I had a healthy form of pressure applied. Once you have a child, it almost feels as if there is a safety net pulled from under you, so you have no other choice than to work through the fears you may have. I say that it puts a little fire under my butt to do better and to try and succeed.

Nancy's determination to succeed in school despite the limited time she had as a full-time employee reflects the attitudes of SMC student-parents. Her narrative shows that although student-parents stress over the responsibilities that come along with their identities, they can push through academic barriers because of the motivation that their children give them.

Student-parents describe their parental status as a privilege because the aspiration to provide for their family motivates them to succeed in school. The attitude of student-parents suggests that they do not measure success by degree attainment, but rather by providing for their families.

### **Alternative narratives of marginalized student-parents**

Joe, from RHC, expressed his main reason for pursuing higher education, which reflects the attitude of most participants: "I know that you cannot succeed in a world without your bachelor's

degree." Each student-parent interviewed expressed experiencing the effects of the majoritarian belief that wealth is not attainable without a college degree. Student-parents experience challenges while pursuing higher education because the administration has forgotten about this student subgroup, even though parents constitute forty-five percent of the community college student body (Gault, 2014). Discrimination amongst student-parents is prominently seen in the lack of adequate resources for student-parents' success. Resources for student-parent success include childcare and tutoring services. Both factors hindered an RHC participant, Maria, from attending community college and eventually caused her to withdraw altogether. The lack of institutional resources or the lack of knowledge about them by student-parents in institutions can also explain their low graduation rates (Jiménez, 2017).

Like RHC student-parents, SMC participants also believed they did not belong in college. There was minimal social integration at SMC in the CalWORKs offices. Unlike RHC, which provides computers and printing for their students, the hostile architecture of SMC lacked a space for students to access the same resources; therefore, they felt as if they did not belong in the institution. An overwhelming sixty-seven percent of SMC student-parents were unaware of the student-parent organizations CalWORKs and C.A.R.E. Furthermore, the lack of institutional resources or knowledge of parenting support programs also hindered parents from postsecondary pathways.

## **Discussion**

This study adds to previous research by focusing on students from various socioeconomic backgrounds, which provides a clearer understanding of the barriers and privileges that student-parents face. More important than the low graduation rates of student-parents are the stories that show how they are negatively affected. This research also brings awareness to the need for social change by breaking down institutional barriers and provides information to students and administrators so they can initiate support programs to help student-parents both academically and mentally. The more administrators value

student-parents, the more likely they are willing to institutionalize support programs for them. Increasing the amount of student-parent resources will ultimately improve the graduation rates of Los Angeles community colleges.

Findings reveal that both RHC and SMC student-parents reported high-stress levels: on average, nine out of a scale rating from one through ten, with one being the least stressed and ten being the most. As an RHC participant explained, the high-stress level was "due to the lack of sleep and lack of eating." RHC and SMC student-parents struggled with food insecurity not necessarily because of their financial background, but because of their constrained schedules that do not allow them the time for self-care. Although many reported high-stress levels, another pattern across both campuses was a high level of contentment. An SMC participant explained that although she rated her stress level at a ten, she also rated her contentment level at a ten, with ten being the most content. She explains that she did so "because I love being a mom." Her answer voiced the narratives of all the participants.

Factors contributing to high-stress levels included having constrained schedules of employment, classes, and homework while also being a parent. Most single parents were the primary breadwinners, so there was no difference in parental responsibilities according to gender. Students having reported having higher grade point averages compared to before they became parents. The student-parents at both colleges shared that being a student-parent motivated them to become educated and self-sufficient. Respondents frequently conveyed that they prioritize their education because they want to provide more for their children. Although the interviewees had not graduated yet, they were happy to be supporting their family and looked forward to being able to offer more after earning their degree. Alex explained: "In order to survive in California or anywhere for that fact and have three children to take care of on my own, I have to have a good job. So I'm pursuing higher education for my kids and myself." Like Alex, all participants expressed gratification when describing how they continue their education to set an example for their children.

When comparing the data on racial demographics and welfare from the two community colleges, the conflict between the Latinx domesticated culture and the college student culture becomes evident. As mentioned, the traditional role of Latina mothers is to stay home and take care of their children; however, the interviewees who were Latina mothers from Rio Hondo undertook multiple responsibilities as student-parents, and they expressed pressure when trying to balance school and work because of the time it took away from their children.

### **Study Limitations**

The survey question that asked participants about their grade point average both before and after they became a parent was limited in whether it could precisely measure academic performance based on different courses and instructors in various institutions. However, this question was an effective conversation starter and encouraged participants to share more in-depth details about their academic achievements and challenges.

Recruiting student-parents at SMC had drawbacks because individuals did not voluntarily approach the table at the college fair with a sign "Student-parents needed for a study," until a new poster stated participants would be compensated. It was not surprising that when SMC student-parents were asked about the parenting programs offered by their institution that most of the student-parents were unaware of them. To qualify for CalWORKs and C.A.R.E., a parent must be receiving government financial aid assistance, but most of the students interviewed were full-time employees. Another limitation of recruiting student-parents at SMC was that it took place during a college fair, so some student-parents were in a rush to get to class. Other student-parents had to arrange to meet me at another time. Most participants at SMC attended evening classes, so if this study were conducted again, recruitment should be during the evening. A further limitation was that some SMC students answered the open-ended questions in a couple of sentences without providing their educational experience in depth. Finally, a limitation for using semi-structured survey questions is that the interviewee is more likely to answer formal questions in the way they believe the researcher would

want, but might respond differently if they were not asked while facing the interviewer, a research limitation known as the front-face. Front-face might have limited the study because the parents were aware that they were being watched while they shared their educational trajectory, and might have shared more information if they did not feel as if their answers were going to be judged by the interviewer.

In-depth interviews are the best way to examine the barriers and privileges student-parents experience and explain why their low degree attainment rates are a public issue rather than merely individual variances. Therefore, despite the limitations, this methodology should be used again when studying a sample of underrepresented students.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

In the process of collecting the data from the interviews, it became apparent that institutional barriers were not the only factor hindering student-parents from transferring out of community college. When analyzing their educational experience from the perspective of mental health, participants exhibited deficit thinking that resulted from microaggressions. Another interview-based study by Acevedo-Gil (2015) mirrored the attitudes expressed in my interviews and found feelings of academic invalidation to be a reason why marginalized students take an average of four years to complete transferable courses at community college while traditional students take an average of two years (p.109).

The interviews not only helped to illuminate the struggles student-parents in Los Angeles experience but also explained why they continue to pursue higher education despite the educational barriers. When reviewing the data collected, universal themes appeared. Mark points out the academic barriers that student-parents face, explaining that " food insecurity, lack of stable housing, and difficulties with childcare are some of the reasons why they might not pursue higher education." Like most student-parents, Lilie also remains resilient when tackling academic barriers because her career goals motivate her to continue working towards degree attainment. Describing this, Lilie recommends

"envisioning a dream and don't give up. Push through and before you know it, that dream will come true." Overall, resilience was the biggest strength of the student-parents interviewed.

The educational experiences of the student-parents explain why the rate of degree attainment for parents is relatively low (Castro, 2017). Based on this study, institutions should provide crucial resources for affordable childcare. In doing so, it would allow student-parents to attend class more easily. Addressing the shortcomings of community college institutions in Los Angeles will likely result in higher degree completion rates for underrepresented students such as student-parents.

### **Significance for student-parent equity**

Research on the lived experiences of student-parents is essential for tackling educational barriers and sharing successful resources. Potential outcomes of this study may include a reduction in the number of single parent households that are at or below the poverty level. According to the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, poverty among all single mothers would decline if just one in four single mothers had earned a college degree. This statistic points out the importance of families obtaining college degrees because they would receive less government assistance, secure better-paying jobs, and improve the education system by paying taxes. Research on the lived experiences of student-parents will bring awareness to the subgroup and result in an increase in reliable student support systems in academic institutions. The long-term goal of this study is to create social awareness and subsequent movement of student-parents to ensure education is more accessible and more inclusive.

### **Conclusion**

Counter-storytelling was an essential method used to share the narratives of student-parents and highlight their sacrifices and motivations for pursuing higher education. Their narratives were enriched by an intersectional lens, which provided a holistic view of the privileges and barriers that student-parents in Los Angeles community colleges experienced due to their multiple identities. The data collected from twelve in-depth, semi-structured

interviews helps explain why student-parents have higher college dropout rates than students without children. The notable findings expose the institutional barriers that parents face, such as a lack of on-campus resources, which shifts the responsibility for dropout rates away from the individual and towards the poor infrastructure of higher education. In the final analysis, all student-parents experienced institutional shortcomings, regardless of their socioeconomic background. Furthermore, findings suggest that educational institutions only accommodate traditional students, not parents; according to the responses from student-parents, these institutions are designed to keep them out. Therefore, structures of discrimination ultimately reflect the low degree attainment of student-parents.

Educational institutions' lack of knowledge about student-parents' experiences results in schools failing to provide adequate support systems for them. Analysis of the data provides a deeper understanding of the institutional and mental barriers that have delayed the parents' degree attainment. For instance, the basic needs of student-parents were unmet, which contributed to their low graduation rates. Parents who identified as students of color (Latinx and Black) expressed feelings of discrimination when denied student services such as tutoring hours that fit with their schedule. The student-parents who identified as white did not have a problem accessing tutoring services, despite their full-time work schedules. Findings based on in-person interviews at community colleges in Los Angeles suggest that local forms of racial disparities were the underlying reason for student-parents' lack of resources. Their lived experiences showed that they were placed in an academic environment lacking essential supplies, which thereby created institutional barriers. However, despite the obstacles attached to student-parents' different identities, they persist in pursuing higher education.

Student-parents demonstrated resilience when supporting their family and focusing on a successful future despite the institutional shortcomings that they experience. They view being a parent as a privilege because aspiring to provide for their children motivates them to succeed in college and pursue their career goals. Unlike previous studies that measure success by degree



attainment, student-parents consider themselves successful if they can provide for their families.

### **Recommendations to institutions**

The theory of validation argues that "enabling, confirming, and supportive" environments will help parents to feel confident about being college students (Rendon, 1994). Student support programs should be easily accessible by all parents, regardless of their socioeconomic background, in order to improve student-parents' academic success.

These findings can help professors, administrators, and policymakers understand the academic barriers that hinder student-parents from graduating and may encourage them to work towards embedding student support programs. Support systems such as childcare and parent support services can be achieved by increased funding at the state and federal levels. Institutionalizing family resource centers, such as Valley Community College's Family Resource Center to all community colleges, can help to improve the attendance of student-parents on campus. Resources can be incorporated by first counting the number of student-parents through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) using titanium database methods, then offering resources directly to students who identified as a parent on their FAFSA application. Suggested resources include counseling centers specializing in services for student-parents, tutoring provided during the evening, and free childcare centers on campuses. Funds needed to initiate student-parent support programs can be provided by partnering with supportive sponsors, such as Ascend's Two-Generation approach. If addressed by general policies across the board, these suggestions will promote equity and inclusion by providing adequate support and greater access to education for student-parents and thereby ensure that all students have opportunities to graduate, regardless of the multiple social categories that they belong to. Furthermore, more research on underrepresented student-parents and subsequent policy changes are needed to eliminate systemic oppression.

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