

Leveraging cultural wealth: An appreciative inquiry into the success of community college student parents.

by

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B.S.I.S., Texas A&M University, Corpus Christi, 2006

M.S., University of Houston, Clear Lake, 2009

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AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2026

Abstract

Student parents comprise approximately 18% of all undergraduates in the United States, with about 51% enrolled in community colleges (Anderson et al., 2024). National data reveal significant disparities in educational attainment between college students who are parents and those who are not. Reichlin Cruse et al. (2019) reported that only 37% of student parents completed a degree or certificate within six years, compared to 59% of students without children.

This qualitative study examined how successful community college student parents utilized their cultural wealth and effectively integrated personal, community, and institutional resources to balance their academic and parenting responsibilities. Guided by Appreciative Inquiry theory and Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), the research examined how student parents utilized aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital to support persistence and achievement in higher education. It also explored what works in terms of institutional support systems and services to promote student parent success.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 female participants attending a mid-sized Hispanic-Serving Institution in the greater Houston, Texas area. All participants had completed at least 45 college credit hours, earned a certificate or degree, or transitioned into a career related to their field of study. Eleven identified as first-generation college students, representing varied family structures, employment statuses, and parenting circumstances.

Findings indicated that participants actively employed all six forms of cultural capital, often in overlapping and mutually reinforcing ways. Aspirational capital reflected their determination to create intergenerational change and serve as educational role models for their children. Familial capital was expressed through emotional, logistical, and motivational support from children, partners, and extended families. Social capital emerged from peer, mentor, and

faith-based networks. Navigational capital involved self-advocacy, strategic organization, and effective utilization of institutional resources. Resistant capital was evident in participants' rejection of deficit narratives and commitment to breaking cycles of limited educational attainment. Linguistic capital supported effective communication and cultural adaptability.

Institutional supports played a pivotal role in persistence, with childcare assistance identified as the most essential infrastructure. Other key supports included basic needs services, TRiO Student Support Services, academic assistance, and positive relationships with faculty and staff. However, awareness of available resources varied, underscoring the need for proactive and systematic communication. Two additional themes emerged during the study: time as a critical resource and parenting as a source of transferable skills and motivation. Participants' strategic time management and the organizational, multitasking, and resilience skills developed through parenting directly contributed to academic success.

The study's implications emphasize that student-parent success depends on the interaction between students' inherent cultural wealth and institutional recognition of these strengths. Community colleges can enhance outcomes by treating childcare as essential infrastructure, strengthening outreach about resources, designing flexible and family-friendly environments, and fostering cultural responsiveness among faculty and staff. Policymakers should prioritize funding for childcare, basic needs, and comprehensive student services while including student-parent perspectives in program development and evaluation.

Overall, this research challenged deficit-based narratives by demonstrating that student-parent success arises not solely from individual determination but from a reciprocal process in which cultural wealth and institutional support systems reinforce one another, advancing equity, inclusion, and opportunity in higher education.

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Approved by:

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Acknowledgments

First, I want to sincerely thank my dissertation committee: Dr. Cindy Miles, Dr. Larry Rideaux, Dr. John E. Roueche, and Dr. Trisha Barefield. Your support, wisdom, and encouragement made all the difference in this process. I am especially grateful to Dr. Miles, whose guidance and belief in me carried me through the most challenging points of this journey. I truly would not be here without you! I am also thankful for the professors in the Kansas State Community College Leadership Program (CCLP). Each of you shaped not only my academic learning but also my growth as a leader and as a person. Your lessons and mentorship will remain with me throughout my career. Special thanks to Dr. Margaretta Mathis for being the backbone of the CCLP and for keeping the program and cohorts going semester after semester. Your guidance throughout the journey was priceless.

To my classmates in the Central Texas Royal Purple Cohort, along with our friends in the Detroit and Arizona cohorts, thank you for walking this path with me. The journey was often challenging, but having each of you alongside me made it manageable and even joyful at times. We all grew together, supported one another, and built friendships that I will always cherish. I would also like to thank Dr. Evelyn Waiwaiole Rhoades for guiding our cohort with patience, answering countless questions, and serving as a steady mentor throughout this process. You are amazing!

I am deeply grateful to my friends, family members, and colleagues who cheered me on, encouraged me, and reminded me of my own strength when I struggled to see it. I am blessed with an incredible village of support, and I hope to honor that by paying it forward in the future. While there are too many of you to name individually, please know that I carry immense

gratitude for each of you and will never forget the wholehearted support you gave. To my colleagues, thank you for understanding when I needed flexibility, for offering advice and perspective, and for celebrating every small victory with me along the way. To my friends, thank you for the countless conversations, laughter, and encouragement that lifted my spirits when the journey felt heavy. Your kindness in reaching out, checking on me, and supporting me when I had to miss events or step back from commitments meant more than I can ever express. Each of you played a part in helping me reach this milestone, and I am forever thankful.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my classmate besties, Tashae Freeman Savage and Marcel Jagne Shaw. Thank you for your constant encouragement, your willingness to listen, and your ability to turn tears into laughter. Even though our journeys were unique, we carried each other through, and for that, I will always be grateful. No matter where life takes us, I am just a phone call away, and you both will always hold a special place in my heart.

Dedication

I first dedicate this dissertation to my four children, Nathaniel, Cameron, Olivia, and Myles, without whom I would be lost. Being your mother is my greatest accomplishment in life. My journey through three graduate degrees as a student parent shaped my passion for this topic, and I am grateful for the support and sacrifices each of you made so that I could pursue this dream. There are not enough words to express how grateful I am for each of you!

Nathaniel, your willingness to step up and help with your siblings is immeasurable and is one of the main reasons I was able to reach this point. I know you have big dreams, too, and I look forward to seeing them all come true for you! Cameron, your humor lifted my spirits and kept me going when the days felt especially long. Thank you for always being uniquely you, no matter what! Olivia, throughout this process, you told me you could not wait to call me ‘Dr. Mom.’ Now you can! Always remember that you can be anything you want to be, my sweet girl. Myles, you may be too young to remember me locked away in my room working or in class, but I will never forget the snuggles and the times you joined my Zoom classes to wave to my classmates. I hope I have made each of you proud and look forward to helping you all achieve whatever you set your eyes on.

I also dedicate this work to my maternal grandmother, Virginia, who passed away this year and will not be here to see me graduate. Although her formal education ended after the eighth grade, her wisdom, resilience, and love continue to shape me. Even though she did not know much about college, she never failed to ask how school was going, and she adored my children with all her heart. I know she would be proud of this accomplishment, and I carry her strength with me as I celebrate this milestone.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Tammy, the very first student-parent I knew. At eight years old, I did not fully understand what it meant when you began your community college journey, but by the time I was eighteen, I saw its full impact as you walked the stage to earn your bachelor's degree during my freshman year of college. Watching your perseverance over those ten years inspired my passion for education, motivated me to pursue multiple graduate degrees, and guided me toward my career in higher education.

Although the struggles and support systems for student parents have evolved since your journey, the significance of earning a degree remains the same. I know without question that I would not have made it through my doctoral program without your love, encouragement, and the countless hours you spent caring for our babies so I could study, write, work, or travel. You changed the trajectory of our family, just as the student parents in my study are changing the futures of their own families. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for always being my biggest cheerleader and never letting me forget how strong I really am. I love you!

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Community college enrollment continues to evolve over time, resulting in these institutions having the most diverse student bodies in history (Boggs, 2010). Students enrolled in community college are diverse in every aspect, including socioeconomic status, age, nationality, ethnicity, degree of disability, and family status. Approximately 3.1 million, or nearly one in five, undergraduate college students in the United States are parents (Yates, 2024-a). Student parents brought diverse life experiences to the college classroom, enriching their learning and serving as a basis for acquiring new knowledge (Attar Flores, 2013). However, Austin and McDermott (2003) identified several trends in the barriers faced by student parents, including issues of social integration, stress on children, childcare concerns, financial difficulties, and housing problems. According to Nelson et al. (2013), a student's parental status increased the likelihood that a student will leave college without a degree. 2022 U.S. Census data shared by Shrider and Creamer (2023) showed that obtaining a college degree contributes to reducing poverty. Individuals with bachelor's degrees face a poverty rate of 4% compared to 14% for those with a high school diploma (Shrider & Creamer, 2023). The impact of student parents dropping out of college often extends to their children, as parents with lower educational levels are more likely to have children who continue to face challenges in achieving higher educational attainment, perpetuating cycles of poverty and disadvantage across generations (Cheng et al., 2016).

Statement of the Problem

Research has documented that community college student parents face various challenges in achieving their academic goals that their non-parenting peers do not face. Student parents must balance academic stressors with the numerous challenges of raising dependent children.

Reichlin Cruse et al. (2019) highlighted the stark disparity in outcomes between parenting and non-parenting students: merely 37% of student parents completed a degree or certificate within six years, compared to 59% of childless students.

Cervantes (2023) reported that the U.S. Census Bureau's 2022 American Community Survey (ACS) indicated that Texans with lower levels of educational attainment faced significantly higher poverty rates. The author further explained how parents without an education were faced with the negative financial impact that ultimately affects their children. National data from 2021 showed that two-thirds of student parents live at or near the poverty line (Williams et al., 2024). The consequences of these challenges are far-reaching, impacting the educational attainment of student parents and limiting their long-term career prospects and economic mobility (Cheng et al., 2016). Furthermore, the success of student parents had broader implications for their families, and research demonstrated that parental educational attainment positively influenced their children's educational aspirations and outcomes (Cheng et al., 2016).

The economic case for completing college, especially for those raising children, was compelling. A growing body of research identified a range of challenges that lowered the academic prospects of student parents succeeding in college, for example, child care, insufficient financial aid that adequately reflected the cost of raising children, and the lack of flexible academic programs that could not accommodate their schedules (Horn & Carrol, 1998; Austin & McDermott, 2003; Wladis et al., 2018). Noll et al. (2017) found that approximately 30% of student parents succeed despite such hurdles, obtaining a certificate or degree within 6 years of enrolling in higher education. The gap in this research signifies the difference between student parents who are able to remain in college and succeed, compared to those who are unable to persist, particularly at community colleges, where a majority of student parents initiate their

college pursuits (Anderson et al., 2024). Without a better understanding of the institutional support systems and personal strengths and resources that help student parents succeed, community colleges cannot fully determine how to best support the student parent population and effectively direct their resources to improve the academic outcomes of this population.

Background of the Problem

Community and technical colleges are considered vital in providing accessible, affordable, and flexible education for student parents (Dundar et al., 2024). Data gathered from the postsecondary sector indicate that student parents are concentrated in community colleges (Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019; Anderson et al., 2024; Yates, 2024b). According to the 2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, more than half (51%) of student parents attended community and technical colleges, and the authors noted these numbers were likely underreported due to the impacts of COVID-19 (Anderson et al., 2024). These types of institutions were known to attract student parents as they typically offer shorter programs and more affordable education.

Historically, student parents have faced challenges in completing their degrees for various reasons. Nearly three decades ago, Horn and Carrol (1998) reported that student parents face unique challenges, balancing academic responsibilities with family obligations, financial pressures, and work, which increases the likelihood of stopping out compared to their peers without children. The authors noted that student parents were also more likely to attend part-time and take longer to complete degrees, which can affect their educational and career advancement. They also frequently needed additional support, such as childcare and financial aid, to persist in and complete their education (Horn & Carrol, 1998).

This historic problem continues to impact student parents due to a persistent range of factors that influence them to temporarily stop out or even drop out. These impacts are demonstrated in more recent findings, which show that two-thirds of community college student parents do not complete their associate's degree within five years of college enrollment (Caldwell & Nzau, 2024). According to Schaetz's (2016) analysis of student-parent data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, student parents face more obstacles to achieving their academic goals than their non-parenting peers. These challenges for student parents were also identified by Green (2013), who studied low-income student mothers, and Huerta et al. (2022), who studied student parents of color. Green found that parents juggling work, school, studying, and family responsibilities, lacking sufficient financial or childcare support, can result in food insecurity, severe sleep deprivation, and often overwhelming stress. Similarly, Huerta et al. (2022) found that significant concerns for student parents included familial obligations, instability with childcare, financial pressures, and social isolation, which may result in their early departure from college. These challenges contributed to lower persistence and degree completion rates among student parents than their non-parenting peers (Short, 2022).

Wladis et al. (2018) found that student parents had lower college persistence and completion rates despite earning higher GPAs on average than their non-parent counterparts. Although student parents often perform well academically, they are more likely to stop or drop out (Via, 2021). Multiple other studies detailed various reasons why student parents struggle, stop out, and/or drop out (Horn & Carrol, 1998; Austin & McDermott, 2003; Yakaboski, 2010; Green, 2013; Wladis et al., 2018; Lovell & Scott, 2019; Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019; Reed et al., 2021; Schreiber et al., 2024).

Student parents often must balance caring for their children with the academic expectations and rigor of their courses (Sallee & Cox, 2019). In addition, more than half of student parents are employed full-time, while many others work part-time (Yates, 2024-b). In 1977, Clair Vickery coined the term "time poverty" to critique traditional poverty measures based solely on income, arguing instead for a dual measure of both monetary and time resources. Vickery (1977) revealed how households, especially single-parent and female-headed, face poverty due to insufficient time, even when income exceeds traditional poverty thresholds. Wladis et al. (2018) referred to time poverty regarding student parents as the lack of sufficient quality and quantity of time for academic work due to childcare and other responsibilities. They noted that during such times, poverty, especially among student parents with preschool-aged children, had a substantial deleterious impact on their persistence in college and credit accumulation.

Similarly, participants in the study on student parents by Attar Flores (2019) described significant challenges related to their lack of time when juggling multiple roles. The difficulty with balancing these roles has been found to be exacerbated when colleges do not have a family-friendly environment or host activities and events that are not child-friendly (LeBlue, 2021). With the demands of caregiving, student parents have less time to study, attend classes, and engage in academic activities. They often face significant time constraints that limit their ability to focus on their education, and this lack of free time makes it challenging for them to fully immerse themselves in their studies, participate in group projects, or seek help when needed (Conway et al., 2021; Wladis et al., 2018). Student parents frequently find themselves juggling multiple responsibilities and must split their attention between academic pursuits and caregiving duties, which can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and fatigue (Conway et al., 2021). The need to

constantly shift focus can hinder their ability to retain information and perform well academically (Wladis et al., 2018). As a result, the combination of limited time and divided attention can significantly impact their educational outcomes.

In addition to time poverty, multiple studies have demonstrated that student parents often struggle to find reliable and affordable childcare (Anderson & Green, 2022; Attar Flores, 2013; Austin & McDermont, 2003). Participants in Attar Flores' (2013) study on student parents reported having to miss class or take their children to class when their child care arrangements fell through. Austin and McDermont (2003) found childcare costs and availability to be key challenges that affect many student parents. According to Miller (2023), child care programs at 2-year institutions are more likely to be underfunded or eliminated, despite being crucial for student parents who rely on them to continue their education. The number of community colleges with childcare on campus has drastically declined over the last decade, from a high of 53% in 2003 to 46% in 2013, and then to 36% in 2023 (LeBlue, 2021; Miller, 2023). Additionally, community colleges with on-campus childcare centers often have lengthy waitlists (Gault et al., 2014).

While the lack of time and access to childcare can negatively impact student parents, many also face significant financial concerns (Sallee & Cox, 2019). According to Green (2013), economic instability might hinder adults from pursuing higher education. Student parents often face significant financial concerns, with approximately 68% of student parents living at or near the poverty line (Williams et al., 2024). With the added cost of higher education, student parents may have less funding to support their family's needs (Sallee & Cox, 2019). However, investing in postsecondary education is cost-effective when the overall benefits surpass the expenses (Gault et al., 2014). This return-on-investment stems from the economic and social advantages of

successful college graduates, who experience enhanced earning potential and reduced reliance on public assistance.

Research has identified various challenges student parents face while working towards their college goals. However, it remains uncertain which personal or external support factors most effectively assist student parents in their academic journeys and enhance their chances of success in higher education, especially in community colleges, where many begin their educational paths.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how successful community college student parents utilized their cultural wealth and other personal, community, and institutional resources to balance academic responsibilities with parenting and other obligations to attain academic success and meet their college and career goals.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. What personal, community, and institutional factors contribute to the academic and career success of student parents attending community college?
 - a) In what ways do student parents utilize elements of *community cultural wealth* (Yosso, 2005) to achieve academic and career success in community college?
 - b) What community or institutional resources and support services do student parents perceive as most effective in supporting their success?

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

This study aimed to explore what factors impacted and contributed to the academic and career success of community college student parents by using a community of cultural wealth

conceptual framework combined with an appreciative inquiry theoretical framework. A majority of published research on student parents has described this population through a deficit-based lens, focusing on the barriers and challenges they face. Multiple studies illustrated various reasons why student parents struggle, stop out, and/or drop out (Horn & Carrol, 1998; Austin & McDermott, 2003; Yakaboski, 2010; Green, 2013; Wladis et al., 2018; Lovell & Scott, 2019; Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019; Reed et al., 2021; Schreiber et al., 2024). This study, however, sought to shift its focus from describing student parents from an asset-based lens to examining what is currently working to support student parents' success and the cultural capital they bring to their college classrooms, their institution, and their educational journey.

This study employed Appreciative Inquiry as the theoretical framework to support an asset-based lens in researching student-parent success. Appreciative Inquiry was a strengths-based approach to organizational change and research that focuses on identifying and leveraging the positive aspects of individuals and systems (Cooperider et al., 2013). Applying the theoretical framework of Appreciative Inquiry focused this study on what was working for student parents rather what impeded their success.

The four phases of Appreciative Inquiry theory, known as the 4-D cycle, provide a philosophically strengths-based approach to inquiry and change (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). The first phase, Discovery, focuses on identifying and appreciating the best of what is by exploring strengths, successes, and positive experiences. The second phase, Dream, invites participants to imagine what could be.. Next, the Design phase centers on co-creating what should be to achieve the desired future. Finally, the Destiny phase ensures sustainability by focusing on what will be (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Together, these four phases provide

a framework for inquiry that shifts the focus from problems to possibilities and builds on strengths to achieve meaningful and lasting outcomes.

Adopting this theoretical approach ensured that the research investigated existing practices and opened the door to discovering potential pathways for positive, strengths-based solutions tailored to the realities of student parents.

In addition to using appreciative inquiry as a theoretical basis for the study, the researcher applied the conceptual framework of Yosso's Model of Community Cultural Wealth (2005). The Community Cultural Wealth framework provided a comprehensive understanding of the resources and assets students from marginalized communities bring to their educational experiences (Every Learner Everywhere, 2020). Yosso (2005) suggests six forms of cultural capital that students bring into the learning environment: Aspirational, Linguistic, Familial, Social, Navigational, and Resistance.

Aspirational capital refers to the dreams and goals that motivate individuals to persist through challenges, often fueled by a desire for better opportunities for themselves or their families.

Linguistic capital acknowledges the value of multiple languages and communication skills, recognizing how diverse linguistic backgrounds contribute to students' ability to navigate different cultural and academic environments.

Familial capital refers to the support systems and knowledge passed down through families, often including strong community values, resilience, and cultural identity.

Social capital refers to the networks and relationships that students rely on to access resources, advice, and emotional support, often through family, peers, or community groups.

Navigational capital refers to students' skills in navigating complex educational and social systems, including understanding institutional structures and overcoming barriers to success.

Resistant capital encompasses the knowledge and strategies gained through challenging and resisting societal inequalities, often empowering students to advocate for themselves and others (Yosso, 2005).

These forms of cultural capital provided a broad, inclusive data collection and analysis framework for exploring how students from diverse backgrounds engage with and succeed in educational settings. The strengths-based elements of the Community Cultural Wealth conceptual model were congruent with the overarching theoretical lens of Appreciative Inquiry and helped shift this study away from traditional investigations of barriers facing student parents to an assets-based inquiry into what student parents bring to the academic environment.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative methodology to explore the experiences, opinions, and perspectives of successful community college student parents. Yin (2016) recommended that researchers use a generic qualitative approach when their study may consider variants that would be explored through multiple specialized types of qualitative research. Generic or basic qualitative methodology primarily focused on the outward exploration of real-world experiences and occurrences, emphasizing the content of people's opinions and perspectives (Percy et al., 2015). The primary goal is to capture and reflect on the lived experiences of individuals, including personal descriptions and reflections (Percy et al., 2015). The data collection process in generic qualitative research is designed to gather information from samples of people, drawing

on their personal experiences and insights about real-world events, processes, or phenomena. This approach focused on understanding the subjective meanings and interpretations that people assign to their experiences (Percy et al., 2015). The lives of student parents vary in multiple ways, and a generic qualitative approach enabled the researcher to explore their individual experiences thoroughly.

Alignment Table

An alignment table was created to provide a clear overview of how the study elements aligned. This table included literature findings, research questions, and theoretical and conceptual frameworks. It served to show the alignment among the various components, ensuring an organized approach to the research. The alignment table is available in Appendix A.

Delimitations and Assumptions

This study was delimited to current or former community college students who, while enrolled in community college, were responsible for caring for one or more dependent children under the age of eighteen. In addition, the study was delimited to successful community college student parents, defined as those who had earned 45 or more college hours or have completed a certificate or degree at a community college.

This study was based on two assumptions. First, it was assumed that the participants were student parents, as defined in this study. Second, it was assumed that participants were honest and forthcoming, providing detailed responses to interview questions, including accounts of their personal experiences as student parents.

Significance of the Study

This study intended to further explore how student parents successfully utilized their cultural wealth to balance academic responsibilities with parenting and other obligations.

Examining how community college student parents utilize cultural wealth to succeed could have a significant impact on multiple areas. First, it extended the body of research by offering insights into how cultural wealth can serve as a valuable asset for student parents navigating higher education. This addition enriched the existing literature on student-parent success by providing a broader understanding of the resources that support these students in persisting and thriving. The findings from this study could influence practice by guiding educators and support staff in developing tailored interventions and programs that can enhance these cultural assets, thereby fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for student parents. Additionally, the findings from this study could inform policy decisions on financial aid, childcare support, and other resources, advocating for policies that recognize the unique experiences, challenges, and strengths of student parents. Lastly, this study lays the groundwork for future research by identifying gaps in understanding how cultural wealth intersects with institutional structures and policies, opening avenues for further exploration into how these dynamics can be better leveraged to support the student-parent population.

Definition of Terms

Certificate refers to a certificate awarded upon the successful completion of a specialized educational program or course of study.

Community College refers to a two-year college or technical school that awards certificates and/or 2-year degrees.

First-Generation College Student refers to an individual whose parents did not complete a bachelor's degree. (U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2023)

Stop out refers to a temporary break from college for one or more semesters, then returning to the same institution (Horn & Carroll, 1998).

Student Parent refers to an individual who, while enrolled in a college or university, cares for one or more dependent children under the age of eighteen or a child, regardless of age, who has a disability that necessitates ongoing care and support from the parent (U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2024). This study will focus solely on student parents attending community colleges.

Student Success for the purpose of this study, will be defined as having earned 45 or more college hours, or completed a certificate or degree at a community college.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a federally funded program that provides financial assistance to low-income individuals and families to purchase food. (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, n.d.-a)

Time Poverty refers to the lack of sufficient quality and quantity of time for academic work due to childcare and other responsibilities (Wladis et al., 2018).

Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is a federally funded program designed to safeguard the health of low-income pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, infants, and children up to age five who are at nutritional risk. (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, n.d.-b)

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the problem, background information, the purpose of the study, and the research questions. Additionally, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks were presented, along with the alignment table, methodology, delimitations, and assumptions that guided the study's implementation. Key terms were defined, and the significance of the study was explained.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 provided an introduction and overview of the study. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the literature related to the research problem, offering a detailed overview of the existing literature on the student-parent population and other key aspects of this study. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology appropriate for the problem, the research questions, and the purpose of the study. Chapter 4 will share an analyze the data collected from the study and present the findings. Chapter 5 will further discuss the findings and include recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter examines the current literature on student parents in higher education, including their demographics, unique strengths, and the barriers they encounter during their educational journey. The chapter provides a comprehensive review of the literature on the impact of a college degree and its support for student and parent success, along with outlining the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Student parent refers to an individual who, while enrolled in a college or university, cares for one or more dependent children under the age of 18 or a child, regardless of age, who has a disability that necessitates ongoing care and support from the parent (U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2024). Information related to student parents in community college was identified separately from information about student parents in all forms of higher education.

This chapter begins by examining the demographic profile of student parents in higher education, drawing on recent data to describe their characteristics across various institutional types. Next, the chapter contextualizes research that describes student parents as an underserved population within the higher education system. The review then presents the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that provided the foundation for understanding the experiences of student parents, specifically the 4-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry and Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth model.

Following this, the chapter analyzes the documented strengths of student parents, the barriers they encounter, and researches the long-term impact of degree attainment on student parents and their families. The chapter explores the literature on what strategies and systems

were used to support student parent success. Finally, the chapter examines the documented role of community colleges in supporting student parents.

Throughout this review, literature was identified through a comprehensive search of the following academic databases: ProQuest, EBSCO, ERIC, and Google Scholar, as well as publications from organizations focused on student-parent issues such as Generation Hope, Student-Parent Action through Research Knowledge (SPARK) Collaborative, and the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR).

Demographics of Student Parents

Recent demographic data provides context for understanding this population. Most recent literature on student parents references a 2019 briefing by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) titled "Parents in College by the Numbers," based on data from the 2015-2016 academic year (Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019). More recently, the Student Parent Action through Research Knowledge (SPARK) Collaborative published an updated report in 2024 titled "Who Are Undergraduates with Dependent Children?" providing an in-depth profile of student parents using 2020 data (Anderson et al., 2024). Both reports offer insights into student parents across various higher education sectors, including community colleges and public and private four-year institutions.

While the earlier IWPR briefing identified community colleges as serving a substantial population of student parents (Crumb, 2021), more recent data reveal that approximately 3.14 million undergraduates in the U.S., or 18% of all undergraduates, are parents (Anderson et al., 2024). This figure declined from a peak in 2012, reflecting broader shifts in college accessibility and student demographics. Anderson et al. (2024) note that the 2020 data likely understated the proportion of student parents in the undergraduate college population, as they were collected

during the COVID-19 pandemic, when childcare shutdowns and employment disruptions disproportionately affected parents.

The latest findings show that student parents are most likely to attend community colleges, with 51% enrolled in these institutions (Anderson et al., 2024). They found that female and nonwhite students are disproportionately represented among student parents. For instance, they noted 24% of female undergraduates and 36% of American Indian or Alaska Native students were parents. Similarly, Black, Latinx, and Native Hawaiian students were noted to have higher-than-average rates of student parenthood, with Black female students comprising 21% of all undergraduate student parents (Anderson et al., 2024).

Anderson et al. (2024) also reported that the 2020 data showed student parents tended to be older than their non-parenting peers, with an average age of 34, compared to 23 for non-parents. Many student parents were also first-generation college students (48%) and single parents (52%). Nearly half of student parents (49%) had children under the age of 6, necessitating regular childcare. However, a majority of children were school-aged (Anderson et al., 2024). These demographic characteristics provide a crucial context for understanding the distinct needs and experiences of student parents in higher education. The concentration of student parents in community colleges, their diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and their status as older and often first-generation students all shape their educational journeys and the support they require to succeed (Anderson et al., 2024).

Moore-Smith (2024) described community college student parents as “underrepresented and underserved” (p. 12). Marginalized communities are defined as groups that experience discrimination and exclusion due to unequal power relationships in economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions (American College of Trust and Estate Counsel [ACTEC], n.d.).

Applying this definition, student parents have been noted to often struggle with financial constraints, limited access to affordable childcare, and a lack of institutional support, which places them at a disadvantage in higher education (Moore-Smith, 2024).

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

In higher education, student parents face unique challenges that can hinder their success (LeBlue, 2021; Sallee & Cox, 2019; Nelson et al., 2013). However, these students add a wealth of strengths and resources to their educational journeys (Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019; Sylvester, 2022). Carnegie Learning (2023) argued that educators should adopt an asset-based approach when studying students, focusing on their strengths, experiences, and unique perspectives rather than their perceived deficiencies. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks such as Appreciative Inquiry and Community Cultural Wealth emphasize positive attributes rather than deficits.

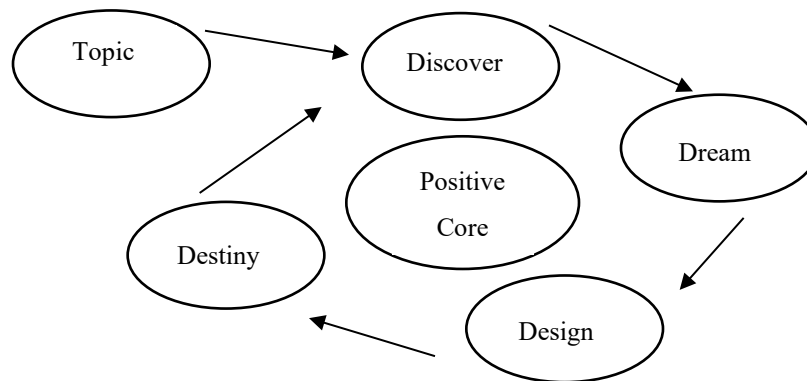
Appreciative Inquiry

The most widely cited asset-based theoretical framework is Appreciative Inquiry, which was developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivasta at Case Western University (Cooperrider & Srivasta, 1987). This theory stems from the belief that human systems evolve in the direction of what they choose to focus on, encouraging the study of strengths and aspirations to foster positive change (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010).

Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2010) who worked with Cooperrider and Srivasta to formalize, expand, and popularize the theory, described the 4-D cycle as the core process of Appreciative Inquiry. As illustrated in Figure 1, the 4-D model loops to continue inquiry in the 4 stages (Forbes, 2019). Whitney & Trosten-Bloom (2010) emphasized that human systems, such as individuals, teams, organizations, and communities, evolve in the direction of what they

choose to study. By focusing on positive aspects and strengths, Appreciative Inquiry leverages this tendency to foster growth and transformation (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010).

Figure 1: 4-D Model of Appreciative Inquiry.



Note. Adapted from "Explaining the 4D Appreciative Inquiry Model," by D. Forbes, 2019, Leader Skill (<https://www.leaderskill.com.au/explaining-the-4d-appreciative-inquiry-model/>).

Many researchers have employed an Appreciative Inquiry approach to investigate what works at community colleges and universities (Johnson, 2021; Royer & Latz, 2016; Whaley, 2016). For example, Whaley (2016) employed Appreciative Inquiry to investigate the factors contributing to student retention and success in a study aimed at identifying and implementing best practices for retaining community college students. Johnson (2021) employed Appreciative Inquiry to investigate professional development practices at Sixth College Residence Life, UC San Diego, utilizing the 4-D model to examine student employees transitioning into professional roles, with a focus on strengths, successes, and positive experiences.

Royer and Latz (2016) employed Appreciative Inquiry to investigate leadership transitions at community colleges, focusing on what was working well rather than problems or deficits. The researchers applied the 4-D cycle to examine how leadership changes could be successfully navigated while preserving institutional memory and fostering engagement. Oxendine et al. (2022) shared how Appreciative Inquiry transformed departmental culture,

particularly within the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. This author focused on how faculty mentorship, evaluation, and collaboration could be improved to foster a more supportive and engaging campus culture.

What all the researchers who applied Appreciative Inquiry documented in the literature shared was a focus on what was working well within the population's institution. They used an asset-based approach to identify positive experiences, strengths, and successes related to their topic of study. Many also used findings to identify future actions, policies, and interventions to promote or areas needing improvement that might address the problems identified in their studies. Several researchers (Johnson, 2021; Royer & Latz, 2016; Whaley, 2016) employed the 4-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry to guide their institutions toward positive change.

Community Cultural Wealth

A conceptual model employing an asset-based approach is Tara Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework, which identifies six forms of cultural capital that marginalized communities utilize to navigate societal systems and achieve success. Yosso (2005) challenged deficit-based views by highlighting individuals' and communities' strengths and resources, emphasizing the importance of aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistance capital.

Aspirational capital refers to maintaining hopes and dreams for the future despite obstacles (Yosso, 2005). This author highlighted the resilience and optimism that individuals draw from their aspirations, often rooted in a commitment to improving their circumstances or providing opportunities for future generations. Navigational capital refers to individuals' skills and strategies for successfully navigating through institutions and systems that may not have been designed for them (Yosso, 2005). This form of capital reflects their ability to adapt and

persist, such as learning how to access resources, advocate for themselves, or work through bureaucratic challenges within educational, legal, or healthcare systems.

Social capital encompasses the networks of people and communities that provide support, resources, and guidance (Yosso, 2005). These relationships can include family, friends, mentors, and community organizations, offering both tangible resources, such as childcare or financial aid, and intangible support, including encouragement and advice. Linguistic capital refers to the communication skills acquired through proficiency in multiple languages or diverse cultural contexts (Yosso, 2005). The research included storytelling, code-switching, and other forms of communication that enhance interpersonal skills and cultural adaptability.

Familial capital refers to the cultural knowledge and support gained through family and community connections (Yosso, 2005). This author has made a significant contribution to the literature by exploring the values, traditions, and histories shared within a family or cultural group, thereby fostering a strong sense of identity, belonging, and purpose. Resistance capital highlights the skills and knowledge developed through experiences of resisting systemic inequalities (Yosso, 2005). This form of capital is tied to activism, advocacy, and the ability to challenge oppressive structures.

Together, these six categories form a comprehensive framework for understanding the strengths and resources that individuals, particularly those from marginalized communities, bring to their pursuits of success. By recognizing and building upon students' cultural backgrounds, skills, and knowledge, educators can create more meaningful learning experiences that enhance engagement and achievement (Carnegie Learning, 2023).

Banuelos (2021) described how the Community Cultural Wealth framework has been used to examine student populations by identifying and valuing the unique strengths and assets

that underrepresented students bring to their educational journeys. Lopez (2022) employed Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework to explore how first-generation Latinx community college students, who are children of immigrant parents, acquire and apply cultural capital throughout their educational journey. The study captured stories from 17 Latinx community college students. Lopez (2022) focused on how first-generation Latinx community college students leveraged different forms of cultural wealth in their college decision-making and persistence.

Multiple other research studies have demonstrated the applicability of the Community Cultural Wealth framework to various student populations in colleges and universities, including Latino college students (Luna & Martinez, 2013), Black male college students (Brooms & Davis, 2017), Black and Latinx College students (Grabsch et al., 2023), Deaf and underrepresented students (Braun et al., 2017), first-generation college students (Garriott, 2020), Latina/o students (Rendón et al., 2015), and students in STEM fields (Burt & Johnson, 2018; Samuelson & Litzler, 2016).

According to Banuelos (2021), Community Cultural Wealth challenges deficit-based perspectives and instead highlights the forms of capital that underrepresented student populations in higher education possess. Banuelos (2021) suggested that the Community Cultural Wealth framework can be applied to study other underserved student populations, as it highlights how students from marginalized backgrounds utilize their communities and experiences to persist in education and beyond. Ultimately, this asset-based perspective shifts the narrative from students' deficiencies to the rich contributions they bring, promoting confidence and long-term success (Banuelos, 2021).

Strengths of Student Parents

Research has consistently demonstrated that student parents bring unique perspectives and valuable life experiences to their educational journeys (LeBlue, 2021; Sallee & Cox, 2019; Nelson et al., 2013). Student parents' abilities to juggle multiple roles have been documented to demonstrate adaptability and problem-solving skills that enhance their academic and personal growth (Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019; Sylvester, 2022). Dundar et al. (2024) discovered that many student parents often begin their educational journey in community or technical colleges to manage costs and other constraints, with 73% of those in baccalaureate programs having attended a 2-year institution. The researchers noted that many student parents enroll in community colleges and universities concurrently. According to Anderson et al. (2024), common assumptions are that student parents perform comparably to non-parents academically, with an average GPA of 3.17. The researchers found that male student parents outperform their male peers, while the GPAs of female student parents are slightly lower than those of their female non-parent counterparts.

Resilience and Motivation

Several studies have highlighted the resilience of student parents. Wladis et al. (2018) studied student parents enrolled in the City University of New York (CUNY) system. They emphasized how some student parents persist in their studies despite facing significant challenges such as financial stress and limited support. This resilience was evident in their continued enrollment and earning of credits under demanding circumstances. According to Manze et al. (2024), some student parents' ability to navigate challenges, including financial pressures and limited childcare options, underscored their determination and adaptability. By developing personal strategies to address these barriers, some student parents demonstrated their

capacity to overcome difficulties and maintain focus on their educational goals (Manze et al., 2024). Furthermore, some student parents' adeptness at problem-solving and managing responsibilities, such as caregiving and employment, was noted to build their resilience, enabling them to remain committed to their education despite adversity (Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019).

Research has revealed that pursuing higher education for student parents is often deeply rooted in their desire to support their families better and set positive examples for their children (Attar Florez, 2013). Attar Flores (2013) focused on students enrolled in a community college with one or more dependent children aged 17 or younger. This study examined the relationship between student persistence and success, focusing on student engagement. Twelve student parents and five staff members were interviewed to explore their experiences and the support services available to them. Nearly all participants in Attar Florez's (2013) study identified family support as a primary motivation, with many aiming to inspire their children to pursue higher education. Despite the demanding journey, most of these student parents were determined to succeed (Attar Florez, 2013).

A postsecondary degree's transformative impact on their families has been found to be a powerful motivator for some student parents, driving these students to achieve financial stability and personal growth and inspiring future generations (Sallee & Cox, 2019). However, Huerta et al. (2022) noted that motivation alone cannot overcome the barriers that student parents face. Some student parents have adopted meticulous strategies to address these challenges, such as effectively scheduling and balancing childcare, work, and coursework (Manze et al., 2024).

Several studies have highlighted that the desire to improve their children's lives and the desire to improve their families' lives were central motivators for some student parents (Manze et al., 2024; Sylvester, 2022; Wladis et al., 2018). Wladis et al. (2018) shared the notion that

student parents frequently cited their children as the primary reason for pursuing a degree. Education was viewed as a pathway to a better life and as a means to set a positive example for their families. Typically, these students were driven by a strong desire to achieve financial stability and independence for themselves and their children (Manze et al., 2024). Sylvester (2022) added that this drive for economic security and a brighter future may have helped student parents remain focused and resilient in their academic pursuits. By viewing a college degree as a critical step toward improving their life circumstances, some student parents remain deeply committed to their education, understanding its potential to transform not only their own lives but also the lives of their children (Anderson et al., 2024).

Discipline and Time Management

Several studies have shown that some student parents possess strong discipline and time management skills (Manze et al., 2024; Sylvester, 2022; Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019). Student parents frequently achieved higher GPAs than their non-parenting peers despite balancing work, family, and academic responsibilities (Anderson et al., 2024). Several studies found that for some student parents, parenting responsibilities instilled a heightened sense of maturity, commitment, and exceptional time management skills (Anderson et al., 2024; Manze et al., 2024). These skills may have contributed to their success and enriched classroom discussions and group projects, ultimately enhancing the overall learning experience for their peers (Anderson et al., 2024).

Anderson et al. (2024) shared that many student parents brought real-world skills to their studies, honed through managing family, work, and other responsibilities. These experiences equipped them with competence and determination to navigate complex academic and life

challenges (Manze et al., 2024). Faculty and staff have reported some student parents as disciplined, mature, and proactive in their communication (Manze et al., 2024; Sylvester, 2022).

Sylvester (2022) described the adaptability and resourcefulness exhibited by some student parents in their ability to address challenges such as time constraints, financial pressures, and limited childcare. According to Anderson et al. (2024), some student parents excelled in prioritizing tasks and allocating their time strategically. Wladis et al. (2018) also found that many student parents dedicated a significant portion of their limited discretionary time to education.

While the research above highlights the resilience, motivation, discipline, and time management skills exhibited by some student parents, the outcome data show that 70% of student parents were unable to complete a certificate or degree within 6 years of enrolling in higher education (Noll et al., 2017). This low completion rate suggests that individual strengths may not be sufficient to overcome systemic barriers, that not enough student parents possess these strengths, or that other factors are inhibiting their success.

Barriers Facing Student Parents

Despite the strengths that many student parents bring to higher education, as described in this literature review, their success has been documented to be more often hindered by significant barriers (Sylvester, 2022). These challenges illustrated that while many student parents demonstrated perseverance and adaptability, systemic obstacles made degree attainment disproportionately difficult for this population (Attar Flores, 2013).

Financial Strain

According to Fletcher et al. (2024), many student parents face significant financial challenges that can affect their educational trajectory. The Trellis Foundation's Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS) Fall 2023 Report offers insights into the economic realities affecting

postsecondary students, including those who are parents (Fletcher et al., 2024). The SFWS gathered responses from 62,367 undergraduate students across 142 colleges and universities in 25 states, including 93 community colleges. This comprehensive survey revealed that approximately 68% of respondents worked while enrolled, with 41% working 40 or more hours per week (Fletcher et al., 2024). These working students, particularly at two-year institutions, often identify primarily as "workers attending school" rather than "students who work," reflecting how employment significantly influenced their academic identity and priorities. Fletcher et al.'s (2024) study also revealed that student parents experienced more financial insecurity than their non-parenting peers. Student parents were more likely to rely on credit sources, such as student loans and credit cards, to pay for school and were less likely to receive financial support from family or scholarships. Around 80% of student parents worked, often full-time, while pursuing their studies (Fletcher et al., 2024).

A report from the Urban Institute and Child Trends explored the financial struggles faced by the 4 million student parents in the U.S. (Schreiber et al., 2024). The National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) reported data from 2020, which indicated three key areas impacting the financial well-being of student parents: elevated expenses, resource management, and persistent gaps between income and costs. Student parents earned an average annual income of approximately \$42,000 (Schreiber et al., 2024). Compared to non-parenting students, who earned an average of \$20,000. Despite earning more than non-parents, many student parents still faced substantial shortfalls.

Student parents frequently paid for their housing, with costs averaging 48% higher than those of non-parenting students (Schreiber et al., 2024). Additional expenses such as food, healthcare, transportation, and utility bills created a financial burden that exceeded typical

student budgets. Over half of student parents rely on federal benefits, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program. Still, eligibility criteria vary by state, complicating access (Schreiber et al., 2024). Student parents were more likely to apply for financial aid than their non-parent peers; however, they received fewer grants and relied more heavily on loans. Many parenting students reported challenges, including financial difficulties, unmanageable debt, and insecurity regarding food or housing (Fletcher et al., 2024).

In addition, Schreiber et al. (2024) explained that credit card debt was more prevalent among student parents, as many used it to bridge funding gaps. According to Schreiber et al. (2024), the standard Cost of Attendance (COA) calculation, a formula defined by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and utilized by colleges and universities to award financial assistance, often overlooks the unique expenses faced by student parents, leaving many with unmet financial needs.

Yakaboski (2010) explored how single-mother undergraduate students identified institutional and cultural barriers at a midwestern university. The study employed focus groups to gather insights from 21 single-mother students regarding their experiences in higher education, the challenges they faced, and the support systems available to them. According to the researcher, financial concerns weighed most heavily on student parents in her study. These concerns included childcare, housing, cost of living, and student fees.

Childcare Access

With nearly half of all student parents having children under age six, childcare access was found to be a significant concern for many student parents (Anderson et al., 2024). The lack of reliable childcare was cited as a common issue that directly impacted academic progress.

About 23% of parenting students reported missing classes due to childcare issues, and many expressed concerns that losing their current childcare arrangements would force them to reduce their course load, impact their grades, or make them less likely to enroll in future semesters (Fletcher et al., 2024).

Williams et al. (2022) studied student parents from low-income backgrounds enrolled in public four-year institutions across the United States. The research aimed to assess the affordability of higher education for student parents by factoring in tuition and childcare expenses to quantify the financial burden on student parents. The researchers found that, on average, a student parent would need to work 52 hours per week to cover tuition and childcare at a public four-year institution. While community colleges typically have significantly lower tuition, childcare costs were noted to be between \$7,000 and \$8,800 annually (Williams et al., 2022). Nearly half of all student parents paid for childcare, which averaged a monthly cost of around \$628 (Schreiber et al. 2024). This cost was significantly higher than tuition and fees in some states.

Peterson (2015) suggested that low-cost on-campus childcare could significantly help relieve some concerns of student parents. Several studies have emphasized the importance of on-campus childcare for student parents, enabling them to balance their studies, work, and parenting responsibilities (LeBlue, 2021; Sallee & Cox, 2019; Nelson et al., 2013). However, access to such facilities was limited, with only a fraction of colleges offering on-campus childcare (Workman & Brady, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this decline, particularly at community colleges, which serve many student parents (Workman & Brady, 2019).

Workman and Brady (2019) noted that access to on-campus childcare had sharply declined over the years. In 2003, 55% of community colleges offered on-campus childcare, but

by 2019, that number had dropped to 44%. At public four-year colleges, the availability of on-campus childcare decreased from 54% in 2004 to 49% in 2019. This reduction was noted to have a significant impact on student parents, particularly those attending community colleges (Workman & Brady, 2019).

Some higher education institutions supported childcare costs for students in on-campus or off-campus partner childcare centers through the Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools (CCAMPIS) grant program (Edgerton, 2024). Edgerton shared that the U.S. Department of Education administers the CCAMPIS program under the Office of Postsecondary Education. However, only institutions participating in Title IV federal student aid programs are eligible to apply for CCAMPIS grants. They noted that institutions must demonstrate a minimum level of Pell Grant funding of \$250,000 received by their students to qualify for CCAMPIS funding. CCAMPIS was first funded in FY 1999 and has received increasing appropriations since FY 2018, reaching \$75 million in FY 2023. Edgerton further shared that, despite the continued increase in funding, there is still not enough money to support all student parents. In 2016-2017, CCAMPIS assisted approximately 3,300 student-parents, while more than 4,000 children were on waiting lists (Edgerton, 2024).

High demand and limited availability have made securing childcare a persistent challenge for student parents, whether on or off campus (Anderson et al., 2024). Even when off-campus childcare options were available, they often had long waitlists, inflexible hours, and high costs, making them inaccessible to many students (Sylvester, 2022). Affordable and accessible childcare was identified as one of the most significant barriers to degree completion, disproportionately affecting student parents who balance multiple responsibilities (Edgerton, 2024).

Time Poverty

Another barrier for student parents could be what researchers term *time poverty*. Wladis et al. (2018) defined time poverty as the insufficient quantity and quality of time available for student parents to devote to their college studies due to their responsibilities, mainly related to childcare and, to a lesser extent, paid work. Wladis et al. (2018) studied students enrolled in the City University of New York (CUNY) system, focusing on students taking various commonly taken courses across CUNY's two-year and four-year campuses in the fall of 2014. The dataset included institutional records and survey responses from 15,385 students, with a survey response rate of 10.6%. The study particularly examined student parents, especially those with children under six years old, as they were found to have significantly less discretionary time and lower time quality for academic work (Wladis et al., 2018).

Conway et al. (2021) collected a nationally representative sample in their survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, which studied college students who participated in the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) from 2003 to 2019. This study specifically focused on student parents and their experiences with time poverty. The authors stated that parents pursuing higher education faced a notable time disadvantage, as student parents often described having one hour less discretionary time each day compared to non-parenting students. This daily deficit accumulated to seven hours weekly, resulting in a substantial 105-hour shortfall over a typical 15-week semester.

Conway et al. (2021) explored time poverty among student parents, particularly those with children under the age of thirteen. The authors noted that student parents had significantly less discretionary time than non-parenting students, particularly those with children under the age of 6. Many student parents, particularly mothers, reported studying while caring for their

children, which often compromised study time and reduced focus and productivity. The impact of parenthood on educational time availability also revealed distinct gender patterns, with mothers facing more pronounced constraints (Conway et al., 2021). Conway et al. (2021) also found that women with young children are more likely to enroll part-time than men and women with older children or no children at all.

According to the study by Wladis et al. (2018), while employment was a contributing factor to time constraints, childcare responsibilities were identified as the primary reason many student parents lacked adequate study time. Fletcher et al. (2024) found that student parents were more likely to work than non-parenting students, with 66% working at least 40 hours per week compared to 34% of non-parents. This prioritization of work over their student identity was noted to impact their academic engagement and progress often. The researchers noted that student parents were more likely to enroll in online or remote courses to accommodate their responsibilities. Many student parents also reported having less time for studying, attending classes, or participating in campus life due to work and family commitments.

The constant juggling of responsibilities diminished academic performance and restricted the time and energy many student parents could devote to their studies (Green, 2013). According to Wladis et al. (2018), most student parents reported that college work is frequently interrupted by childcare duties, multitasking, and fragmented time blocks, which prevent them from achieving deep focus. They said that student parents described needing to study late at night or face frequent interruptions, which reduced the overall effectiveness of their study sessions.

Several researchers found differences in enrollment patterns among student parents. According to Green (2013), nearly half of student parents (47%) attended college part-time, compared to 21% of non-parenting students. Dundar et al. (2024) documented how part-time

enrollment reflected student parents' need to manage academic, family, and work responsibilities simultaneously. For many student parents, time pressures were noted to contribute to lower retention rates and academic performance (Fletcher et al., 2024).

Social Isolation

Social isolation was found to be another challenge for many student parents, who reported feelings of disconnection and difficulty in building peer relationships (Manze et al., 2024). Austin and McDermott (2003) found that separation from family or support systems was a significant challenge for many student parents in their study of low-income, single mothers. Unlike traditional-aged students who often formed social groups on campus, these women reported struggling to find peer connections due to their responsibilities as parents. Additionally, traditional college orientation programs and student activities, often designed to foster a sense of campus belonging, were found to be inaccessible to many single parents due to their childcare and work commitments (Austin and McDermott, 2003).

Some research documented that single parents' enrollment patterns further contributed to their sense of social isolation. According to Anderson et al. (2024), 47% of student parents enrolled part-time, which could make building peer relationships and accessing campus resources more challenging. Dundar et al. (2024) reported that student parents were more likely to participate in online programs or courses, with 44% enrolled in fully online programs compared to 19% of non-parents. The researchers argued that although flexible online options accommodated the unique needs of student parents and reduced commuting and childcare expenses, studying online limited their time spent on campus and inhibited opportunities for them to develop social relationships.

Some student parents were reported to experience isolation due to a strong desire for self-sufficiency. Sallee and Cox (2019) found that some student parents distanced themselves from support systems to counter negative stereotypes associated with government assistance and welfare. Research by Manze et al. (2024) suggested that some student parents felt pressured to demonstrate resilience, sometimes hiding their struggles to avoid appearing reliant on assistance. Many felt a heightened responsibility to succeed independently, motivated by personal goals and their children's futures. However, this self-reliance often isolated them from potentially helpful college resources (Manze et al., 2024).

Manze et al. (2024) suggested that support from other student parents and campus staff provided both encouragement and practical guidance, helping student parents navigate the challenges they faced. However, building these networks could be difficult due to limited time on campus and competing responsibilities. Austin and McDermott (2003) discussed how social isolation was a significant barrier to persistence, but relationships with other student parents, faculty, and support organizations helped some participants overcome it. These authors recommended that universities increase awareness of available resources and create student-parent-focused programs to reduce isolation.

Impact of a College Degree

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) reported that approximately 70% of entry-level positions required a bachelor's degree (VanDerziel, 2023). Attaining a college degree has a profound impact on student parents and their families, significantly increasing earnings, promoting financial independence, and reducing reliance on public assistance (Short et al., 2022). Graduating not only enhanced the graduate's

socioeconomic status but also positively influenced their children's future educational outcomes (Kaushal, 2014; Emmons & Ricketts, 2019).

Improved Child Outcomes

Children of educated parents tended to enjoy better health, wealth, and educational success. Specifically, Kaushal (2014) found that these children often performed better academically, achieved higher test scores, and received greater support for academic pursuits. Parental education was correlated with reduced engagement in risky behaviors and improved mental health for children (Meyrose et al., 2018). Moreover, college-educated parents were more likely to provide educational materials and create stable home environments, further increasing their children's likelihood of attending and completing college (Kaushal, 2014).

Health and Well-being Benefits

Higher education has led to healthier lifestyles and improved coping strategies among parents, resulting in better access to nutrition and healthcare for their children (Kaushal, 2014). Educated parents communicated more effectively, fostering better emotional development in their children (Kaushal, 2014). Furthermore, Meyrose et al. (2018) noted that mothers with higher levels of education implemented more effective stress management strategies, which in turn enhanced their children's mental health outcomes.

Societal Advantages

Several researchers have found that the benefits of higher education extend beyond individual families to society as a whole. According to Kaushal (2014), educated parents were more active community members, participated in elections, and served as models of civic engagement for their children. The author noted that participation contributed to lower crime rates, as degree holders had better job prospects. Additionally, maternal education was found to

correlate with reduced public health burdens and healthcare costs, with children of college-educated mothers exhibiting lower rates of mental health issues (Meyrose et al., 2018).

Furthermore, Emmons and Ricketts (2019) reported that children with parents holding four-year degrees experienced higher median family income and wealth levels, strengthening both local and national economies. Specifically, a parent with a college degree correlated with a 37% increase in median family income and a 54% increase in median wealth.

Overall, the literature on the impact of parental education describes immense positive effects, including improved family dynamics, enhanced child well-being, and societal advancements, many of which fostered a cycle of success that benefited future generations.

Supporting Student Parent Success

Community colleges have historically played a pivotal role in expanding access to higher education, particularly for diverse and underserved populations, including student parents. According to Boggs (2010), community colleges offer an open door for all populations to opportunities. These opportunities are available to all who seek them, making community college the fastest-growing type of higher education in the United States (Boggs, 2010). Fletcher and Carter (2010) emphasized that community colleges were crucial in providing accessible and flexible educational opportunities to a diverse student population. Fletcher and Carter (2010) noted that community colleges enrolled 43% of all U.S. undergraduates and provided a pathway to four-year institutions. They further observed that half of all baccalaureate degree earners attended a community college at some point in their academic career. Community colleges offering open-door opportunities for students from various socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, nationalities, ethnicities, and abilities have been well documented (Boggs, 2010).

Community colleges have served as primary entry points for student parents in higher education, with more than half of student parents enrolled in these institutions due to their affordability, flexibility, and accessibility (Anderson et al., 2024; Dundar et al., 2024; Sallee & Cox, 2019). Flexible delivery methods, including hybrid and online options, have improved persistence rates among student parents (Conway et al., 2021). However, research indicates that institutional resources for student parents are often limited, with campus-based services, such as childcare and financial aid, frequently falling short of meeting their needs (Sallee & Cox, 2019; Workman & Brady, 2019). Many college environments were found to lack policies that accommodate students with caregiving responsibilities, leaving student parents to rely on self-advocacy, with successful students consistently seeking support (Sallee & Cox, 2019; Manze et al., 2024). Researchers recommended increasing access to affordable childcare options, revising financial aid formulas to account for actual costs faced by student parents, and implementing comprehensive support programs that combine childcare, academic support, and financial assistance (Wladis et al., 2018; Conway et al., 2021).

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an outline of the theoretical framework of Appreciative Inquiry and conceptual framework of Community Cultural Wealth. It examined research on the experiences of student parents, documented specific demographic data, identified strengths, observed barriers, and measured the impact of degree attainment. Several studies demonstrated that when student parents were able to overcome these barriers and complete their degrees, the impact extended beyond individual achievement to benefit their families through improved financial stability, enhanced quality of life, and positive intergenerational effects (Emmons & Ricketts, 2019; Kaushal, 2014; Meyrose et al., 2018; Short et al., 2022). The literature was

instrumental in demonstrating how student parents face unique challenges, including financial constraints that often exceed traditional student budgets, limited access to affordable childcare, time poverty that reduces their capacity for academic work, and social isolation that restricted their ability to build supportive networks (Sally & Cox, 2019; Wladis et al., 2018; Crumb, 2021; Attar Flores, 2013).

While several recent studies have focused on student parents, the existing research presented certain limitations in scope. Many studies focused on student parents across all sectors of higher education without distinguishing between experiences in 2-year and 4-year institutions (Edgerton, 2024; Fletcher et al., 2024; Schreiber et al., 2024; Nelson et al., 2013; Dundar et al., 2024; Conway et al., 2021). Other studies have focused solely on student parents at 4-year institutions (Green, 2013; Wladis et al., 2018; LeBlue, 2021; Sylvester, 2022). Although Anderson et al. (2024) confirmed that 51% of student parents were enrolled in community colleges, only four studies were found in this review that focused explicitly on student parents in community colleges (Crumb, 2021; Attar Flores, 2013; Sally & Cox, 2019; Manze et al., 2024). Among these studies, the majority documented experiences and challenges faced by specific subpopulations, such as single mothers (Sally & Cox, 2019; Crumb, 2021), student parents receiving child care subsidy (Edgerton, 2024) and low-income student parents (Green, 2013).

While a substantial body of literature has documented the barriers faced by student parents, a critical gap remains in understanding what contributes to student parent success rather than what hinders it. This gap is particularly significant given that community colleges serve the majority of student parents (Anderson et al., 2024). The next chapter will outline the methodology to be employed in this study, specifically, the generic qualitative research design and data analysis.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology used in this study. The content consists of the following: revisiting the study's purpose, research questions, and the role of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, along with an alignment table. Next, the chapter details the research design, study setting, participants, and the instruments utilized in the analysis. The chapter concludes by describing the data collection process, data sources, analytical methods, and measures used to ensure the study's quality, ethical considerations, and its limitations.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how successful community college student parents utilize their cultural wealth and other personal, community, and institutional resources to balance academic responsibilities with parenting and other obligations to attain academic success and meet their college and career goals. The following research questions guided the study:

Research Questions

1. What personal, community, and institutional factors contribute to the academic and career success of student parents attending community college?
 - a) In what ways do student parents utilize elements of *community cultural wealth* (Yosso, 2005) to achieve academic and career success in community college?
 - b) What community or institutional resources and support services do student parents perceive as most effective in supporting their success?

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Theoretical Framework

This study employed Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2008, 2013) as its theoretical framework, providing an overarching focus on utilizing an asset-based approach to

research and organizational development. Rather than emphasizing problems, deficits, or gaps, Appreciative Inquiry focuses on recognizing and enhancing the strengths and effective practices within an organization or system. This approach was particularly well-suited for exploring the success factors that contribute to the academic progress and achievements of student parents.

Conceptual Framework

To further ensure that an asset-based lens was used to study student-parent success, this study specifically employed a Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) conceptual framework. Developed by Tara Yosso (2005), the CCW model identified six forms of cultural capital or wealth that members of underserved communities use to navigate societal systems and achieve success. Community Cultural Wealth provided a valuable framework for studying student parents, as it allowed the researcher to explore the unique strengths these students used to contribute to their educational experiences despite the challenges they face. By applying Yosso's concept of cultural wealth, the researcher examined how student parents utilized various forms of capital to balance their academic responsibilities and family life.

The six forms of cultural capital in the CCW model are as follows: Aspirational, Linguistic, Familial, Social, Navigational, and Resistance (Yosso, 2005). These forms were used to develop interview questions and for the theoretical analysis of the data collected from participant interviews. For example, familial capital was examined to identify the role, if any, that student parents' families, whether biological or chosen, may have played in their success in college. Similarly, social capital was explored to identify who in the student's social circle, both on and off campus, has been influential in supporting their educational journey and how that has impacted the student.

Additionally, aspirational capital, or the ability to maintain dreams for themselves and their children in the face of obstacles, was investigated to determine the impact, if any, that their dreams, goals, and motivation for better opportunities for themselves or their children have had on their success in college. Linguistic and navigational capital were considered to identify how student parents have utilized their communication skills, prior knowledge, and experiences to access resources and overcome barriers within the educational system. Furthermore, resistant capital was explored to identify if they have advocated for their needs or engaged in resistance against institutional structures that they perceived did not accommodate their needs.

These six concepts of cultural capital were used as a framework for formulating interview questions as well as for thematic analysis of data collected from in-depth interviews. By examining student parents through the lens of cultural wealth, the researcher gained a deeper understanding of the assets they possess to support their successful navigation of the higher education journey.

Research Design

According to the qualitative methodologist Busetto et al. (2020), qualitative research is beneficial for addressing complex research questions that cannot be effectively answered using quantitative methods alone. They note this approach explores the reasons behind observed phenomena, providing insights into why something is or is not happening. As such, they maintain that this approach is especially valuable when assessing complex, multi-component interventions and systems, where interactions between various factors can be intricate and complex to quantify. Additionally, the authors suggest that qualitative research should focus on improving interventions rather than merely evaluating effectiveness, thereby helping to determine what works, for whom, when, how, and why.

This study utilized a generic qualitative research design, relying on semi-structured, in-depth interviews for data collection. Percy et al. (2015) described this approach as one in which researchers seek to understand participants' opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections regarding their experiences. The authors argue that this approach also allows researchers to draw on existing knowledge and understandings about the topic to describe participants' perspectives and contribute to a broader understanding of the issue. These researchers further suggest that a generic qualitative design explores participants' views on the factors that shape their life experiences and how they interpret those experiences. The researcher used open-ended interview questions to gather participants' stories, opinions, and experiences, while encouraging them to share their views on the successes and challenges they faced during their educational journey. The descriptions provided by participants were analyzed to identify themes and patterns that revealed any common perceptions of student parents (Yin, 2016).

Site Selection

The site for this study was a mid-sized community college in the greater Houston, Texas area. According to the most recent data from the U.S. Department of Education (2025), the selected site is a federally designated Hispanic-Serving Institution with a student enrollment of approximately 7,700. These data indicated that students in this institution were 56% female, 44% male, 53% Hispanic, 26% White, 13% Black or African American, 2% Asian, and the remaining 6% belonged to other or unknown ethnicities. Approximately 30% of this student population were noted to have received Federal Pell Grants, indicating that at least one-third of the students were categorized as low-income.

In June 2023, the State of Texas passed House Bill (HB) 1361, which took effect on September 1, 2023. HB 1361 required community colleges in Texas to identify student parents

and assign a liaison for current or incoming students at the institution who are considered the parent or guardian of a child under 18 years of age (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2024). The selected site for this study began its work to identify student parents before the passage of HB 1361 by adding an option for students to self-identify as single parents on their Apply Texas Application, starting with the 2019-2020 academic year. The Associate Vice President of Student Success and Belonging shares that for the spring 2025 semester, approximately 556 students identified as single parents (K. Spiers, personal communication, February 27, 2025).

In addition to the option to identify as a single parent on the enrollment application, the institution utilized two other ways to collect student parent identification. The financial aid office ran reports each semester that identified students who claimed dependents on their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) applications. The Director of Financial Aid shared that for the 2024-2025 academic year, 977 students included dependents on their FAFSA application (F. Leal, personal communication, April 8, 2025).

The third method of identifying student parents at the institution began in the fall of 2024, when it launched a survey that has been continued each semester through its learning management system. This survey was used to ask students to share their parenting status. According to K. Spiers (personal communication, February 27, 2025), in the Fall of 2024, of the 3976 collected survey responses, 554 students identified as a parent or guardian of someone under the age of 18, and in the spring of 2025 semester, 2702 responses were collected, and 407 of those responses self-identified as a student parent. She also shared that despite using these three data collection methods, the institution was restricted and estimated the student parent enrollment, which they estimated to be approximately 20%. Because the application question and

the survey are both voluntary ways for students to self-identify, students may elect not to self-identify; therefore, not all parent students are likely to be identified correctly. In addition, according to F. Leal (personal communication, April 8, 2025), about 66% of students at the institution complete a FAFSA application.

Study Participants

Participants of this study were current or former community college students over the age of 18 who, during their time enrolled, were the parent or guardian of one or more children under the age of 18. To focus on student parents who have demonstrated success in college, study participants were limited to those who had earned 45 or more college hours or completed a certificate or degree at a community college.

Percy et al. (2015) suggested that using smaller, information-rich samples to collect information from experienced participants within a specific context is acceptable in generic qualitative studies. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with 12 participants. The researcher determined the number of participants needed to maximize the study by including diverse characteristics, such as the ages of children, employment status, and financial status.

Instrumentation

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary research instrument (Yin, 2016). The tools used in data collection for generic qualitative studies are designed based on the researcher's prior knowledge of the topic (Percy et al., 2015). Following this guide allowed the data to align with specific research objectives and provided a clear structure to guide the process. Jahja et al. (2021) described data collection in a generic qualitative study as a flexible and participant-centered process, with semi-structured, in-depth interviews being the primary method.

A semi-structured interview protocol was used for this study. The initial interview questions for this study were generalized to encourage participants to share their experiences by asking open-ended questions. Follow-up questions were used to encourage participants to expand specific aspects of their experiences. Interview questions were used to guide the interviews (Appendix B). Following Percy et al. (2015), research questions were designed to explore and understand how people interpret their experiences, construct the reality around them, and assign meaning to those experiences. These questions were designed to capture participants' perspectives and provide a rich, descriptive account of the phenomenon being studied. This study employed semi-structured interviews to provide a general framework while allowing the researcher to adapt the flow according to participants' responses. This format ensured that essential topics were covered consistently with all study participants, while allowing room for participants to introduce new insights (Peoples, 2021).

Data Collection

Percy et al. (2015) explained that data collection in generic qualitative studies focuses on gathering information about participants' experiences, opinions, attitudes, or beliefs regarding real-world phenomena. They maintain that generic qualitative studies prioritize practical, real-world insights. Before beginning data collection for this study, the researcher obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Kansas State University and the selected research site and contacted the president of the selected site to request access to participants.

Once IRB approval was obtained and the selected site approved the study, initial contact was made to recruit participants. Purposeful was employed to identify participants, as these are accepted methods for determining participants in a qualitative study (Peoples, 2021). Purposeful sampling was employed by contacting the registrar at the selected site and requesting that they

email all identified student parents with 45 or more credit hours via their institutional email, inviting them to participate in the study.

Flyers requesting participants were shared with the institution's student-parent liaison and academic advisors and posted in areas with high student traffic. Students who consented to participate in the study were asked to answer a short participant questionnaire (Appendix C) and invited to one-on-one interviews. The participant questionnaire focused on the student parents' employment status, Pell Grant status, the number and ages of dependents, and parenting status. It aimed to help identify contextual factors influencing their academic experiences and success.

Before full implementation, the interview questions were pilot tested with a small group of student parents to ensure that the survey items were clear, relevant, and effective in eliciting detailed responses, as recommended by Yin (2016). Piloting questions in a qualitative study is vital to ensure effectiveness and reliability. It allowed the researcher to identify potential misinterpretations, ensuring that participants clearly understood what they were asked (Hassan et al. 2006). Informed consent was obtained, and participants were informed that they could withdraw their consent to participate in the study at any point, either before or during the interviews.

This study employed semi-structured interviews to gather data, where the researcher followed the interview protocol but also allowed for follow-up inquiries to clarify insights provided and explore emerging topics. All interviews were audio and video-recorded through Webex to capture participants' exact words, tone, and emotions. Participants were encouraged to leave their cameras off during their interviews, and recordings were moved to a password protected external hard drive to protect their anonymity. In keeping with Peoples' (2021) recommendations, transcriptions of these recordings were made and serve as the primary data for

analysis, ensuring accuracy and richness in capturing participants' narratives. Each interview was scheduled for 90 minutes to allow participants to share detailed accounts of their lived experiences. Following Percy et al. (2015), the focus was on understanding participants' reflections and ideas about external events or processes to collect data that reveal how participants perceive and interact with the world around them. Including additional open-ended initial and follow-up questions in a semi-structured interview enabled the researcher to adapt to the participant's input as needed (Peoples, 2021). Interview recordings will be kept in a secure location and retained for five years before being destroyed.

Data Analysis

This study used both theoretical analysis and inductive analysis to analyze data collected from interviews with student parents. As Percy et al. (2015) described, theoretical analysis involves examining qualitative data based on predetermined categories or themes derived from existing theories or research. The data collected for theoretical analysis were explored through the lens of the six forms of cultural capital described in the Community Cultural Wealth Model (Yosso, 2005).

Theoretical analysis followed a structured process that began with immersing oneself in the data by reading, reviewing, and highlighting meaningful segments that aligned with the predefined themes (Percy et al., 2015). The themes used when analyzing the data in this survey included the six types of cultural capital described by Yosso (2005): aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance. These categories served as predetermined themes that guided the analysis, while allowing for sub-themes and new themes to emerge that expanded on or brought nuance to the framework.

Percy et al. (2015) stated that the next step for the researcher was to code the data by clustering related items into patterns and organizing these patterns under predetermined themes. Any patterns that did not fit the existing categories were kept separately for further evaluation and allowed for the emergence of new themes. Data points were grouped under each capital type, with patterns identified within and across participants. Patterns identified multiple times across participants within themes were categorized as sub-themes. After clustering the patterns into themes and sub-themes, the researcher revisited any unclassified patterns and identified new themes that contributed to the research (Percy et al., 2015).

Finally, the themes were synthesized into a comprehensive analysis, each supported by direct quotes from the data (Percy et al., 2015). This step-by-step process ensured that the analysis remained grounded in theory while allowing for new insights from the data. By grounding the analysis in this framework, the researcher was able to thoroughly explore how participants leveraged their cultural wealth while remaining open to other contributions that enhanced their understanding of their experiences and helped them respond to the overarching research questions.

In addition, inductive analysis (Percy et al., 2015), was used to identify themes related to data collected regarding what resources or support services student parents found to be most useful in supporting their success in college to address research question 1(b). Inductive analysis (Percy et al., 2015) was used to identify non-CCW themes in the data by using open coding, grouping codes into categories, and refining them into themes that addressed research question 1(b)

Limitations

Qualitative research illuminates subjective experiences, providing nuanced understanding (Busetto et al., 2020). However, it has distinct limitations. Unlike quantitative approaches, qualitative research does not rely on predetermined sample sizes, raising questions about generalizability (Busetto et al., 2020). Each participant's unique background means their experiences, particularly regarding resources and supports influencing success, may not transfer to other student parents. Qualitative data analysis depends on researcher interpretation, which can introduce bias and reduce perceived objectivity (Busetto et al., 2020). To enhance objectivity, the researcher created a reflexivity statement and relied on peer review to reduce bias and strengthen validity.

This study focused on 12 successful student parents at a single community college, making findings context-specific and potentially unrepresentative of all student-parent experiences. By emphasizing perspectives of those who achieved academic or career success, the study may have underrepresented individuals facing ongoing barriers or who did not persist. Limited institutional data on student parents necessitated reliance on self-identification, preventing comparison with quantitative enrollment or completion data. Participants' reflections may have been influenced by selective recall, where recollections align with current beliefs while contradictory details are forgotten (Schacter, 2001).

Despite these limitations, the study provided valuable insight into how personal, community, and institutional factors shape student-parent success and offered a framework for institutional reflection and improvement.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher completed Protection of Human Subjects training for researchers to learn about ethical principles, regulatory requirements, and best practices for safeguarding the rights, welfare, and well-being of participants (CITI Program, n.d.). Additionally, the researcher obtained approval from the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the IRB of the chosen site for the study before conducting any interviews. Peoples (2021) recommended that researchers conducting a study use extra care to ensure the confidentiality of participants. For this study, participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Informed consent forms were collected, and participants were assured they could withdraw their consent at any time.

All recordings and data collected during the study were securely stored on an external hard drive. This drive was kept in a locked, secure location to ensure the confidentiality and integrity of the data. To comply with ethical guidelines and institutional policies, the data was retained in this secure location and will be retained for a period of five years. Access will be restricted to authorized personnel only during this time, further safeguarding the information. After the five-year retention period, the data will be securely disposed of to ensure participants' privacy, including the permanent deletion of digital files and the physical destruction of hard copies.

The researcher utilized generative artificial intelligence tools to assist with preliminary organizational tasks, including brainstorming ideas, developing outlines, refining subtopic titles, and improving spelling, punctuation, and grammar. However, all substantive research, analysis, interpretation, and written content represent the researcher's own original work. At no point was any confidential or identifying information about research participants uploaded to or processed

through AI platforms, ensuring full compliance with ethical research standards and participant privacy protections.

Reflexivity Statement

Peoples (2021) recommended that the researcher remain mindful of their own potential biases and preconceptions throughout the process and provide a reflexivity statement to assist the researcher in understanding and describing their perspectives, ensuring that the participants' experiences remain central. I am a single mother of four, currently pursuing my doctorate and balancing the challenges of education, my career, and parenting. I have been a student parent through three graduate degrees and would consider myself successful.

As a student parent, I brought a dual perspective to my research, having firsthand experience balancing the demands of academic life and caregiving. I believe this shared identity fostered a sense of trust and rapport with participants of this study, potentially encouraging them to share their stories openly. My personal journey as a student parent equipped me with unique knowledge that served as an asset to this research, providing me with an intuitive understanding of the lived experiences of participants, while allowing me to recognize subtle nuances in their stories that might otherwise go unnoticed by researchers without this shared identity. However, I recognized that my own journey might lead me to expect specific challenges or coping strategies in their experiences. To mitigate this, I actively engaged in bracketing, consciously setting aside my assumptions to ensure that my interpretations honor the unique narratives of the participants. By prioritizing their voices, I aimed to validate my findings and uphold the ethical standards of qualitative research. I reflected throughout the study to help guard against bias or subjectivity that could arise due to my own lived experiences as a student parent.

Conducting this study was both a professional and deeply personal endeavor. While my shared identity with participants allowed for empathy, I remained vigilant to create an environment where they felt free to express both positive and negative experiences without fear of judgment or bias. Continuous reflexivity guided me in navigating this balance, helping me remain aware of my influence on the research process. Through this approach, I aimed to ensure that the study made a meaningful contribution to understanding and supporting the experiences of student parents, amplifying their voices while maintaining the integrity of their perspectives.

Study Quality

The quality of a qualitative study was crucial to ensure its credibility and rigor. Tracy (2010) provided a comprehensive framework for evaluating and guiding the design, execution, and reporting of qualitative research. The table below evaluated the study design's quality, ensuring it meets the rigorous standards Tracy (2010) outlined for qualitative research.

Table 3.1 Tracy's Big Eight Criteria

Criteria	Application to the Study
Worthy Topic (Tracy, 2010)	The study addressed the underexplored experiences of successful student parents in community colleges, a population often overlooked in higher education research. The topic is timely, significant, and relevant to improving institutional support and policy.
Rich Rigor	The study employed rigorous data collection methods, including in-depth semi-structured interviews. A diverse sample of student parents was selected to capture a range of varied experiences.
Sincerity	The researcher reflected on and wrote a reflexivity statement to acknowledge and manage personal biases. Transparency was maintained by documenting decision-making processes and methodological choices.
Credibility	Direct quotes from participants provided authentic voices.

Resonance	The study was designed to contribute to the literature on student parents by offering insights into their unique challenges and coping strategies. The study examined specific experiences that contributed to the success of student parents. It was designed to inform institutional practices and policies to better support this population.
Significant Contribution	The study aimed to contribute to the literature on student parents by providing insights into their unique challenges and coping strategies. The study examined specific experiences that contribute to the success of student parents. It was designed to inform institutional practices and policies to better support this population.
Ethical	Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and allowing participants to withdraw from the study at any time. The study adhered to Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines and maintained participants' privacy.
Meaningful Coherence	The study demonstrated coherence by aligning its purpose, research questions, theoretical framework, conceptual framework, and methodology. The findings addressed the research questions and offered a cohesive narrative that reflects the participants' lived experiences.

Tracy (2010) provided a robust framework for assessing the quality of qualitative research. This study was credible, rigorous, and impactful, adhering to these criteria and ultimately contributing valuable knowledge while fostering meaningful change. The study met Tracy's (2010) criteria for high-quality qualitative research through its intentional design and rigorous approach. It addressed the lived experiences of successful student parents in community colleges, an often-overlooked population in higher education. This topic is both timely and significant, focusing on improving institutional support and policies for this group. Rigorous data collection methods, including in-depth semi-structured interviews, were employed, and a diverse sample of student parents helped capture a range of perspectives. The researcher demonstrated

sincerity through reflexivity, managing personal biases and documenting decision-making processes and methodological choices to maintain transparency.

Credibility was strengthened by incorporating direct participant quotes, which added authenticity to the findings. Additionally, interview questions were piloted with a small group of student parents before being used with the study participants. According to Hassan et al. (2006), piloting questions in a qualitative study is a crucial step to ensure the effectiveness and reliability of the instrument. It allows researchers to identify potential misinterpretations of the questions, ensuring that participants clearly understand what is being asked. By testing the questions in advance, the researcher refined the language to eliminate confusion and enhance clarity, ensuring that respondents interpreted each question as intended. Additionally, the pilot helped assess the overall structure and flow of the questions. It was essential to ensure that questions were logically ordered, avoiding unnecessary repetition and maintaining a natural flow (Hassan et al., 2006).

The study fostered resonance by presenting vivid, relatable narratives designed to engage educators, policymakers, and other student parents. It aimed to contribute to the literature by offering insights into the challenges and coping strategies of student parents, providing practical recommendations for institutional practices and policies. Ethical considerations were addressed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw, ensuring compliance with IRB guidelines. Finally, the study design demonstrated meaningful coherence by aligning its purpose, research questions, theoretical framework, and methodology, as shown within the alignment table. The findings were structured to offer a cohesive narrative that thoroughly reflected the participants' lived experiences.

Summary

This study examined how successful student parents attending community college utilize their cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and other community or institutional resources and support services to successfully balance academic responsibilities with parenting and other obligations. This chapter detailed the alignment of the study's theoretical and conceptual frameworks with its overall design. It explained the site and participant selection processes. Additionally, the chapter outlined the researcher's approach to data collection and analysis, while addressing the strategies employed to uphold ethical standards and ensure the study's quality and rigor.

Chapter 4 - Research Results and Analysis

This chapter presents the results and an analysis of data collected to investigate the personal, community, and institutional factors that contribute to academic and career success among student parents attending community college. The chapter begins with a review of the research questions and then the researcher presents an overview of participant demographics and profiles. Next are findings organized by themes related to the conceptual framework of *community cultural wealth*, as well as by themes related to *community and institutional resources and services* found to support student parents' success in college. The chapter concludes with a review of emergent themes providing additional insights into study participants' successful strategies and resources and a summary of the overall findings.

Research Questions

This study was guided by one overarching research question and two sub-questions designed to explore the multifaceted nature of student-parent success in community college settings. The overarching research question examined the personal, community, and institutional factors that contribute to academic and career success among this population. Two sub-questions were used to delve deeper into specific aspects of this inquiry: first, investigating how student parents draw upon Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework to achieve their educational goals, and second, identifying the community and institutional resources that student parents perceive as most effective in supporting their persistence and achievement. Together, these questions provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the variety of assets, resources, and support systems that enable student parents to thrive in their educational and career pursuits. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What personal, community, and institutional factors contribute to the academic and career success of student parents attending community college?
 - a) In what ways do student parents utilize elements of *community cultural wealth* (Yosso, 2005) to achieve academic and career success in community college?
 - b) What community or institutional resources and support services do student parents perceive as most effective in supporting their success?

Participant Demographics

The researcher conducted individual interviews with 12 female participants who met the study criteria of demonstrating a measurable level of success in community college by having earned 45 or more college hours or completed a certificate or degree. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the study participants.

Table 4.1: Participant Demographics

Participant	Employment Status	Pell Status	Number of Children	Ages of Children	Family Status	Major	First Generation
Marisol (Female)	Part-Time	Eligible	2	13, 6	Two Parent	Accounting	Yes
Clara (Female)	Full-Time	Eligible	2	1, 8	Single Parent	Safety Management	Yes
Sophia (Female)	Part-Time	Not Eligible	2	10, 7	Two Parent	Healthcare Administration	Yes
Elaina (Female)	Part-Time	Eligible	1	15	Two Parent	Education	Yes
Rosa (Female)	Full-Time	Eligible	2	16, 14	Single Parent	Business	Yes
Lila (Female)	Part-Time	Eligible	2	6, Infant	Two Parent	Nutrition	Yes
Isabel (Female)	Full-Time	Eligible	2	17, 16	Two Parent	Business	Yes
Daniella (Female)	Full-Time	Eligible	1	7	Single Parent	Safety Management	Yes

Lindsey (Female)	Full-Time	Eligible	1	Infant	Two Parent	General Studies	Yes
Monica (Female)	Unemployed	Eligible	4	6, 5, 3, 1	Two Parent	Nursing	Yes
Naomi (Female)	Unemployed	Not Eligible (<i>International</i>)	2	14, 5	Single Parent	Nursing	Yes
Rachel (Female)	Part-time	Eligible	4	6, 5, 4, 3	Single Parent	Nursing	No

Note: Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities

Among the participants, six were employed full-time, four were engaged in part-time work, and two were not employed at the time of the study. Ten participants qualified for Pell Grant support, while two participants were not eligible for Pell as one of the participants was an international student. The family composition included seven participants from two-parent households and five single parents. Participants were raising between one and four children, with ages spanning from infancy through late adolescence.

The majority (11) of the study participants identified as first-generation college students. The U.S. Department of Education defines a first-generation college student as an individual whose parents did not complete a bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Although first-generation status was not included in the original participant questionnaire, the topic emerged during the interviews, prompting the researcher to incorporate a follow-up question on first-generation status.

Participant Profiles

The following profiles provide an overview background of each participant, incorporating demographic information from the questionnaire and background details shared during the interviews. These profiles offer context for understanding each participant's educational journey and personal and family circumstances.

Marisol

Marisol was a 33-year-old woman who worked part-time and was eligible for Pell Grant funding. She has two children, ages 13 and 6, and lived in a two-parent household. Marisol identified as a Mexican immigrant and a first-generation college student who completed her GED before enrolling in college to pursue a degree in accounting. Marisol was one semester away from completing her associate's degree at the time of the interview. She utilized the college's single parents' program, child care assistance, and various support resources while attending college.

Clara

Clara worked full-time and was eligible for Pell Grant funding. She has two children, ages 1 and 8, and identified as a single parent. Clara was a 34-year-old first-generation college student who began her educational journey at the age of 26, after becoming a mother. She balanced full-time work and full-time school while raising her daughters. At the time of the interview, she had completed an associate's degree in safety management and was pursuing a second associate's degree in business. Clara utilized the college's childcare assistance programs, food market, single-parent support group, and other campus resources.

Sophia

Sophia, age 36, worked part-time and was not eligible for Pell Grant funding. She had two children, ages 10 and 7, and lived in a two-parent household. Sophia was a married mother and a first-generation college student who initially pursued a career in pharmacy before switching to healthcare administration. Her husband was also pursuing his education while she attended college. At the time of the interview, she had completed her associate's degree.

However, she was still enrolled at the college, taking a few additional courses to continue toward her bachelor's and master's degrees.

Elaina

Elaina was 44 years old, worked part-time, and was eligible for Pell Grant funding. She had one child, age 15, and lived in a two-parent household. Elaina was a first-generation college student and aspiring teacher who returned to education after homeschooling her son. At the time of the interview, Elaina had completed 45 credit hour and two semesters remaining to complete her Associate of Arts in teaching. She utilized campus resources, including tutoring services and the writing center, as she pursued her studies.

Rosa

Rosa worked full-time and received Pell Grant funding. She had two children, ages 16 and 14, and was a single parent. Rosa was a 36-year-old first-generation college student pursuing a degree in business management who planned to graduate with her associate's degree at the end of the semester she was interviewed. She experienced a temporary loss of financial aid during a family crisis and was supported by the TRiO Student Support Services (SSS) program. She also utilized campus resources, including gas cards and the food pantry.

Lila

Lila worked part-time and was eligible for Pell Grant funding. She had two children, ages six and an infant, and lived in a two-parent household. Lila was a 26-year-old mother and first-generation college student who was initially undocumented and received a scholarship to the college. She changed her major multiple times from environmental science to paralegal studies to registered dietitian. Due to her degree changes, Lila had taken some courses that did not apply to her current major and had two or three semesters left until she earned her degree. She utilized

campus resources, including child care assistance, TRiO SSS, counseling services, and tutoring support.

Isabel

Isabel, age 46, worked full-time and was eligible for Pell Grant funding. She had two children, ages 17 and 16, and lived in a two-parent household. Isabel was a married mother and first-generation college student who returned to education to pursue an associate degree in business administration more than two decades after leaving school. She had already earned one certificate and planned to complete a second during the semester in which she was interviewed. Isabel was the first in her family of 10 siblings to graduate from high school and the first to attend college. As a child, she attended over 20 schools in different states as part of a migrant family.

Daniela

Daniela was 30 years old and a single mother of a 7-year-old child. She received Pell grants and worked full-time. She often supplemented her income with part-time jobs, such as bartending or serving. Daniela was a first-generation college student pursuing a degree in safety management technology and had already earned a certificate in the field. She returned to school once her son began pre-K, making her studies and his education journey parallel. Daniela received child care assistance from the college.

Lindsey

Lindsey was a 30-year-old and a new mother to a ten-month-old son who received childcare assistance and Pell Grant funding. She worked full-time while pursuing her degree at the community college. Lindsey planned to pursue a bachelor's degree after graduation the following semester; however, she was still undecided about which specific field she wanted to

focus on. A first-generation college student, Lindsey first attended college ten years ago but left before completing her program. After building a career in municipal work, she decided to return to college following the birth of her son, motivated by her desire to create a better future for her family.

Monica

Monica was a 26-year-old first-generation college student, wife, and mother of four children ages 6, 5, 3, and 1. She was in the final semester of her associate degree in nursing and worked part-time for some of her journey, but had to stop working as she progressed into clinicals. Monica decided to attend this community college because of its strong nursing program and proximity to home. She also received Pell funding and child care assistance.

Naomi

Naomi was a 37-year-old first-generation international student and mother of two who came to the United States from Africa in 2018. After her husband's work ended and he returned home, Naomi decided to remain in the U.S. with her two children so they could continue their education and have greater opportunities. Due to her international status, she was not eligible for Pell funding and could not be employed. Naomi was in her last year of the nursing program at the time of her interview.

Rachel

Rachel was a 29-year-old single mother of four young children, ages 6, 5, 4, and 3. She described her life as a constant balancing act between school, parenting, and finances. Rachel worked part-time, received child care assistance, and Pell funding. She was majoring in nursing and was the only participant who was not a first-generation college student. While working

toward her associate's degree, Rachel was also enrolled in a dual program for a BSN and planned to graduate from both programs in the semester following the interview.

Findings Related to Community Cultural Wealth

The following analysis presents findings related to the first research sub-question: *In what ways do student parents utilize elements of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to achieve academic and career success in community college?* Using the Community Cultural Wealth framework as the primary analytical lens, the researcher explored how participants reflected upon the six themes defining cultural capital: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital. Additional sub-themes emerged from the data related to each of the major themes, providing more thorough descriptions of how participants used their various forms of cultural wealth capital. The data revealed that each of the six cultural capitals was evident across participants, often overlapping and reinforcing one another.

Aspirational Capital

Among the student parents in this study, aspirations were deeply intertwined with their identities as mothers and first-generation students. Their drive to succeed was often anchored in a desire to create stability, serve as role models for their children, and alter the trajectory of their families' futures. Across participants, educational aspiration represented both personal fulfillment and a generational investment in their children's opportunities.

Education as Legacy

For most participants, pursuing higher education symbolized the opportunity to break intergenerational cycles of limited educational attainment. Of the 12 participants, 11 identified as first-generation college students, and many viewed their academic journeys as the beginning of a

legacy they wanted their children to continue. Regardless of work status or family structure, participants often connected their motivation to the desire for their children to "see" what was possible. Marisol, a part-time working mother of two in a two-parent household, described her pursuit of a degree as a living example for her daughter; "I wanted my daughter to go to school, and I don't want to motivate her without me having anything to... to prove myself or back her up."

For single parents like Clara, who worked full-time while raising two young children, education served as both an inspiration and a necessity. She explained, "I wanted to finish college... and I want them [my children] to know that it's possible." Participants with fewer children, such as Daniela, emphasized the importance of creating a model of independence for their sons. At the same time, those with larger families, such as Monica and Rachel, viewed college as a means to establish generational security and financial stability.

Persistence Despite Barriers

Despite varied life circumstances, persistence emerged as a shared expression of aspirational capital. Those balancing full-time employment, such as Rosa and Daniela, spoke of exhaustion but also of determination to "push through the hard times." Single parents described persistence as a matter of survival, continuing classes despite work schedules and childcare gaps, while participants in two-parent households emphasized the importance of partnership and shared responsibility in sustaining motivation.

Sophia, a married mother of two, described this determination: "No, I'm not gonna stop now. I'm gonna continue... I'm gonna go for my bachelor's and hopefully my master's." In contrast, Rachel, a single mother of four, reflected on the practical challenges of persistence: "I'm paying two tuitions... daycare, household expenses... but I know once I graduate it'll be

worth it.” These experiences highlight that while all participants demonstrated high aspiration, the pathways toward persistence differed according to access to support systems and family structures.

Stability and Career Goals

Across participants, aspirations were also grounded in the pursuit of stability, as well as financial, emotional, and professional goals. Several participants linked their degrees to the hope of securing dependable careers. Lila, a part-time worker and mother of two, viewed college as a gateway to long-term stability: “It keeps me coming back... I know I can provide stability for them someday.” Similarly, Monica, a mother of four, connected her decision to study nursing with witnessing her family’s instability in labor jobs, explaining her goal was “to have a stable job inside... knowing I can’t get laid off.”

Participants who worked full-time often described college as a means to advance their careers. At the same time, unemployed mothers, such as Naomi, framed education as a re-entry point into the workforce and a means to fulfill long-held dreams. Despite differences in background, the overarching narrative reflected the belief that higher education was key to achieving independence and modeling resilience for their children.

Familial Capital

For the student parents in this study, familial capital manifested as motivation and tangible support, extending from their children to spouses, parents, and extended family networks.

Children as Motivators

Every participant identified their children as central to their educational motivation, though the nature of this motivation varied by family structure and circumstances. For some,

children served as witnesses to their persistence; for others, they represented the economic imperative driving degree completion. Rosa captured the significance of visible achievement when reflecting on her graduation: "My kids were so proud to see me walk across the stage. I didn't have to just tell them about the value of education; they saw it in me." This embodiment of educational values went beyond verbal encouragement, offering children tangible proof that higher education was both accessible and achievable.

Rachel, a single mother of four, articulated a different dimension of child-centered motivation rooted in practical necessity: "I have four kids and I'm sitting here thinking that's four colleges, four insurances, four cars, four everything basically. And there's no way that I was working retail... there's no way this is going to support all my children." Here, children functioned not only as emotional inspiration but as the economic calculus underlying her educational decisions.

Spousal and Immediate Family Support

For participants in two-parent households, spousal support was found to be essential to their academic persistence. This support took multiple forms, including logistical, emotional, and financial, and often required explicit negotiation and collaborative planning. Sophia and her husband developed a systematic approach to managing childcare during study periods: "We were there for each other, you know, like... when you have homework, you let me know and I'll take the kids... When I have homework, he'll take the kids." This reciprocal arrangement illustrated how academic success for student parents often depended on partners' willingness to absorb additional domestic labor.

Monica's experience highlighted the financial dimension of spousal support, particularly for those in demanding programs: "He has worked this whole time, so I didn't have to work

[because] I could imagine working too. I worked my first semester but after that I didn't, it's really hard." Her husband's employment enabled her to commit fully to nursing school, a privilege she recognized as critical to her success. Elaina described how family members mobilized to prevent her withdrawal: "My husband's like, No, you've come too far. And my son's even the same way. He's like, No, mom, you've come too far." This emotional support proved decisive during moments of doubt, revealing how immediate family members actively protected participants' educational investments.

Rachel, despite being a single parent, demonstrated how extended immediate family networks could function similarly to spousal support: "It's both sets of the grandparents. They both help... Then I have, we all have it's really everybody again it's uncles, everybody like we have a pretty big village." Her description of "going down the list of who can and who can't pick up right now" illustrated the complex coordination required when family-based childcare served as the primary support system.

Extended Family and Intergenerational Influence

Beyond immediate households, the extended family provided both practical assistance and models of resilience that shaped participants' educational identities. These influences often carried intergenerational weight, connecting participants' current struggles with family members' past experiences and future possibilities. Rosa identified her father as her primary supporter outside her children: "Outside of my kids, it's been just my dad... they've had my back through everything... And they're like, No, no, you're not done. Get your butt up, get out there." This sustained encouragement functioned as accountability, helping her persist through moments when stopping seemed easier.

For Monica, her grandmother directly influenced her career choice: "My grandma is the whole reason I even looked into nursing. She had always had a lot of things wrong with her, but she was always a fighter." Her grandmother's death continued to shape her professional practice: "Every little old lady or little old man that I see, you know, I feel for them because... that's why... I'm loving them like I loved her." Monica also credited her mother's longstanding emphasis on independence: "My mom, since I was smaller, she always said you, you get something, you be independent and you work your butt off." These messages, embedded in childhood, became mantras guiding her adult educational decisions.

Lila found inspiration in her mother's example of balancing competing demands: "My mom... was a single mom for ten years, and she was also studying and working at the same time... I always looked up to that." This model of maternal persistence normalized the challenges Lila faced and provided evidence that success was possible under similar circumstances. Rachel described receiving the motivation for her return to education from her aunt: "My aunt actually told me while I was working retail, that I better get my butt in college before she beats me because she does not see me working retail the rest of my life. And ... my grandmother passed away recently after that conversation, and she goes, Grandma would not want you to be here right now." This direct intervention, connected to her grandmother's memory, transformed abstract aspiration into urgent action.

Naomi's experience illustrated how familial capital operated across geographic distance. Though her family remained in Africa and could not provide financial assistance, they offered critical emotional support: "My family right now since they're in Africa, the only thing they do is just to encourage me when I'm like losing it, like I'm giving up, they're just there to say no, if there's other means try, continue trying." Simultaneously, her sister's local presence provided

tangible childcare assistance: "I also have my sister who has helped me a lot with my kids, so that has helped me like to ease it down instead of me thinking too much of saying, okay, I have to do this for my children."

Social Capital

For participants in this study, social capital extended beyond family to include peers, mentors, faith communities, and institutional relationships. These connections provided practical resources, emotional encouragement, and critical information that participants might not have otherwise had access to. The diversity of these networks, from nursing cohorts to church communities to reciprocal childcare arrangements, illustrated how student parents actively cultivated relationships that sustained their educational journeys.

Peer and Mentor Support

Participants identified specific individuals who facilitated their navigation of college systems and provided both academic and personal support. These relationships often crossed over the lines between friendship, mentorship, and practical assistance, creating multifaceted support systems. Elaina described receiving crucial early guidance from a friend with institutional knowledge: "I had my friend, who's also an adjunct chemistry professor at [the college], help me navigate how to get registered and how to do all that." This information helped processes that might otherwise have served as barriers to entry, illustrating how personal connections could compensate for unfamiliarity with institutional procedures.

Clara developed a relationship with a childcare provider that transcended transactional arrangements: the provider became like "another mom" to her family. This transformation of a service relationship into familial support demonstrated how student parents often needed to expand their definition of family to include those who sustained their educational pursuits.

Monica described how her nursing cohort became essential to managing both academic demands and parenting responsibilities: "A lot of my friends in the cohort, they have kids, and sometimes we do study groups, and our kids are just playing. [Because] obviously we can't just drop our kids off." The shared experience of parenting while pursuing demanding coursework created natural alliances. The sustained nature of nursing programs intensified these bonds: "We're with the same people for two years. So those relationships are... we already know how we study and how, you know, we already know who to go to for what." This extended contact allowed relationships to develop beyond surface-level networking into genuine interdependence.

Lindsey's support system illustrated how friendships could adapt to accommodate the unique constraints of student parents: "Sometimes that looks like a girl's night in on the couch while we're watching a comfort show and I'm on my laptop doing schoolwork." Her friend and the friend's husband created space for Lindsey to simultaneously maintain social connections and complete academic work, recognizing that she could not fully separate these aspects of her life. Naomi's introduction to the college came through a personal connection: "I had a student there [at the college]. He's the one who introduced me to [the college]." Similarly, Daniela learned about campus resources through a friend in the nursing program: "It was actually a friend that told me about it because she's a nurse, she's in a nursing program at the college. And she utilizes all of those resources, and she told me about it." These examples revealed how peer networks functioned as information pipelines, directing participants toward resources they would not have discovered independently.

Daniela also described developing a reciprocal support network among single parents: "The friends that I have are all single mothers or even single dads, and we all kind of adjust our lives to helping each other out... we just spread it all out for all the kids. If one has it, they all

do." This collective approach to childcare and mutual support demonstrated how student parents with similar circumstances created informal systems that mimicked extended family structures.

Community and Faith-Based Networks

Beyond immediate peer relationships, some participants drew strength from established community connections that provided consistent encouragement and affirmation. These networks offered emotional support and created contexts in which participants' educational efforts were recognized and celebrated. Isabel described the profound impact of her long-term faith community: "I've been there 25 years, and every single person there supports me. They love on me, they pray for me, they encourage me." This sustained, collective support provided a stable foundation as other aspects of her life shifted in response to the demands of school and parenting. The longevity of these relationships meant that her church community had witnessed her journey over time and could celebrate her progress with genuine investment in her success.

Marisol noted that her educational journey resonated beyond her immediate household, influencing her broader family and community connections. These ripple effects illustrated how student parents' persistence could inspire others facing similar barriers and demonstrate that educational mobility remained possible.

Navigational Capital

For the student parents in this study, navigational capital encompassed learning to advocate for their needs, developing sophisticated organizational systems, and identifying institutional resources that could support their success. These skills were not innate but developed through experience, often emerging from trial and error as participants learned which strategies worked within the specific context of community college while managing parenting responsibilities.

Self-Advocacy and Institutional Communication

Participants described learning to speak up for themselves within institutional settings, a skill that often developed over time as they became more comfortable navigating faculty relationships and administrative processes. For some, self-advocacy meant challenging unfair treatment; for others, it meant communicating about scheduling conflicts or seeking accommodations. Marisol explained how a professor encouraged her to formalize her concerns: "He [the professor] recommended [for] me to file a complaint... You need to advocate for yourself because if you don't say anything, it will stay like that." This guidance reframed self-advocacy not as complaint but as legitimate participation in institutional accountability processes. Clara echoed this understanding simply: "Sometimes you have to speak up for yourself."

Elaina described developing comfort with faculty communication over time: "In the beginning, not that comfortable, but as I got to know... I would become a little bit more comfortable." When scheduling conflicts arose, she learned to communicate proactively: "They've all been pretty respectful, understanding when something's come up, all they've asked is, you know, send a quick email." This experience revealed that many faculty members responded positively when students communicated clearly about their constraints. Sophia described negotiating with a professor about bringing her sick child to class, demonstrating willingness to request accommodations when parenting responsibilities conflicted with academic expectations. Such negotiations required participants to assess both their own needs and the institutional flexibility, then advocate for practical solutions.

Daniela's experience illustrated the limits of self-advocacy within institutional constraints. When facing challenges with course registration and scheduling, she attempted to

resolve the situation: "I tried really hard to like get that to swing. And it just didn't work for me, and I ended up having to wait and retake other classes... I did try to advocate for myself."

Though unsuccessful, her effort demonstrated understanding that advocacy was both appropriate and necessary, even when institutional structures ultimately could not accommodate her needs.

Organizational Strategies and Time Management

Participants developed systems for managing academic responsibilities alongside parenting and, for many, employment. These organizational approaches varied in their specifics but shared common features: detailed planning, strategic prioritization, and constant adaptation to unpredictable family demands. Sophia described her comprehensive planning process: "As soon as like the syllabus comes out... I'll look through the entire syllabus. I'll write it down in my planner. And then that also gets integrated into my monthly planner." This multilayered system included course-level, weekly, and monthly planning, creating visibility into upcoming demands and enabling proactive rather than reactive management of assignments.

Elaina structured her study time around her child's schedule: "I'll try to do it while he's at school or when he's in his room playing games, I'll try to do my school work." Similarly, Lila explained: "I tried to study whenever I don't have them... I study as much as I can whenever they're not here, and when they're here, I'm just present with them." These approaches reflected intentional boundary-setting, maximizing study efficiency during children's absence while preserving quality time when together. Monica implemented rigorous daily planning to manage her nursing program alongside raising four children: "I plan out my week. I plan out my days, I make sure I write it down every single day. This is what you have to do, this is how much time you have." She also developed a strategy of front-loading study time to protect family time: "My class doesn't start till twelve, but I'll be at the school by eight... studying from eight to twelve, do

lecture 12 to four, go home and still study... I get it done early, so when I come home, I'll study for two hours, and then I'll have time with my kids." Her planning also accommodated unpredictability: "Kids are so unpredictable, you don't know what you're gonna deal with. What if one gets sick? What if one has something for school? You want to make sure you plan out everything so you can have time for your studies."

Rachel developed mobile study strategies that transformed waiting time into productive academic work: "I take it on the go. All the books I read in the car through the self-read [online textbook]... I literally just take my work wherever I'm going. I have a go bag that I just take with me, so if I'm waiting in the doctor's office for the kids, I'm sitting there doing my extra work." She also extended her available study hours into late evening: "I stay up pretty late doing work. After the kids go to bed at 8:30, I'm maybe up until two, three in the morning studying and doing work so I can still stay ahead in class." This strategy sacrificed sleep to create sufficient academic time without compromising daytime availability for her children. Lindsey acknowledged the fundamental challenge underlying all organizational strategies: "Balancing it all, like, you only get 24 hours in the day and eight of, I'm a full-time employee, and so having to try to balance my time between being a mom, being a full-time employee, being a wife, and still finding time for myself, that's been my biggest struggle." Her approach focused on maximizing existing time: "It's trying to make those 24 hours stretch for as much as possible, like learning that you have to wake up early or you know it might mean going to bed later."

Naomi's experience illustrated how implementing planning strategies improved academic outcomes: "Right now, what has helped me a lot is putting a plan, because every day, every time I just used like to wake up and, okay, I'll do this, I'll do that without having the actual planning. So right now, with the progress that I see in my school, I see that my planning is working." Her

reflection captured the learning curve many participants experienced, discovering that intentional planning yielded better results than reactive time management. Daniela described strategic multitasking that integrated academic work into daily activities: "I never put school on the back burner. I never tell myself I don't have the time... I'm sitting here at this desk. I had time to knock out some schoolwork. You know, I'm doing laundry, I have time to listen to a lesson... I multitask a lot." This approach required constant vigilance for available time and willingness to fragment study sessions across the day's activities.

Resource Navigation and Institutional Knowledge

Beyond organizational skills, navigational capital included learning to identify and access institutional resources. Participants varied in their awareness of available supports, with some discovering resources early and others not learning about them until well into their programs. This variation highlighted how institutional resource navigation often depended on informal information networks rather than systematic institutional communication. Rosa described utilizing multiple support services: "Yeah, I've used the student resource center. I've got gas cards from them and the food pantry. I've used them as well, and those who've been super helpful." Her comprehensive awareness of available resources enabled her to address immediate material needs that might otherwise have compromised her ability to attend classes or complete coursework.

Lila discovered unexpected financial support through email communication: "I thought I wasn't gonna be able to pay for college... but I saw in my email that I had gotten approved for a scholarship." This serendipitous discovery highlighted the importance for student parents to closely monitor institutional communications, as resources might not be proactively offered. Lindsey described receiving crucial guidance from financial aid staff when she was unfamiliar

with available processes: "I had to call the financial aid office, and I was like, I don't know what I'm doing... and she kind of walked me through it... She was like, well, check out the student resource center. She goes, they have childcare assistance." This staff member's initiative in directing Lindsey toward additional resources demonstrated how individual employees can significantly impact students' success by connecting them to supports beyond the scope of their immediate office.

Rachel's experience highlighted the consequences of delayed resource awareness: "I wish I would have known about the daycare [assistance] [because] I didn't find out about that until like way later... I didn't know about the grocery [market], I didn't know about the gas cards, I didn't know about anything... I wish I would have known about that sooner." Despite eventually "using everything offered," the initial period without this knowledge likely created unnecessary financial stress and may have jeopardized her persistence. Her experience underscored the importance of systematic resource orientation for new student parents.

Resistant Capital

For the student parents in this study, resistance manifested in multiple forms: rejecting deficit-based assumptions about their backgrounds and capabilities, redefining success on their own terms, and actively disrupting patterns of limited educational attainment in their families. Their educational pursuits represented acts of resistance against societal expectations, economic constraints, and sometimes family histories of instability, transforming their personal circumstances into opportunities for generational change.

Redefining Success and Achievement Standards

Participants demonstrated resistance by establishing their own definitions of success rather than accepting dominant narratives about what achievement should look like for student

parents. These definitions varied, with some participants emphasizing excellence, while others defined success in terms of persistence and completion. Sophia explicitly rejected the notion that minimal effort was acceptable: "I heard someone say oh well, Cs get degrees. I was not. I didn't like it because I'm over here like, No, you need to get an A because I do it with two kids and extracurricular activities." Her resistance took the form of refusing to lower standards despite her circumstances, instead using her success with multiple responsibilities as evidence that high achievement remained possible. Monica and Daniela similarly described pushing for the highest grades possible, rejecting the assumption that student parents should settle for less-than-optimal outcomes.

In contrast, Lindsey defined success differently, focusing on consistent engagement rather than perfection: "As a student [for me], it [success] means just making sure I turn in everything on time. It doesn't even have to be a hundred percent effort put in. It's just making sure that I've shown up." This definition represented its own form of resistance, rejecting the pressure to perform perfectly and instead prioritizing sustained participation despite demanding circumstances. For Lindsey, showing up and completing work constituted success, given her competing responsibilities as a full-time employee, mother, and wife. These contrasting definitions revealed how resistant capital operated not through a single approach but through participants' insistence on defining achievement in ways that acknowledged their circumstances without accepting deficit-based assumptions about their capabilities.

Breaking Intergenerational Cycles

Participants actively challenged family patterns of limited educational attainment and economic instability. Their academic pursuits represented deliberate efforts to create different trajectories for themselves and their children, often motivated by witnessing the struggles of

family members. Clara expressed explicit rejection of deficit-based thinking: "Yes, we come from this background, but it's possible." This statement captured the essence of resistant capital, acknowledging systemic barriers while refusing to accept them as permanent limitations. Her education represented proof that background did not determine destiny. Rosa reflected on her non-traditional educational path: "Didn't go to school right after college because I was young and dumb and made horrible decisions... So yeah, I just I'm older, I'll be 37 this year, so it's weird to say I'm a college student and I have kids that are about to be in college." Her return to education challenged assumptions about when college "should" happen and demonstrated that educational opportunity remained viable regardless of age or past decisions.

Monica articulated her determination to be the first in her family to earn a degree: "Nobody in my family has went to college. Nobody in my family can say they have a degree. And I really do wanna be that motivation for like my cousins, my kids, anyone, even my older people." Her educational pursuit carried weight beyond personal achievement, representing the establishment of new possibilities within her family system. She also emphasized breaking cycles of employment instability she witnessed growing up: "I wasn't raised on stability... my family chased shut downs, it's good money. It's fast money, but it's not stable... They definitely put it in my head, like, don't do what we did." Her family members' explicit encouragement to pursue different employment patterns illustrated recognition that their own experiences, while economically necessary, were not models they wanted her to replicate.

Daniela described similar motivation to create stability different from what she witnessed: "I basically come from a family that has no college graduates, some of them didn't even, most of them didn't even finish high school... really what motivated me was, kind of seeing a lot of what my family was going through and still goes through, not being as successful." Her

education represented resistance against accepting these patterns as inevitable, instead actively working to establish different outcomes. Lila demonstrated continuous educational persistence despite life circumstances: "I've been going nonstop... I was already eight months pregnant, basically, I've not stopped." Her refusal to allow pregnancy to interrupt her educational trajectory challenged assumptions about when women should pause education for family responsibilities.

Making Difficult Decisions

Some participants' resistance involved making decisions that challenged social expectations or required them to navigate systems not designed to support their circumstances. Naomi made the difficult decision to remain in the United States as a single parent after her husband returned home: "He decided to go back home, and I decided to stay back [in the U.S.] because I have two kids... looking at the circumstances back home, I thought of staying back and making sure that my kids are in school." This decision represented resistance against multiple pressures, including to reunite her family, to return to familiar cultural contexts, and to abandon her educational pursuit. Her choice prioritized her children's educational opportunities and her own degree completion despite significant personal sacrifice.

Sophia described negotiating with a professor about bringing her sick child to class, a request that challenged institutional norms about appropriate classroom participation. Such negotiations required participants to advocate for accommodations that recognized their parenting responsibilities as legitimate rather than problematic.

Linguistic Capital

Yosso (2005) defined linguistic capital as the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language or style. For participants in this study, linguistic capital encompassed code-switching, navigating academic language, advocating

across different institutional contexts, and drawing on bilingual and bicultural communication skills. These capabilities enabled participants to effectively translate their needs across various settings, advocate for themselves and their children, and leverage their cultural and linguistic backgrounds as strengths rather than barriers.

Communication and Institutional Advocacy

Participants demonstrated their ability to communicate effectively across various contexts, adapting their communication styles to navigate institutional bureaucracy, faculty relationships, and interactions with support services. This flexibility in communication represented a form of capital that enabled them to access resources and accommodations. Daniela described learning to advocate for herself when facing challenges with course registration and scheduling: "I tried really hard to like get that to swing. And it just didn't work for me, and I ended up having to wait and retake other classes... I did try to advocate for myself." Although her advocacy did not achieve the desired outcome, her effort demonstrated an understanding that institutional communication requires explicit requests and negotiation, rather than passive acceptance of initial responses.

Sophia described negotiating with a professor about bringing her sick child to class, illustrating her ability to communicate her needs while respecting institutional norms. Such negotiations required careful framing, acknowledging the unusual nature of her request while emphasizing her commitment to not missing class. Elaina explained her growing comfort with institutional communication over time: "In the beginning, not that comfortable, but as I got to know... I would become a little bit more comfortable." This progressive development revealed how linguistic capital in institutional contexts often developed through experience and relationship-building rather than being immediately accessible to new students.

Lila demonstrated effective engagement with professors and counselors by utilizing communication skills she had developed over time, adapting her communication style to different institutional contexts and individual relationships. Her ability to navigate these interactions enabled her to access guidance and support that sustained her educational progress.

Bilingual and Bicultural Skills

Several participants drew on their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, which provided them with communication skills and cultural knowledge applicable across different contexts. For some, this involved navigating between languages; for others, it meant translating between different cultural expectations and institutional norms. Marisol identified her cultural background: "So we come from a Mexican background." Her cultural identity influenced her understanding of family obligations, educational aspirations, and her role as a mother pursuing higher education. Navigating between cultural expectations and institutional norms required a sense of both contexts.

Isabel described extensive experience with different educational systems, having attended "over 20 schools in different states" as a child of migrant workers. This background, although potentially disruptive to consistent schooling, provided her with adaptive skills and an understanding of how different educational contexts operate. Her ability to navigate various systems as a child translated into navigational skills as an adult student. Naomi navigated the college as an international student from Africa, learning new systems while facing language and cultural differences: "I'm from Africa. We don't know too much about computers. So, I need somebody to teach me." Her statement revealed both her cultural background and her willingness to request assistance in areas where she lacked experience explicitly. This direct communication

about her learning needs represented her linguistic capital and ability to articulate what support she required rather than struggling silently.

Although not all participants explicitly discussed bilingual skills, those who identified cultural backgrounds different from the dominant institutional norms demonstrated the ability to code-switch by adapting their communication and presentation of self across various contexts. This ability enabled them to navigate institutional systems, access resources, and advocate for their needs while maintaining a connection to their cultural identities and community relationships.

Findings Related to Institutional Resources and Supports

This section addresses themes that emerged from the findings related to Sub-Question 2: *What community and institutional resources do student parents utilize to support their academic and career success in community college?* The findings revealed that participants' success depended not only on their cultural capital but also on their ability to identify and access institutional resources specifically designed to address the material, academic, and logistical challenges of pursuing higher education while parenting. These resources served as critical supports, enabling persistence, with varying degrees of awareness and accessibility among participants.

Childcare Assistance

Childcare assistance emerged as the single most critical resource enabling student parents' persistence, particularly for those with young children and limited family support networks. Nine of the study participants received child care assistance from the college. The cost of care, often exceeding tuition, represented the primary economic barrier facing student parents. Lindsey described childcare assistance as transformative: "The childcare assistance has helped us

so tremendously that that's quite literally the only reason I've gone back to college and stayed in it." She recalled the emotional impact of receiving approval: "They called me to let me know that I was approved and that they would cover 75% of my child's care while school was in session, and I literally cried."

Monica emphasized how childcare assistance reduced both financial and psychological stress: "They helped with like my daycare, and that helps more than I think they know because if they didn't help me with my daycare, I'm not working. I wouldn't be able to take my baby to daycare, which means it would be harder to go to class." She identified it as "one of the smartest things that they ever did," explaining: "I think that's one of the smartest things that they ever did was help parents with childcare because you're not worried, oh, can I pay daycare? Can I, who's gonna watch my child?" Daniela experienced significant relief upon finally receiving assistance: "This is the first semester that I've actually gotten assistance with childcare... It's been a huge help. It really has. It's definitely a weight off my shoulders knowing that I'm getting assistance with his childcare, cause that stuff is expensive."

Rachel articulated the stark economics facing parents of multiple young children: "The college offers that daycare program, which there is absolutely no way I would be able to go to college without that. The college daycare program, because I have four kids in college with a thousand dollars a week... There is no way I would be able to go to college without their day care program." She noted relief as her children aged into kindergarten: "Just this year, August, both of them went to kindergarten, so it was like big relief because now I don't have to pay for daycare because the college covers the whole daycare bill now because I only have two."

Basic Needs Resources

The college provided resources addressing students' fundamental needs for survival, including food, transportation, emergency funds, and printing services. For participants facing severe financial precarity, these resources were essential infrastructure enabling continued enrollment. Sophia emphasized practical resources: "These resources that [the college] offers, like the market, really have helped, you know, as well as like gas cards." Rosa echoed this assessment: "I've used gas cards and the food pantry. They've been super helpful when things got tough."

Naomi provided the most detailed description of basic needs resources' significance for single parents: "We have where we get our basic needs, where there's food, there's a gas card, that as a single parent like me, that means a lot because sometimes I may not even have food in the house, but from class I can go and grab some things there and come home and my kids can eat... those are big, big, big things that are helping me through." She also highlighted free printing services: "You have a library whereby we can do printing. As a single parent, I cannot have money to go for printing somewhere else, but those resources you give them for free."

The college also provided emergency financial assistance for unexpected crises. Naomi described receiving support when her car broke down: "Emergency aid. If I have an emergency, yes, they provide that to us, which is great. I remember one time my car had a problem. I was like, how can I go to school? But when I went to them, they were able to help me and fix my car, which I never expected." Daniela's reflection revealed the consequences of delayed resource awareness: "I wish I would have known how much help comes with the school, like groceries, gas cards. I didn't know any of that... That's something I wish I would know at the very beginning because it probably would have helped a lot."

TRiO Student Support Services

TRiO programs provided comprehensive support services specifically for first-generation, low-income, and disabled students, populations that overlapped with student-parent identities. Four of the study participants mentioned being members of TRiO. The program's comprehensive approach addressed both academic and non-academic barriers simultaneously through a dedicated advisor. Rosa's description captured the comprehensive nature of TRiO support: "So on campus, I am part of the TRiO program and... my TRiO advisor helped me through all that stuff... she was like my biggest asset." For first-generation students like Rosa, having a dedicated institutional advocate who understood their circumstances and could help navigate unfamiliar systems proved invaluable. Lila similarly credited TRiO with providing crucial guidance for navigating financial aid and coursework when she encountered challenges. The consistent praise participants directed toward TRiO suggested that structured support programs with dedicated staff, clear missions to serve underrepresented populations, and resources to address multiple barriers represented particularly effective models for supporting student parents.

Academic Support Services

Academic support services provided participants with critical assistance when coursework became overwhelming. For student parents managing multiple responsibilities, the ability to access supplemental instruction often meant the difference between persisting through challenging courses and withdrawing. Clara utilized tutoring services, explaining: "I used tutoring because I needed extra help with some of my classes, and it really made a difference." Marisol described accessing counseling services during overwhelming periods: "I used [counseling services] because at one point I was very overwhelmed." For student parents, academic support services represented more than supplemental instruction; they provided

dedicated time and space where academic concerns could be addressed without the competing demands of children, household management, or employment. Daniela described receiving individualized academic support from a chemistry instructor: "I had a chemistry teacher, she would sit after class with me ... sometimes I'd just be lost. I'd be like, what did you even just say now? And she would sit with me and make sure, like step by step, I could get something."

Faculty and Staff Support

Beyond programmatic resources, participants consistently emphasized the importance of individual faculty and staff members who provided guidance, flexibility, mentorship, and encouragement. All participants described predominantly positive interactions with faculty and staff, and each named specific individuals who had significantly influenced their educational journeys. Individual faculty members provided accommodations enabling participants to continue their education while managing parenting emergencies. Lila's experience illustrated this flexibility: "My CPR teacher... let me bring my daughter to class. And then also, like when I was pregnant, the professor... accommodated me a lot."

Isabel emphasized the consistent responsiveness she experienced: "There hasn't been a time that I needed something that one of my professors didn't come through for me." Monica highlighted well-timed campus events addressing student stress: "They always have like free coffee, free treats, free, like, hey, we know you're tired. We know you're stressed. Come get something free... They do it at the perfect time." She also noted awareness of mental health support services: "I know they have the [mental health support], I haven't got to that point where I needed it, but it's also good knowing that it's there." Naomi's descriptions emphasized the emotional and motivational dimensions of faculty support: "With my experience with the people at [the college], to me, I see them as family. Because whoever I meet, whoever I tell my story,

they're all like saying the same things, encouraging me, making me sure that I look at the positive way, not at the negative way, no matter what I'm going through." She also noted: "All the professors, they're just like my family to me... They have positive mind on things which has really helped me... I've never experienced any negative mind[ed] professor at [the college]."

The frequency with which specific names appeared across multiple participants' narratives suggested that individual faculty and staff members developed reputations as particularly supportive of student parents, creating informal networks of support that operated alongside formal programs.

Importance of Institutional Resources

Rachel's reflection captured the comprehensive nature of institutional support and its fundamental importance: "The college offers that daycare [assistance] program... there is no way I would be able to go to college without their daycare program... I've used every single resource that the college has offered, and there is no way I would have been able to continue my college education without all of their resources." Her comprehensive utilization demonstrated that student parents facing significant barriers often require multiple, coordinated supports rather than a single intervention. When examining the relative importance of resources, childcare assistance emerged as the most foundational support. Four participants explicitly stated that without childcare subsidies, their college attendance would have been impossible. The consistency and intensity of language used when discussing childcare assistance (phrases like "no way," "only reason," and "literally cried") distinguished it from other resources as uniquely foundational rather than supplemental.

Institutional resources represented another set of critical supports, particularly for single parents and those experiencing significant financial strain. While not every participant utilized

these resources extensively, those who did described them as essential rather than merely helpful. Basic needs services such as food pantries, childcare subsidies, and emergency grants were especially vital for maintaining stability. Several important patterns emerged across participants' experiences, illustrating how access to comprehensive institutional resources can make the difference between persistence and withdrawal. Several important patterns emerged across participants' experiences:

- **Resource Awareness Varied Considerably:** Some participants discovered supports early through proactive institutional communication or peer networks, while others learned about available supports only after significant struggle or not at all.
- **Multiple Coordinated Supports:** Student parents often required multiple coordinated supports rather than any single intervention.
- **Individual Relationships:** The flexibility, encouragement, and advocacy provided by individual faculty and staff members created institutional climates where student parents felt supported rather than burdened, capable rather than deficient.

Emergent Themes

During analysis of participant interview data two themes emerged that extended beyond participants' perceptions regarding supportive resources and services or their strengths related to Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework. These themes appeared consistently across participant narratives and provided additional insight into the successful strategies and resources that supported community college student parents.

Time as a Critical Resource

Participants consistently described time as a finite and valuable resource central to their ability to balance school, parenting, and family responsibilities. Unlike other forms of capital that

could be cultivated or expanded, time remained fixed, requiring constant strategic management and often painful trade-offs. Marisol acknowledged the fundamental role of support in managing time constraints: "I couldn't be doing any of this without his [my husband's] support." Her statement revealed that time itself was insufficient, and time to study had to be created through others' willingness to absorb responsibilities that would otherwise consume her hours.

Monica emphasized the challenge of managing time with four children and demanding coursework: "There's their school, there's my school, there's home. They have homework, I have homework, we do our homework together sometimes because we don't have enough hours in the day to do so much." The parallel structure of their lives, both attending school, both completing homework, illustrated how her academic demands doubled the family's total workload rather than simply affecting her individually. Rachel articulated the experience of time scarcity with four young children: "I feel like my schedule's already so busy that I don't have time for anything else especially when you're like a single mom and then I have four kids and three of them are in T ball, and the other one's in gymnastics and so it's like I am stretched everywhere." The metaphor of being "stretched everywhere" captured the physical sensation of insufficient time and the feeling of being pulled simultaneously in multiple directions with no possibility of being fully present in any single location or role.

Naomi connected time constraints directly to academic setbacks: "I don't have enough time for me to study, to concentrate on my education. I have to think of, from here I have to go and pick up my kids, I have to make sure they have food... that has really delayed my graduation time and that has been very difficult." Her experience illustrated how time scarcity translated into tangible academic consequences, extending time to degree completion and creating ongoing frustration. Lindsey acknowledged the constant balancing act: "Balancing it all, like, you only

get 24 hours in the day and eight of, I'm a full-time employee, and so having to try to balance my time between being a mom, being a full-time employee, being a wife, and still finding time for myself, that's been my biggest struggle." Her explicit naming of the 24-hour constraint highlighted what made student parents' time management fundamentally different from that of traditional students: they operated under the same temporal limitations while managing significantly more competing demands.

Despite these shared challenges, participants developed varied strategies for maximizing available time. Isabel developed prioritization strategies: "If there's a class I can get ahead of, I do it fast, so I can focus on the harder classes." Sophia implemented detailed planning: "As soon as the syllabus comes out for... I'll look through the entire syllabus. I'll write it down in my planner. And then that also gets integrated into my monthly planner." Lila structured study time around children's presence: "I tried to study whenever I don't have them [my kids] ... I study as much as I can whenever they're not here, and when they're here, I'm just present with them."

Parenting as a Source of Skills and Motivation

While participants consistently described the challenges parenting created for their educational pursuits, they simultaneously identified parenting as providing both motivation for persistence and practical skills for managing complex responsibilities. This dual nature, in which parenting serves both as an obstacle and an asset, emerged as central to participants' educational identities. Marisol connected her educational goals to broader family impact: "I wanted to make a difference in my family... my husband and my kids and whoever surrounds me." Her education represented not only personal achievement but an investment in improving her family system and modeling possibilities for others. Isabel offered encouragement to other parents based on her experience: "No matter where they're at in life, don't give up on yourself. Pour into yourself. You

deserve it. School is worth it, it really, really is." This message explicitly validated the importance of parents prioritizing their own education, countering narratives that frame parental self-investment as selfish.

Sophia described the collaborative approach she and her spouse used for managing childcare and academic responsibilities: "We were there for each other, you know, like... when you have homework, you let me know... When I have homework, he'll take the kids." This system illustrated how parenting responsibilities, while time-consuming, could be shared in ways that enabled both partners to pursue goals. Lila connected her educational persistence to her desire to provide stability for her children: "It keeps me coming back is like that I know I can provide stability for them someday... like I won't be jumping from job to job." Here, parenting functioned not as a distraction from education but as the reason education mattered and the motivation that sustained her through difficult periods.

Monica connected her pregnancy and parenting directly to her academic motivation and resilience: "Towards the end, it's like, No baby, you were my motivation. You made it easier for me to get up and go." Rather than viewing her pregnancy as an impediment to completing nursing school, she reframed her child as the source of strength, enabling her persistence. She described how taking her final exam shortly after giving birth demonstrated her capacity: "That told me my strength... if I could do that, I could keep going, like nothing is hard for me anymore." This experience became evidence of her resilience, proof that she could manage whatever challenges her program presented. Lindsey reflected on the significance of seemingly small accomplishments in the context of new motherhood: "To me loading up an infant and having to make a 30-minute car drive to a foreign campus to try to figure out this foreign process while also trying to make sure he's fed changed and okay... literally just showing up at the

college to register was a big enough deal for me." Her reflection highlighted how parenting responsibilities transformed the meaning of ordinary academic tasks and actions that might seem routine to traditional students; these tasks became significant achievements when accomplished while managing infant care.

Rachel connected her educational pursuit directly to providing for her children's futures: "I have four kids and I'm sitting here thinking that's four colleges, four insurances, four cars, four everything basically." Her children represented not only emotional motivation but the economic imperative underlying her degree completion, and their future needs made her education financially necessary. Naomi explained how keeping her children in the United States for educational opportunities motivated her to remain and pursue her own education despite the hardship of separation from her husband. This decision reflected her prioritization of her children's long-term interests over the preservation of family unity.

Daniela used visual reminders of her progress as motivation, including photographs documenting her journey: "I keep like pictures and videos that I keep of my certificates, my classes. Things that I've done or accomplished in school, not just school, but in life and my career... comparing just my face and my expressions and my eyes like the way I look in those pictures, that's really what keeps me going." These tangible records of transformation provided evidence of change that she could return to during difficult moments, reminding herself of how far she had come. Beyond motivation, several participants identified specific skills developed through parenting that translated into academic success. The organizational systems they created to manage children's schedules, appointments, and activities provided frameworks for managing academic deadlines. The advocacy skills developed through navigating children's educational

and healthcare systems prepared them for institutional navigation in college. The multitasking required by parenting enabled them to study while managing household responsibilities.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 presented the findings from interviews with 12 female student parents at a mid-sized community college in the Houston, Texas area. The chapter began by revisiting the research questions and describing the data collection process. Participant demographics and individual profiles were provided to contextualize the findings.

Analysis of the findings revealed that participants actively utilized all six forms of cultural capital identified in Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework: aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, and linguistic capital. These forms of capital often overlapped and reinforced one another in supporting participants' educational persistence.

The chapter also addressed institutional resources and support services that participants identified as essential to their success. Childcare assistance emerged as the most critical resource, followed by support for basic needs, TRiO Student Support Services, academic assistance, and supportive relationships with faculty and staff. However, awareness of available resources varied considerably among participants

Finally, the chapter presented two emergent themes that extended beyond the other two categories of findings: time as a critical resource and parenting as a source of skills and motivation. These themes illustrated how student parents reported transforming potential barriers into strategic strengths. The findings suggest that student-parent success resulted from the interaction between students' inherent cultural wealth and effective institutional support systems. Chapter 5 will discuss these findings in relation to existing literature, explore their implications

for practice and policy, acknowledge the study's limitations, and offer recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion and Recommendations

Community college student parents face substantial challenges in achieving their academic goals that distinguish them from their non-parenting peers. Student parents must balance academic stressors with the complex demands of raising dependent children. Reichlin Cruse et al. (2019) documented stark disparities in outcomes, with only 37% of student parents completing a degree or certificate within six years, compared to 59% of childless students. Educational attainment has significant economic implications for student parents and their families (Cheng et al., 2016; Emmons & Ricketts, 2019; Kaushal, 2014). National data from 2021 revealed that two-thirds of student parents live at or near the poverty line. For parents raising children, educational achievement affects not only their own economic well-being but also that of their children (Reichlin Cruse et al., 2019).

Despite these challenges, approximately one-third of student parents successfully earn a certificate or degree within six years of enrolling in higher education (Anderson et al., 2024; Noll et al., 2017). Understanding the factors that enable some student parents to persist and succeed remains a crucial area of inquiry, particularly at community colleges, where many student parents initiate their higher education journey (Anderson et al., 2024). Without a clearer understanding of the personal strengths, community resources, and institutional support systems that facilitate student-parent success, community colleges may struggle to allocate resources to improve outcomes for this population effectively. This chapter interprets these findings in relation to the research questions and existing scholarship, considers implications for practice and policy, and identifies areas for future research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how successful community college student parents utilized their cultural wealth and incorporated personal, community, and institutional resources to balance academic responsibilities with parenting demands and other obligations.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What personal, community, and institutional factors contribute to the academic and career success of student parents attending community college?
 - a) In what ways do student parents utilize elements of *community cultural wealth* (Yosso, 2005) to achieve academic and career success in community college?
 - b) What community or institutional resources and support services do student parents perceive as most effective in supporting their success?

Discussion Related to the Literature

The findings of this study support and extend the broader body of literature on student parents in higher education. Previous research has consistently shown that student parents encounter multiple structural barriers to success, including financial strain, limited access to childcare, and competing demands on time (Gault et al., 2014; López Turley & Desmond, 2011). This study confirmed that these barriers continue to affect community college student parents, and it also revealed the active strategies participants used to manage and overcome them. Rather than describing their experiences as defined by constraint, participants framed their academic persistence as an act of purpose and agency, demonstrating that they were not passive recipients of circumstance but active creators of opportunity.

Much of the existing literature has focused on the tension between parenting responsibilities and academic obligations, often positioning parenthood as a barrier to college completion (Lovell & Scott, 2020; Moreau & Kerner, 2015). The findings of this study provide a more nuanced understanding, highlighting the strengths that parenting can offer. Participants described how caregiving cultivated transferable skills such as organization, time management, and resilience, all of which supported their academic achievement (Short et al., 2022). This finding aligns with research suggesting that student parents develop strong self-regulatory and problem-solving abilities through their dual roles (Hofferth & Goldscheider, 2015).

Consistent with Gault et al. (2014), participants' experiences reflected the reality of "time poverty" (Conway et al., 2021; Vickery, 1977; Wladis et al., 2018); however, they also reframed time as a managed resource rather than a fixed constraint. Student parents intentionally organized study schedules, integrated schoolwork with family routines, and maximized limited hours to meet academic expectations. These findings contribute to existing research by shifting the perspective from time scarcity as a deficit to time management as a strategic strength. Participants' ability to transform time into a tool for success suggests that persistence among student parents is not simply a matter of endurance but of learned adaptability.

The findings also support prior research emphasizing the importance of motivation and purpose in sustaining student-parent persistence (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Crumb, 2021; Via, 2021; Huerta et al., 2022; Green, 2013). Participants' commitment to education was often described as intertwined with family aspirations, particularly the desire to create stable and secure futures for their children (Cheng et al., 2016; Kaushal, 2014; Meyrose et al., 2018). This finding aligns with those of Moreau and Kerner (2015), who noted that parenting often serves as both the motivation for pursuing higher education and the means through which students

cultivate perseverance. In this study, student parents repeatedly described their children as their primary motivation, transforming personal ambition into an intergenerational pursuit of opportunity.

Emotional and social support also emerged as key components of success, echoing findings from prior studies that highlight the role of family, peers, and institutional networks in sustaining student parents (Gault et al., 2014; Hofferth & Goldscheider, 2015). Participants who had access to supportive partners, relatives, or peers were better able to manage academic and family demands. Those without consistent support described creating informal systems of mutual aid with classmates, faith communities, or trusted mentors (Huerta et al., 2022). These experiences underscore the importance of both formal and informal networks in sustaining persistence.

The study's findings regarding institutional resources align with the existing literature, which emphasizes the critical role of childcare assistance, basic needs support, and comprehensive student services (Gault et al., 2014; Sallee & Cox, 2019; Miller, 2023; Caldwell & Nzau, 2024). The participants' unanimous emphasis on childcare assistance as foundational, rather than supplemental support, confirms Gault et al.'s (2014) documentation of the relationship between childcare access and student-parent persistence. The finding that nine participants utilized childcare assistance, with several stating it was "the only reason" they could attend college, underscores the necessity of this resource as basic educational infrastructure.

Discussion Related to Community Cultural Wealth

The findings from this study revealed that community college student parents drew upon all six forms of cultural capital identified in Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework, often in overlapping and mutually reinforcing ways. The study both supports and

extends Yosso's model, demonstrating how these capitals functioned collectively to support persistence while also identifying emergent dimensions, specifically time as a critical resource and parenting as a source of skills and motivation, that extend beyond the original framework.

The CCW framework provided a valuable foundation for analyzing how participants leveraged their existing strengths rather than focusing on their deficits (Banuelos, 2021; Garriott, 2020; Grabsch et al., 2023). Its emphasis on aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, and linguistic capital aligned closely with the study's appreciative inquiry approach and the lived experiences of student parents.

Aspirational Capital

Yosso (2005) defined aspirational capital as the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future despite facing real or perceived barriers. Aspirational capital was clearly present as participants framed education not simply as a personal goal but as a generational investment, viewing their academic success as paving the way for their children. This extends Yosso's (2005) definition by introducing an intergenerational dimension in which education serves as both a legacy and a demonstration of hope. Parents like Marisol and Clara spoke of proving to their children that college was possible. In contrast, others, such as Sophia and Monica, demonstrated resilience through pregnancies, late-night study sessions, and overcoming setbacks. Their persistence reflects aspirational capital functioning as both a source of hope and a legacy of heritage.

The study revealed three key sub-themes within aspirational capital: education as legacy, persistence despite barriers, and stability and career goals. The finding that 11 of the 12 participants identified as first-generation college students amplified the significance of their educational pursuits as acts of intergenerational transformation (Rendon et al., 2015).

Participants' explicit connections between their education and their children's future opportunities demonstrated how aspirational capital operated not only as personal motivation but as a collective family endeavor.

Familial Capital

Yosso (2005) defined familial capital as the cultural knowledge, skills, and support nurtured through family relationships. Familial capital was evident across both traditional and nontraditional family structures. Children served as motivators, spouses offered logistical support, and extended or chosen family networks provided encouragement and practical assistance. These findings align with Yosso's definition of familial capital as the cultural knowledge and support nurtured through kinship ties, but also broaden it to include flexible and chosen family configurations standard among student parents. The intergenerational transmission of motivation, in which participants drew inspiration from parents, grandparents, and even children, demonstrated familial capital as both emotional and instrumental in nature.

The study found three dimensions of familial capital: children as motivators, spousal and immediate family support, and extended family and intergenerational influence. The finding that familial capital operated in multiple ways, with children inspiring parents, parents supporting each other, and extended family providing both practical and emotional assistance, revealed the complexity of family support systems. Single parents like Rachel demonstrated extensive familial capital through coordinated support networks involving "both sets of grandparents" and extended family members, challenging assumptions that familial capital requires traditional two-parent households.

Social Capital

Yosso (2005) described social capital as the networks of people and community resources that provide support, assistance, and access to opportunities. Study participants described their social capital in terms of peer networks, mentors, faith communities, and institutional relationships. Participants benefited from study groups, church communities, and programs such as TRiO (U.S. Department of Education, 2023), which confirmed the importance of both relational and institutional connections in student-parent success. However, several participants learned about available resources only late in their academic journeys, suggesting that while social capital encompasses supportive networks, students also require access to knowledge about those networks. This gap between resource availability and awareness points to an institutional challenge in translating potential support into accessible capital.

The study revealed two key manifestations of social capital: peer and mentor support, as well as community and faith-based networks. The finding that nursing cohort relationships became particularly strong due to sustained contact over two years suggests that program design can intentionally cultivate social capital. The development of reciprocal childcare networks among single parents illustrates how student parents actively create social capital when traditional support systems are unavailable. Isabel's 25-year relationship with her faith community demonstrated how long-term social networks can provide stable emotional support as other aspects of life shift.

Navigational Capital

Yosso (2005) defined navigational capital as the skills required to navigate through institutions that were not created with marginalized students in mind. For student parents in this study, navigational capital appeared through self-advocacy, organization, and resource management. Participants developed sophisticated strategies to move through educational

systems that were not designed for them, including detailed study schedules, advocacy for accommodations, and strategic coordination of childcare (Manze et al., 2024). These behaviors exemplify Yosso's definition of navigational capital but also overlap with the emergent theme of time as a critical resource. Time management was not merely a coping mechanism but a strategic skill that participants consciously developed, protected, and maximized, functioning as a form of capital in itself.

The study identified three components of navigational capital: self-advocacy and institutional communication, organizational strategies and time management, and resource navigation and institutional knowledge. The finding that navigational capital often developed progressively through trial and error, rather than being immediately accessible, suggests that institutions could accelerate this learning curve through systematic orientation and support. Participants' sophisticated organizational systems, ranging from Sophia's multilayered planning across course, weekly, and monthly timeframes to Rachel's mobile study strategies, demonstrated the complexity of navigating community college as a student parent.

The significant variation in resource awareness among participants highlighted a critical gap: navigational capital requires not only the ability to seek resources but also knowledge that resources exist. Daniela's wish that she had known about basic needs resources "at the very beginning" and Rachel's delayed discovery of childcare assistance illustrated how institutional communication gaps limited the effectiveness of navigational capital.

Resistant Capital

Yosso (2005) described resistant capital as the skills to challenge inequality and dominant narratives. Resistant capital emerged through participants' rejection of deficit narratives and their determination to break intergenerational cycles of limited educational attainment (Luna &

Martinez, 2013). As first-generation college students, many challenged systemic and familial barriers by redefining success on their own terms. Whether through persistence, career aspirations, or modeling achievement for their children, participants enacted resistance as empowerment, embodying Yosso's concept of challenging inequality while expanding its application to intergenerational transformation.

The study revealed three dimensions of resistant capital: redefining success and achievement standards, breaking intergenerational cycles, and making difficult decisions. The finding that participants defined success differently, with some emphasizing excellence and others prioritizing consistent engagement, demonstrated that resistant capital operated through participants' insistence on self-determined definitions of achievement rather than accepting external standards that failed to acknowledge their unique circumstances. The contrast between Sophia's rejection of "Cs get degrees" and Lindsey's emphasis on "just making sure I have shown up" revealed multiple valid expressions of resistant capital.

Participants' explicit articulation of breaking family patterns of limited educational attainment represented resistance against accepting systemic barriers as permanent limitations. Monica's determination to be the first in her family to earn a degree and Daniela's motivation, inspired by witnessing family members' struggles, demonstrated how resistant capital operated through deliberate efforts to create different trajectories. Naomi's decision to remain in the United States as a single parent, prioritizing her children's educational opportunities despite significant personal sacrifices, illustrated how resistant capital can sometimes require challenging multiple pressures simultaneously.

Linguistic Capital

Linguistic capital, although the least prominent, was evident in participants' communication skills and self-advocacy, particularly among bilingual and immigrant participants. The ability to navigate between linguistic and cultural contexts enhanced institutional communication and self-expression, though this area warrants further exploration in future studies.

The study identified two aspects of linguistic capital: communication and institutional advocacy, as well as bilingual and bicultural skills. The finding that linguistic capital in institutional contexts often developed through experience and relationship-building rather than being immediately accessible suggested that participants learned the "language" of higher education progressively. Naomi's direct communication about her learning needs as an international student, explicitly requesting assistance in areas where she lacked experience, demonstrated how linguistic capital included the ability to articulate support needs clearly.

While not all participants explicitly discussed bilingual skills, those who identified cultural backgrounds different from dominant institutional norms demonstrated code-switching abilities that enabled them to navigate institutional systems while maintaining connections to their cultural identities. Isabel's experience attending over twenty schools as a child of migrant workers, though potentially disruptive to consistent schooling, provided adaptive skills and understanding of how different educational contexts operate that translated into navigational advantages as an adult student.

Development of Cultural Wealth

A key question arising from this study is whether successful student parents succeed because they possess these forms of capital prior to enrollment, or whether they develop such capital during their enrollment. The findings suggest that both processes likely operate together;

however, the study's design, which focused on successful student parents reflecting on their journeys, makes it difficult to determine whether cultural wealth contributed to success or developed as a result of the educational experience.

Several findings suggest that certain forms of cultural wealth existed prior to enrollment and contributed to initial persistence. Participants' aspirational capital, particularly the desire to create better futures for their children and break intergenerational cycles, clearly motivated their enrollment decisions and sustained them through early challenges. Familial capital, in the form of existing family support networks and spousal partnerships, enabled many participants to manage initial childcare and logistical challenges. Lila's inspiration from her mother's example of balancing single parenthood with education, and Monica's grandmother's influence on her decision to pursue a nursing career, demonstrated how familial and aspirational capital shaped her choices to pursue higher education.

However, other findings revealed that certain forms of cultural wealth developed over time through educational experiences. Navigational capital, particularly the skills of self-advocacy and institutional communication, clearly developed over time. Elaina's description of becoming "more comfortable" with faculty communication as she gained experience, along with the general finding that navigational capital emerged through trial and error, demonstrated these developmental processes. Similarly, participants' organizational strategies and time management systems represented learned skills refined through experience rather than abilities they had when they started.

The finding that resource awareness varied considerably, with some participants discovering supports only after significant struggle, suggests that social capital, particularly knowledge of institutional resources and support networks, developed over time rather than

existing fully formed at enrollment. Daniela's wish that she had known about resources "at the very beginning" and Rachel's delayed discovery of childcare assistance indicated that even successful student parents needed time to build the social capital necessary to access available supports.

Linguistic capital, particularly the ability to navigate institutional language and advocate effectively across various contexts, appeared to strengthen through practice and relationship-building. Participants learned the "language" of higher education over time, developing comfort with institutional communication through sustained engagement.

Resistant capital presented a complex case, as participants both drew upon existing determination and developed more sophisticated strategies for challenging deficit narratives and redefining success. The persistence that enabled them to continue through challenges reflected both existing resistant capital and new strength gained through experiences of overcoming obstacles.

The retrospective nature of this study's design means that participants' narratives may emphasize continuity and coherence, potentially obscuring the developmental processes through which cultural wealth emerged. Participants reflecting on their completed or nearly completed educational journeys naturally constructed narratives that emphasize their strengths and capabilities, which can make it difficult to identify points where cultural wealth was absent or still in development.

This question about directionality has important implications. If cultural wealth primarily exists before enrollment, institutions should focus on identifying students who possess these forms of capital and supporting their success. However, if cultural wealth develops through educational experiences, institutions should design interventions that cultivate these capabilities,

particularly during students' early semesters when navigational and social capital may be weakest.

The most likely interpretation, supported by the study's findings, is that both processes operate together. Student parents who ultimately succeed begin with certain forms of cultural wealth, particularly aspirational, familial, and resistant capital, that enable initial enrollment and early persistence. At the same time, they develop additional forms of capital, particularly navigational, social, and linguistic capital, through their educational experiences. This developmental process likely creates a positive cycle, where initial forms of capital enable persistence long enough to develop additional forms, which then further support continued success.

This understanding suggests that institutions should both recognize and build upon existing strengths and design experiences that cultivate developing forms of cultural wealth. Comprehensive support programs, such as TRiO, may be particularly effective because they accelerate the development of navigational and social capital during the critical early period when these forms are still emerging.

Discussion Related to Institutional Resources and Supports

The study's findings regarding institutional resources revealed that participants' success depended not only on their cultural capital but also on their ability to identify and access institutional resources specifically designed to address material, academic, and logistical challenges. The analysis identified a clear hierarchy of resource importance based on participants' characterizations of their necessity.

Childcare Assistance

Childcare assistance emerged as the most critical resource enabling student-parent persistence (Edgerton, 2024; Miller, 2023; Moore-Smith, 2024; Sylvester, 2022; Workman & Brady, 2019). Nine participants utilized childcare assistance, with four explicitly stating that without childcare subsidies, their attendance at college would have been impossible. The consistency and intensity of language participants used when discussing childcare assistance, phrases like "no way," "only reason," and "literally cried," distinguished it from other resources as uniquely foundational rather than supplemental.

Lindsey's characterization of childcare assistance as "quite literally the only reason I've gone back to college and stayed in it" and Rachel's statement that with four children requiring "a thousand dollars a week" in care "there is absolutely no way I would be able to go to college without their daycare program" illustrated the stark economics facing parents of multiple young children. The cost of care often exceeded tuition, representing the primary economic barrier to access. Monica's identification of childcare assistance as "one of the smartest things that they ever did" and her explanation that without it "I wouldn't be able to take my baby to daycare, which means it would be harder to go to class" revealed both the financial and psychological relief this support provided.

The finding that childcare assistance should be understood as foundational infrastructure, comparable to classrooms or libraries, rather than exceptional support, has significant implications for institutional resource allocation and policy priorities. This positions childcare assistance as a prerequisite for student-parent enrollment rather than a supplemental benefit, and could fundamentally reframe institutional responsibility.

Basic Needs Resources

Basic needs resources represented another critical support, particularly for single parents and those facing severe financial precarity (Fletcher et al., 2024; Williams et al., 2024).

Resources addressing fundamental survival needs, including food, transportation, emergency funds, and printing services, enabled continued enrollment for participants operating with extremely limited financial margins.

Naomi's detailed description revealed the severity of financial precarity some student parents faced: "Sometimes I may not even have food in the house, but from class I can go and grab some things there and come home and my kids can eat." The ability to access food on campus transformed what could have been a choice between attending class and feeding her children into a situation where both were possible. The emergency financial assistance that fixed Naomi's car prevented what could have been a semester-ending crisis, illustrating how seemingly minor expenses (from an institutional perspective) could pose insurmountable barriers for student parents.

At the same time, not every participant utilized these resources as extensively as Naomi and Rosa; those who did described them as essential rather than merely helpful, positioning them as prerequisite supports for class attendance rather than supplemental benefits.

TRiO Student Support Services

The TRiO SSS program proved particularly valuable for first-generation student parents, with four participants specifically mentioning their membership in the program. The program's comprehensive approach addressed both academic and non-academic barriers simultaneously through dedicated advisors, creating single points of contact that could coordinate multiple forms of support (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Rosa's characterization of her TRiO advisor as her "biggest asset" suggested this individual provided guidance, advocacy, and support across multiple aspects of her college experience. The effectiveness of TRiO appeared to stem partly from its comprehensive approach, which addressed multiple barriers simultaneously, its clear mission to serve underrepresented populations, and its dedicated staff who could develop expertise in the particular challenges facing first-generation, low-income student parents.

The finding that structured support programs with dedicated staff and resources to address multiple barriers represented particularly effective models for supporting student parents has implications for institutional program design. Unlike general advising or financial aid offices serving all students, TRiO's focus on specific populations enabled staff to develop specialized expertise and provide individualized, sustained support that proved especially important for participants lacking family members with college experience who could guide them through institutional systems.

Academic Support Services

Academic support services, including tutoring and counseling, provided critical assistance when coursework became overwhelming. However, these services received less emphasis in participants' narratives compared to childcare and basic needs assistance. Clara and Marisol mentioned utilizing these services during challenging periods, but neither characterized them as essential to their persistence in the way they described other resources.

This pattern may suggest that academic challenges, while significant, were more manageable through other strategies, such as time management or peer study groups, than through structural barriers like childcare costs or food insecurity. Daniela's description of individualized chemistry instruction after class, where her instructor voluntarily provided one-

on-one clarification beyond formal responsibilities, suggested that academic support often came through faculty relationships rather than formal tutoring services.

For student parents, academic support services represented more than just supplemental instruction; they provided dedicated time and space where academic concerns could be addressed without the competing demands of childcare, household management, or employment. This spatial and temporal dimension distinguished the value of these services for student parents from their value for traditional students.

Faculty and Staff Support

Individual faculty and staff members who provided guidance, flexibility, mentorship, and encouragement proved as important as programmatic resources. All participants described predominantly positive interactions with faculty and staff, naming specific individuals who had significantly influenced their educational journeys. The frequency with which specific names appeared across multiple participants' narratives suggested that individual faculty and staff members developed reputations as particularly supportive of student parents, creating informal networks of support operating alongside formal programs.

The flexibility, encouragement, and advocacy these individuals provided created institutional climates where student parents felt supported rather than burdensome, capable rather than deficient. Lila's experience with professors who allowed her to bring her daughter to class and accommodated her pregnancy, Isabel's statement that "there has not been a time that I needed something that one of my professors didn't come through for me," and Naomi's characterization of faculty as "family" illustrated how relational support influenced students' sense of belonging and capability.

Monica's awareness of mental health support services, even without utilization ("it's also good knowing that it's there"), and her appreciation for well-timed campus events providing free coffee and treats demonstrated how institutional recognition of student stress provided psychological reassurance. The finding that specific faculty and staff members became known resources for student parents highlighted the importance of professional development in helping all institutional personnel understand the circumstances of student parents and respond with appropriate flexibility.

Critical Patterns Across Resource Experiences

Several important patterns emerged across participants' experiences with institutional resources. First, resource awareness varied considerably, with some participants discovering supports early while others learned about them only after significant struggle or not at all. This variation underscored the critical importance of proactive, systematic communication, ensuring all student parents learned about available resources upon enrollment.

Second, student parents often require multiple coordinated supports rather than any single intervention. Rachel's use of "every single resource" available and Naomi's reliance on basic needs assistance, emergency aid, childcare support, and faculty encouragement illustrated how barriers facing student parents accumulated and intersected, requiring comprehensive rather than piecemeal responses.

Third, relationships with individual faculty and staff members proved as crucial as programmatic resources. The flexibility, encouragement, and advocacy these individuals provided created institutional climates where student parents felt supported rather than burdensome, capable rather than deficient.

Discussion of Emergent Themes

Two additional themes emerged throughout the study.

Time as a Critical Resource

Time as a critical resource emerged as a key theme in this study, highlighting the strategic dimension of managing competing responsibilities (Conway et al., 2021; Wladis et al., 2018). Participants did not simply experience time scarcity; they learned to allocate it deliberately, protect study hours, and integrate academic and parenting schedules. This theme reframes time management as a form of strength, emphasizing intentionality rather than deficit.

The finding that time functioned as the fundamental limiting resource shaping educational experiences revealed a structural constraint that intersected with all forms of cultural wealth. All forms of capital, familial support, social networks, navigational strategies, and aspirational goals operated within and against this temporal constraint. The consistency with which participants discussed time constraints, combined with their varied strategies for maximizing available time, suggested that time management represented a distinct topic requiring explicit recognition and institutional support.

Parenting as Skills and Motivation

The second emergent theme, *parenting as skills and motivation*, reframed caregiving from a barrier to an asset. Participants described how parenting cultivated transferable skills such as organization, advocacy, and resilience, and provided the emotional drive to persist. Education was understood as both an act of self-fulfillment and a means of providing stability and opportunity for their children.

The finding that parenting functioned as both the "why" and the "how" of educational persistence challenged deficit-based narratives positioning parenthood solely as an obstacle.

Monica's reframing of her pregnancy as her "motivation" and Lindsey's recognition that accomplishing ordinary academic tasks while managing infant care represented significant achievements demonstrated how parenting experiences transformed the meaning of academic milestones. The organizational systems participants created to manage children's schedules, the advocacy skills developed through navigating children's educational and healthcare systems, and the multitasking required by parenting all equipped participants with capabilities directly applicable to academic success.

Together, these findings affirm the utility of the CCW framework while suggesting that student-parent experiences require an expanded conceptualization of the framework. The six capitals capture essential strengths, but the themes of time and parenting reveal unique dimensions of student-parent resilience and strategy. Recognizing these additional assets of time management and caregiving broadens the understanding of how student parents transform challenges into capacity.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

Implications

The findings of this study carry implications for community colleges, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to improve outcomes for student parents. Although participants identified institutional supports such as childcare, advising, and basic needs assistance as essential, their persistence and success were most strongly shaped by their existing forms of cultural wealth, particularly aspirational, familial, and resistant capital, and by how their institutions recognized, affirmed, and leveraged these strengths.

Implications for Community Colleges

The findings of this study suggest that community colleges' resources played a critical role in the relationship between family responsibilities and academic persistence. Adequate institutional supports were those that built on, rather than replaced, student parents' strengths. Colleges that design programs around hope, resilience, and intergenerational motivation could enable parents to translate caregiving responsibilities into motivation for success. Strategies such as flexible scheduling, family-friendly study spaces, and advising informed by the realities of parenting made a meaningful contribution to persistence. This observation directly addressed the overarching research question by identifying institutional factors associated with student-parent persistence and success (Anderson & Green, 2022; Huerta et al., 2022).

Childcare and basic needs supports were identified as foundational infrastructure that enabled student parents to participate in college life. Childcare access was consistently cited as a necessary condition for persistence, not an optional resource. However, the findings also revealed that institutional resources were most effective when integrated with the familial and social networks that students had already developed. Communication practices also influenced how well students accessed available supports. Many participants reported learning about institutional resources later in their academic journey, suggesting that more proactive communication during orientation, advising, and early-term engagement could accelerate the development of navigational capital. Embedding information about childcare, tutoring, and basic needs assistance into the onboarding process would likely improve utilization and persistence outcomes (Caldwell & Nzau, 2024).

Finally, professional development emerged as a vital area of institutional improvement. Training faculty and staff in empathy, flexibility, and cultural awareness can enhance an institution's responsiveness to the needs of student parents (Rendón et al., 2015). When faculty

recognize caregiving as an expression of responsibility, resilience, and time-management expertise, they can reinforce students' aspirational and resistant capital and strengthen their sense of belonging.

Implications for Policy and Leadership

At the institutional leadership and public policy levels, the study demonstrated that systemic alignment between supports and the lived realities of student parents is critical to achieving equitable outcomes. Funding policies that prioritize childcare, affordable course materials, transportation, and flexible course delivery could be crucial to the persistence of student parents (Miller, 2023; Sallee & Cox, 2019).

However, such investments would likely be most impactful when guided by an empowerment perspective that views student parents as contributors to campus life and community vitality rather than as recipients of aid. The study also suggested that institutional and policy decisions should include the voices of student parents in both design and evaluation processes. Participants demonstrated deep insight into their needs and the types of support that were most effective. Establishing advisory councils or focus groups of student parents could enhance program relevance and accountability.

Data collection practices represented another key policy implication. Many participants noted that they were unaware of formal mechanisms through which their parental status was tracked or recognized. Institutions could identify student parents to more effectively measure persistence, evaluate interventions, and tailor resources to their needs. An improved data infrastructure would also support advocacy for expanded funding and policy reform at both the state and federal levels.

Implications for Practice

Practitioners, including advisors, faculty, and student-services professionals, played a pivotal role in transforming institutional interactions into meaningful student experiences. Grounded in the principles of Appreciative Inquiry and Community Cultural Wealth, the findings demonstrated that positive day-to-day interactions strengthened students' cultural wealth.

Faculty influenced student-parent success through their instructional design, communication, and flexibility. Clear expectations, transparent policies for extensions, and understanding of caregiving responsibilities were shared by participants as ways to foster trust and engagement without compromising academic standards. Similarly, advisors who took an asset-based approach, centering on student strengths, goals, and aspirations, helped build navigational and resilient capital, enabling student parents to persist despite competing demands.

Programs such as TRiO illustrate how structured support systems that combine academic guidance, mentoring, and resource navigation can accelerate the development of navigational capital. Integrating these principles across general advising services could ensure that a greater number of student parents receive coordinated, consistent guidance early in their college experience.

Professional practice also benefited from institutional collaboration. Cross-departmental communication among faculty, advising, financial aid, and student services helped prevent gaps in support and allowed for timely intervention when challenges arose. Embedding a culture of empathy and flexibility across roles helped sustain a climate where student parents were recognized as valued members of the academic community.

Unexpected Results

Two findings emerged that expanded the conceptual understanding of student-parent success. First, while institutional resources such as childcare and financial aid were critical, participants consistently described their success as rooted in internal motivation, familial commitment, and faith in their ability to model perseverance for their children. Institutional efforts were most effective when they amplified, rather than replaced, these intrinsic forms of motivation and familial capital.

Second, the use of time emerged as a distinct theme. Participants' reflections suggested that time was not only a constraint but also a strategic resource that required intentional management and institutional accommodation. Colleges could address time as an equity issue by offering flexible scheduling, expanding online learning opportunities, and streamlining administrative processes. Viewing time as a form of capital reframed it as a policy variable that institutions could influence, rather than a fixed limitation beyond their control.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study offer valuable insight into the ways community college student parents draw upon personal, community, and institutional resources to achieve success. However, further research could deepen understanding of how these processes function across various contexts, institutional environments, and timeframes. The following recommendations are offered to guide future inquiry.

Expanded Populations and Institutional Contexts

Future research could examine the experiences of student parents across multiple community colleges, including those in rural and urban settings, as well as institutions with varying support infrastructures. Comparative analysis would help identify which supports and practices are context-dependent and which reflect universal principles of student-parent success.

Studies could also compare institutions with established single-parent programs to those without them to determine which approaches most effectively promote persistence, completion, and post-graduation outcomes. For example, a large-scale study investigating the experiences of student parents in multiple Texas community colleges could build on this initial investigation and provide more generalizable conclusions.

Quantitative Examination of Cultural Wealth and Persistence

Larger-scale quantitative studies could measure the relationships between specific forms of cultural wealth and student outcomes such as persistence, credit accumulation, and graduation. Surveys assessing aspirational, familial, and navigational capital could provide empirical evidence of the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework's relevance to community college contexts. Quantitative validation of these constructs would also strengthen theoretical applications and provide a foundation for evidence-based program design.

Longitudinal Research on Cultural Wealth Development

This study captured a snapshot of participants' experiences. However, future longitudinal designs could follow student parents from enrollment through completion to explore how forms of cultural wealth evolve over time and how institutional practices influence that development. Such research could also investigate how changes in family structure, employment, or financial status shape the use and sustainability of cultural wealth throughout the educational journey.

Intersectional Analyses

Further research could examine how intersecting identities, such as race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and immigration background, influence the expression and leveraging of cultural wealth. Intersectional analyses could reveal how overlapping systems of

privilege and disadvantage shape student-parent experiences and resource access. These insights would enable institutions to design more inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive supports.

Institutional Communication and Resource Awareness

Studies investigating how student parents learn about institutional supports and how communication channels influence access could inform more proactive outreach strategies. Given that many participants in this study reported discovering resources late in their academic journey, research focused on orientation, advising, and early intervention could provide actionable insights for improving utilization and student-parent retention.

Policy Evaluation and Institutional Innovation

Evaluations of institutional and state-level policies, such as on-campus childcare programs, emergency aid initiatives, flexible course delivery models, and family-friendly scheduling, would provide policymakers and leaders with actionable evidence. Research could also assess how institutional culture and leadership commitment influence the implementation, sustainability, and effectiveness of these supports.

Time and Parenting

Emergent findings from this study suggest that time and parenting represent distinct themes that may warrant deeper exploration. Future studies could examine time as an equity issue, focusing on how scheduling practices, online course design, and workload expectations affect student-parent persistence. Similarly, further exploration of the strengths developed from parenting could reveal how caregiving develops transferable skills, such as organization, advocacy, and resilience, that contribute to academic and professional success.

Faculty and Staff Professional Development

Future research could examine the impact of faculty and staff professional development on student-parent outcomes. Mixed-methods studies could evaluate how training in empathy, flexibility, and culturally responsive practices influences student satisfaction, academic engagement, and persistence. Understanding the relationship between professional learning and institutional climate can help colleges design more effective professional development initiatives that directly support student parents.

Long-Term and Intergenerational Outcomes

Finally, longitudinal research following student parents beyond graduation could shed light on how educational attainment affects their career trajectories, financial stability, and their children's educational aspirations. Examining intergenerational impacts would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term social and economic returns of supporting student parents in higher education.

Summary

This study contributed to the understanding of how community college student parents utilized personal strengths, cultural wealth, and institutional resources to achieve academic and career success. The findings illustrated that while childcare and basic needs supports were essential, they were most effective when embedded within environments that recognized and celebrated student-parent resilience, agency, and motivation.

Approaching this study from an Appreciative Inquiry lens revealed that student parent persistence and success emerged from the interaction of institutional structures and students' inherent assets. Colleges that invested in childcare, flexible scheduling, and culturally responsive

professional development while fostering empathy and validation among faculty and staff created conditions where student parents could thrive.

Ultimately, this study underscored that student-parent success was not solely the result of individual determination or institutional generosity. Instead, it reflected a reciprocal process in which students' cultural wealth and institutional supports reinforced one another. When community colleges intentionally align resources, policies, and practices with the strengths and lived realities of student parents, they not only improve educational outcomes but also advance broader goals of equity, inclusion, and community development that extend across families and generations.

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Appendix A - Alignment Table

Table 1: Alignment Table

Literature Findings	Research Question	Theoretical and Conceptual Framework	Methodology	Interview Questions
Approximately 3.14 million undergraduates in the U.S., or 18% of all undergraduates, are parents (Anderson et al., 2024).	1. What personal, community, and institutional factors contribute to the academic and career success of student parents attending community college?	Appreciative Inquiry (AI) focuses on what works at an overarching level, and Community Cultural Wealth focuses on specific assets individuals have to support their success (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010; Yosso, 2005).	Utilize asset-oriented in-depth interviews to gather rich, descriptive accounts. Open-ended questions will allow participants to share their experiences.	Questions: 4,5,6, 13
Student parents bring diverse life experiences to the classroom that can enrich their own learning and serve as a basis for acquiring new knowledge (Attar Flores, 2013).	1. a. In what ways do student parents utilize elements of <i>community cultural wealth</i> (Yosso, 2005) to achieve academic and career success in community college?	Aligned with AI theoretical model; Community Cultural Wealth highlights the diverse experiences, strengths, and knowledge individuals bring to the classroom (Yosso, 2005).	Utilize asset-oriented in-depth interviews based on CCW concepts to gather rich, descriptive accounts. Open-ended questions will allow participants to share their experiences.	Questions: 1, 2, 3, 7, 12,
According to Nelson et al. (2013), being a student parent increases the likelihood that a student will leave college without a degree.	1.b. What community or institutional resources and support services do student parents perceive as most effective in supporting their success?	Aligned with AI theoretical model.	Utilize asset-oriented in-depth interviews based on resources and support services to gather rich, descriptive accounts. Open-ended questions will allow participants to share their experiences.	Questions: 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15

Appendix B - Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about yourself, your family, and your journey to community college?
 - a. Is your work in your field of study? (For SPs who indicated they are working)
2. What motivated you to pursue your education while raising your children?
3. What does success mean to you as a student parent?
4. What has been your proudest moment as a student parent?
5. What have been the biggest challenges you've faced as a student parent?
 - a. How did you overcome these challenges?
6. What strategies did you develop to manage both your coursework and parental responsibilities?
7. Has your family influenced your educational journey?
 - a. Have specific family values or traditions helped you succeed in college?
8. What types of support have been most valuable during your college experience?
9. How have your professors responded when you needed to manage both academic and parental responsibilities?
10. What campus resources or services have you found most helpful?
 - a. For academic success?
 - b. For career readiness?
11. Can you tell me about your relationships with other student parents or support networks on or off campus?
12. How do you advocate for yourself and your needs as a student parent?
 - a. Can you share a specific example of when you had to speak up for yourself or your family?
13. Looking back, what do you wish you had known when you first started college as a parent?
14. How could community colleges better support student parents in their academic and career goals?
15. What specific services or resources would make the biggest difference?

Appendix C - Participant Questionnaire

1. What was your employment status while enrolled in community college?

- ☐ Full-time employed
- ☐ Part-time employed
- ☐ Not employed

2. Did you receive Pell Grant funding during your community college enrollment?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

3. How many children did you care for while attending community college?

4. Please list the age(s) of each child who was under your care while you were enrolled:

Child 1: _____

Child 2: _____

Child 3: _____

[Add more lines as needed]

5. Which best describes your parenting status while you were enrolled?

- ☐ Single Parent
- ☐ Two-Parent Household.
- ☐ Other (Please explain)