

# The Invisible Village: An Exploration of Undergraduate Student Mothers' Experiences

Courtney Kensinger<sup>1</sup> · Dorlisa J. Minnick<sup>2</sup>

Published online: 20 June 2017  
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2017

**Abstract** This study explored the experiences of mothers in college using a qualitative design. Results showed that a lack of financial resources was the chief barrier for student mothers in their educational pursuits while social/emotional support was the most important contributor to student mothers' success in college. Participants relied heavily on student loans to cover costs of childcare or family to help watch their children. Role conflict experienced by student mothers has implications on family and college retention. Implications of this study included the adaptation and revisions of policies at the state and federal levels in addition to implications at the university level. Limitations of the study included a lack of racial and ethnic diversity and only including student mothers currently enrolled in college. Several recommendations for future research are described.

**Keywords** Undergraduate student mothers · Gender · Women · Role conflict · College campuses

## Introduction

An African proverb states that “it takes a village to raise a child” meaning that all residents of the community have a part in ensuring that the needs of a child are met. The best way to help a child is to first help the child's mother, which

contributes to her success not only as a parent, but in her educational pursuits. However, when there is a lack of collaboration between members in the academic community, the village may appear invisible, leading mothers to believe that no support is available.

Access to education for women is an effective means to decreasing the risk of poverty. Women who complete a 4-year degree program earn about \$23,000 (US Dollars) more each year than women who do not complete higher education (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014). This is especially important when considering the role of motherhood. There are 4.8 million undergraduate students in the US who are parents, which is 26% of the total undergraduate population. Seventy-one percent of parents attending college are women and approximately 59% of these women are unmarried. These statistics make it even more important to explore the factors that impact student mothers' experiences in college (Institute for Women's Policy Research 2014).

There are a variety of reasons why mothers pursue post-secondary education, but two of the most prevalent ones include respect and economics. The components of respect involve respect for self, respect from friends, coworkers and family members and respect for children (Duquaine-Watson 2007). Better career choices are another major reason why mothers attend college. Mothers hope to improve their financial situation, especially because females, and in particular those who are the sole head of household, are more likely to be in poverty than non-female or non-parent students. The average poverty rate for all female-headed households is 30.6%, although this rate does not separate women by educational attainment (United States Census Bureau 2015).

Despite the reasons that mothers attend college and the benefits that they may experience in their educational pursuits, they also face a variety of hardships, especially

---

✉ Dorlisa J. Minnick  
djminnick@ship.edu

<sup>1</sup> South Central Community Action Program, Chambersburg, PA, USA

<sup>2</sup> Department of Social Work and Gerontology, Shippensburg University, Shippensburg, PA 17257, USA

after welfare reform in 1996 (Duquaine-Watson 2007; Katz 2013; Wilson 2011). Before 1996, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) was present and offered cash subsidies to help with living expenses. Once AFDC was replaced with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), funds that helped support low-income women pursuing higher education were greatly decreased or abolished. TANF only allows for 12 months of job training, which does not provide for full support in the pursuit of a 4-year degree (Wilson 2011). Mothers are increasingly relying on student loans to help pay for necessary expenses like childcare. This leads to other financial problems such as the accrual of interest on loans or needing a co-signer to access the funds. The average undergraduate debt 1-year post graduation for women without children is \$25,638, and for women with children, the average amount of debt is \$29,452 (Institute for Women's Policy Research 2014).

Instructional methods, common in the university setting, also serve as a barrier. These methods include group projects and participation in out-of-class activities such as meetings, lectures, or performances. This type of instruction provides additional challenges for mothers such as paying for a babysitter to attend a meeting or event or being compelled to miss work. Mothers often try to avoid courses with these requirements, though this is not always possible, especially if it is a required course for the student's major. Difficulty meeting these out-of-class requirements can result in failing a course or extending the degree completion time (Duquaine-Watson 2007).

There have been few studies exploring factors that contribute to mothers' experiences as a student and those studies focused largely on non-traditional aged mothers enrolled at community colleges (Duquaine-Watson 2007; Katz 2013; Wilson 2011). While there is limited research on both the protective and risk factors that contribute to the success of mothers enrolled in an undergraduate program, research indicates that education serves as a protective mechanism (Easterbrooks et al. 2011; Solivan et al. 2015; Vandsburger et al. 2008). The purpose of this exploratory research was to further explore the factors that contribute to the experiences of mothers enrolled in an undergraduate program at a rural, mid-sized four-year university inclusive of both traditional and nontraditional-aged mothers.

## Literature Review

### Theoretical Perspectives

#### *Gender-Role Theory*

Gender-role theory argues that there are stereotyped behaviors that women are expected to engage in and this theory

can be used to understand the experiences of college mothers. Women are expected to be the primary caregiver and whether they are viewed as a good mother is determined by the number of children they have and the amount of time these mothers spent with their children. One study that explored "good mother" stereotypes in college found that mothers who returned to college within 6 months of her child's birth were viewed as more arrogant, cold-hearted, and less feminine by peers, especially by male peers. Because of these perceptions by peers, mothers may lack needed social support and have greater feelings of role conflict (Mottarella et al. 2009).

Estes (2011) also found that if a parent chose to be a student and did not adhere to the prescribed gender roles, their identity as a good parent was jeopardized. This same study found that student parents were expected to be low-achieving students because they had a child; their role was already defined for them (Estes 2011). This may lead to mothers feeling defeated and less likely to complete higher education despite the numerous benefits of earning a college degree.

#### *Social Capital*

Another theory used to frame the research study to understand the experiences of college mothers is social capital theory, which Putnam (2000) described as "the connections among individuals—social networks and the norms or reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (p. 19). The connections formed can satisfy the interests of individuals, but also can have a collective impact—benefiting not only the individual, but the larger community (Putnam 2000). A few of the positive benefits to social capital include trust, cooperation and mutual support.

Social capital at colleges and universities was found to not only offer benefits as those described above, but also contribute to higher academic achievement (Greyerbiehl and Mitchell 2014; Jensen and Jetten 2015; Soria and Stebleton 2013). In a study conducted on African American female students' involvement with a historically Black sorority at a predominantly White college, participants noted that they received social support and had access to a larger network and community. The connections that these students made helped them to feel more motivated to do well in their courses (Soria and Stebleton 2013).

Social capital theory also includes the concepts of bonding and bridging. Bonding is inclusive and involves social connections between members of the same group whereas bridging is inclusive and occurs between individuals of different groups. Though bonding can provide needed emotional support, especially to marginalized groups, it can also be a barrier to further mobility (Putnam 2000). It was found that when bonding interactions among college

students are strong, it can prevent these students from pursuing relationships outside of their group (Jensen and Jetten 2015).

Therefore, it is important for student mothers to have access to both bonding and bridging relationships. If a student mother lacks the opportunity to connect with other student mothers, her emotional/social support and sense of belongingness may decrease. However, if student mothers are unable to connect with students in the larger campus community, the likelihood of her success in college may decrease and feelings of isolation in the “village” may increase.

### Protective Factors

Protective factors are defined as “attributes or characteristics that lower the probability of an undesirable outcome” (Bernard 2004; Rutter 1987; Werner and Smith 1992 as cited in Jenson and Fraser 2011, p. 11). The undesirable outcome in this study was identified as the attrition of college mothers. Two attributes that serve as protective factors of college mothers are self-efficacy and support.

#### *Self-efficacy*

Self-efficacy is a belief in one’s own abilities and has been shown to serve as a protective factor in promoting educational success (Arastaman and Balci 2013; Gizir and Aydin 2009; Morrison et al. 2006). The protective possibilities of having high self-efficacy include the ability to reflect on consequences and choices, create responsibility for self and others and manage goals and progress (Morrison et al. 2006). As found by Albert Bandura (1997), one of the components that can impact the development of self-efficacy is verbal or social persuasion including encouraging words and moral support from others (as cited in Bhatia 2014). Mothers who experience positive verbal or social persuasion, may have higher levels of self-efficacy, thus increasing mothers’ success in college.

#### *Support*

External protective factors in the form of supportive relationships with peers and family proved to be important to student mothers’ success in college (Brown and Amankwaa 2007; Lashley and Ollivierre 2014) specifically in terms of helping the mother balance the role of student and parent. For example, Brown and Amankwaa (2007) found that mothers who were able to align their work and school schedules with those of family and friends who were willing to assist, could both better manage their childcare needs and social life. Lashley and Ollivierre (2014) found that mothers received support from their parents, siblings, and

eldest children and that support was reciprocal between participants and family members. Both of these studies focused on the college experiences of single, African American mothers.

### Risk Factors

The researchers also explored the role that risk factors have in the educational pursuits of student mothers. Fraser and Terzian (2005) defined a risk factor as “any event, condition, or experience that increases the probability that a problem will be formed, maintained or exacerbated” (as cited in Jenson and Fraser 2011, p. 11). There are several barriers that impact the experiences of college mothers. These include lack of child care, lack of financial support, lack of emotional support, and mother stereotypes.

#### *Child Care*

A lack of child care served as a barrier among mothers in college (Duquaine-Watson 2007; Mahaffey et al. 2015). For example, in a study focused on single student mothers enrolled at a community college, it was found that the on-campus child care center did not prioritize enrollment. The center was opened to the larger community and the average wait list was between 6 to 8 months (Duquaine-Watson 2007). Lengthy waitlists are especially difficult for students experiencing unplanned pregnancies. Extended waitlists for child care combined with an unplanned pregnancy can cause the college mother to take additional time off from college. Inaccessible campus childcare leads to extra travel time thereby decreasing connectedness to campus and study time, not to mention the associated travel expenses for off-campus child care. Even if students are able to secure on-campus child care, barriers may still be present in terms of the center’s operating hours. For example, for centers only open until 5:30 PM, this could prevent students from taking required major courses only offered in the evening.

#### *Finances*

A lack of financial support is another factor that impacts mothers’ experiences (Duquaine-Watson 2007; Lashley and Ollivierre 2014; Mahaffey et al. 2015). In a study conducted with single mothers, all of the participants experienced financial insecurity and over half of the participants had applied for public assistance, but only one of the participants received financial assistance through public assistance (Duquaine-Watson 2007). Lashley and Ollivierre (2014) found that the mean annual income of single, Black student mothers was between \$15,000 and \$20,000. With such limited funds, these mothers not only experienced difficulty in paying for college, but also in funding basic necessities for their children.

### *Lack of Emotional/Social Support*

The college experience of traditional-aged students involves building deep friendships. Students rely on these friendships to navigate the academic and social realm of the college experience. These friendships celebrate the happy and positive experiences as well as providing support to one another in times of trouble, whether that is failing an assignment or ending a romantic relationship. For college mothers lacking these friendships, and ultimately the support from sharing common college experiences, this can negatively impact their educational success (Duquaine-Watson 2007). Mothers had few friendships with other students because of busy schedules and poor treatment by peers. Participants felt that peers perceived them as unusual and would not ask about their well-being once finding out they were a mother (Duquaine-Watson 2007).

### **Summary**

Support and risk concepts are embedded in the theories of gender and social capital framing this study. This study is warranted for a few reasons. There are a limited number of published studies examining college mothers' experiences (Brown and Amankwaa 2007; Duquaine-Watson 2007; Lashley and Ollivierre 2014; Mahaffey et al. 2015) particularly those experiences of both traditional and non-traditional student mothers at a 4-year university. With the long-term economic implications on completing college, educational success of mothers is critical. Therefore, the researchers sought to gain a deeper understanding of protective and risk factors and their contribution in the lives of student mothers enrolled at a rural, public, mid-sized university located in the mid-Atlantic region of the US. The research question that guided the study was: How do the protective and risk factors impact the experiences of mothers in college?

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

The research design for the study was an exploratory qualitative design using semi-structured, open-ended, face-to-face interviews. There was a brief, structured survey administered that gathered demographic information and recruited participants for the face-to-face interviews.

#### **Recruitment of Participants**

Nonprobability criterion sampling was used to recruit participants. The sampling frame was all enrolled students

who self identified as a mother and were at least 18 years old at an academic institution in the mid-Atlantic Region of the United States of America. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted by the academic institution, but denied the authors request to utilize snowball sampling. Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study.

The researchers recruited college mothers through broad invitations on campus. In an effort to recruit a diverse sample of college mothers, the authors spoke directly to campus offices that included the Non-Traditional Student Organization, the Multicultural Student Affairs Office and several academic departments in the College of Arts and Sciences as well as the College of Education and Human Services. Staff in these areas were asked to forward an electronic flyer with information about the study to female students in their department. Physical copies of the flyer were distributed to parents of all children enrolled in the Child and Family Center and the Head Start Program located on campus. Copies of the flyer were also posted in public places throughout campus to recruit participants. All participants who completed both the survey and the face-to-face interview had the opportunity to be randomly selected for one of two \$10.00 gift cards.

### **Demographics of Sample**

The sample size for the research study was 27. The age range for the participants was between 22 and 50 years. The mean age was 33.37 years ( $SD=9.75$ ) yet the largest group of participants were 25 years old or younger ( $n=8$ , 29.6%), which is classified as traditional-aged college students. A majority of the participants were seniors in college ( $n=16$ , 61.5%), whereas some identified as juniors ( $n=8$ , 30.8%) and others as sophomores ( $n=2$ , 7.7%). None of the student mothers identified as first-year students. Most participants identified as Caucasian ( $n=23$ ) and only two named Hispanic ethnicity. The mean cumulative GPA for participants ( $n=23$ ) was 3.22 ( $SD=0.47$ ) on a four-point scale. The range for cumulative GPA was between 2.36 and 3.9.

Forty-eight percent ( $n=13$ ) of participants identified being pregnant while in college with 69% of pregnant college mothers indicating the pregnancy was unplanned. Over half of the participants ( $n=16$ , 61.5%) in the study were married. The mean number of children per participant was 1.93 ( $SD=1.14$ ). The mean age of the children was 10.83 ( $SD=8.99$ ).

### **Instruments**

Demographic information and basic information surrounding child care were gathered via SurveyMonkey. IBM SPSS

Statistics, version 23 (IBM 2015) was used to run frequencies on survey data. All mothers who completed the online survey before the end of the Fall Semester, who consented to being contacted for a face-to-face interview and who had at least one child age 10 or younger, were contacted. Mothers who had at least one child age 10 or younger were invited for a face-to-face interview because child care was more likely to be an area of concern for these mothers as opposed to mothers of older children. Of the 16 participants contacted, 11 mothers engaged in the interview process. Table 1 provides demographic characteristics of the sampled population. Interview participants gave informed consent prior to the interview. The interview protocol and survey questions are provided in the Table 2.

The primary instrument of this research study was the semi-structured interview. The interview questions were open-ended, focusing on forms of support and barriers in pursuing education. The interviews occurred on campus in a private space at a time that was convenient for the first author and the college mother. Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed verbatim into text by the first author. The second author then listened to the recording while reading the transcript and corrected any inconsistencies discovered between the voice and the written transcription before analysis.

Themed analysis was conducted using qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, version 10 (QSR International 2012). Codes and themes were created by reading line-by-line of each transcript during the open coding phase with simultaneous coding (Saldaña 2009) employed, which permitted more than one code to be applied to the same data. The first author coded transcripts with the second author reviewing concepts and codes. Then in a team approach, themes were developed from the codes and its dimensions

(Saldaña 2011). The team met regularly during data analysis and discussed concepts until consensus was reached when discrepancies occurred.

## Results

### Protective Factors

#### Self-Efficacy

Participants “always” (n=8, 33.3%) or “mostly” (n=13, 54.2%) experienced feelings of self-efficacy in their abilities to successfully complete college as a student mother; whereas, only a few participants “sometimes” (n=3, 12.5%) experienced feelings of self-efficacy. None of the participants reported “rarely” or “never” experiencing feelings of self-efficacy as a student mother.

Participants identified several attributes that had helped them to be successful in college. These included confidence, determination, the ability to multitask, being realistic and goal-driven, and maintaining positivity. Beth, a 34-year-old married woman, reported that she is “much more dedicated since I have had my children to [do] this.” Having children has served as a source of strength and has helped mothers to be more determined to graduate from college.

### Motivation for Attending College

There were four types of motivators identified for attending college. The majority of participants’ (n=11, 42.3%) primary motivator to attend college was to improve their economic conditions, which included financial security and

**Table 1** Descriptors for demographic characteristics in the college mothers interviewed (N=11)

Student mother aliases	Race/age	Age of children	Relationship status	Class standing
Abby	Caucasian, 23	10m	Separated	Senior
Beth	Caucasian, 35	7y; 5y	Married	Senior
Gretchen	Caucasian, 34	5y; 3y	Married	Senior
Julie	Caucasian, 33	8y; 4y	Married	Junior
Linda	Caucasian, 34	4y; 1y	Single	Junior
Lisa	Caucasian, 34	1y	Married	Senior
Mary	Caucasian, 24	Pregnant	Single	Junior
Sarah	Caucasian, 26	4y; 6m	Married	Junior
Sharon	Caucasian, 35	12y; 10y	Remarried	Senior
Susan	Caucasian, 41	17y; 9y; 7y; 5y	Married	Senior
Taylor	Caucasian, 23	1y	Engaged	Senior

m = months

y = years

**Table 2** Survey questions & interview protocol

Demographics	Educational Information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age</li> <li>• Race</li> <li>• Ethnicity</li> <li>• Marital Status</li> <li>• Living arrangement</li> <li>• At least one child</li> <li>• Number of children</li> <li>• Age of children</li> <li>• Children live with you</li> <li>• Disability or major illness of children</li> <li>• Pregnant in college</li> <li>• Start college after having children</li> <li>• Planned pregnancy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enrolled in undergraduate program</li> <li>• College attended</li> <li>• College start date</li> <li>• Class Standing</li> <li>• Expected graduation date</li> <li>• Enrollment status</li> <li>• Major</li> <li>• GPA</li> <li>• Motivators</li> <li>• Barriers</li> <li>• Time off in education</li> <li>• Club involvement</li> <li>• Professors' level of understanding</li> <li>• Accommodation by peers</li> </ul>
<p>Childcare/Financial</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reliable childcare</li> <li>• Missed class</li> <li>• Childcare services offered by college</li> <li>• Source of childcare</li> <li>• Paying for childcare</li> <li>• Public assistance</li> <li>• Employment outside of home</li> </ul>	<p>Other</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Withdrawn from course</li> <li>• Support</li> <li>• Provider of support</li> <li>• Feelings of discrimination</li> <li>• Services offered at college to support mothers</li> <li>• Self-efficacy</li> <li>• Willing to be contacted for interview</li> </ul>
<p>Interview</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does having support as a student mother mean to you?</li> <li>• What motivates you to stay in college?</li> <li>• What are barriers that make it challenging to stay in college?</li> <li>• How do you feel that your experience differs from other, non-parent college students?</li> <li>• What are your interactions like with faculty?</li> <li>• What are your interactions like with peers?</li> <li>• Have you had any experiences with discrimination because you were a mother?</li> <li>• What services does your college offer to support mothers?</li> <li>• What could your college do to make your experiences as a student mother better?</li> </ul>	

a higher earning potential. Other participants (n = 9, 34.6%) identified that their main motivator for attending college was career aspirations requiring higher education. Five participants (19.2%) were motivated to enroll in college to set a good example for their children and one participant (3.8%) was motivated to attend college to obtain respect for self and/or from family members.

Participants identified both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to be important protective factors in their pursuit of educational goals and identified wanting to be able to support their family financially, having an equal resumé when compared to a significant other and pursuing another career after completing a military commitment. Most mothers identified being motivated by their children. For example, Abby, a 23-year-old mother of an infant and separated from her husband stated:

I want to have a better life for my daughter and so I want her to be able to look at me and be like, she can do this and like she did that and that she can, that she'll be able to do anything, like anything is possible.

**Support**

Social/emotional forms of support were viewed by student mothers to be more important in their educational pursuits (n = 13, 54.2%) than financial support (n = 11, 45.8%). Most participants (n = 19, 79.1%) reported that family members, which included a parent, a spouse/partner or the child's father, provided the most significant social or emotional support compared to non-family members, which allowed participants to better balance their role of student and mother. Not only was social/emotional forms of support important to student mothers from family members, but participants identified that in individual interactions with professors, faculty were mostly or always (n = 24, 96%) understanding toward students who were mothers. This level of understanding extended by faculty members can help create a climate of inclusion on college campuses.

Support was the most prevalent protective factor and came in the form of emotional support, financial support and help with watching children. Emotional support from friends, family and other mothers proved to be important. Other people provided this form of support to college

mothers by using encouraging words, such as “you are doing a great job.” Abby also stated:

My mom and best friend, like they just never lost confidence in me. You know, I think a lot of the people that I knew kind of, as soon as I was pregnant, didn’t think I was going to finish school. But like, you know, I have a couple people in my life who just like, always knew that I was going to finish and they never once acted like it was even an option that I would stop going.

This example shows how despite becoming a mother in college, the emotional support instilled confidence in the participant to complete her degree.

### *Financial*

Financial support served as another protective factor. Five participants noted that their significant others provided financial support that covered living expenses. Twenty-three-year-old Taylor, a mom of a toddler, stated that “I did not have to work while I was in school so my fiancé kind of supported me.” Other women noted that they received military benefits from their own service or dependent benefits. Two participants noted that they lived with their parents, which allowed them to save money.

### *Help with Watching Children*

Help with watching children served as another protective factor. This included significant others, parents, or in-laws watching the children while the mother goes to class or to study. Abby stated that “My mom is helping me out a lot with childcare. She watches the baby when I go to classes and I really appreciate that.” Julie, a mom of two noted that a half-day, 3 days-a-week preschool program provided a window of time for her to attend class. These findings show that family members help participants balance their role as a student and mother by watching their children so the participants could attend class.

## **Risk Factors**

This section outlines different risk factors that student mothers experience. Over half of the mothers ( $n=15$ , 57.7%) identified that a lack of financial resources was the primary barrier to attending college whereas other participants identified a lack of childcare ( $n=6$ , 23.1%) or a lack of social or emotional support ( $n=5$ , 19.2%) as their most significant barrier.

## **Lack of Financial Resources**

A lack of financial resources was a main theme among participants. Those participants who were married, felt that their spouses had taken on more of the financial burden in the family. Sharon, a remarried woman with a 10 and 12-year-old, stated that: “It’s been a lot of extra pressure on him to be able to financially support our family.” Though general financial strain on the family was mentioned, difficulty paying for childcare so student mothers could attend college was more prevalent across mothers of all ages and marital statuses. For example, Lisa, a married mother of a toddler in her mid-30s, stated that because of the State budget impasse,

The [state-sponsored] loan money didn’t come through and that made it almost impossible to pay for my daughter’s daycare. And I really need that in order to have time to do homework because he’s at work all the time so that means I’m taking care of her if she’s not in daycare.

Gretchen, a married woman with two young children, described her financial pressures by stating that “With my loans, I would take as much as I possibly could because I needed to pay for child care because my husband does not make very much money to support all of us and then childcare.”

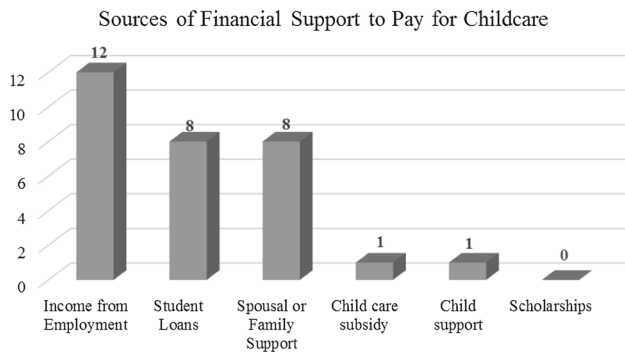
Figure 1 outlines different ways that student mothers paid for childcare. This chart displays that women used school loans to pay for childcare, took out private loans to pay for their education, worked full-time or part-time, or received financial support from their family to pay for childcare. Only one mother identified being a recipient of a governmental child care subsidy and no mothers identified scholarship money that they received to cover childcare expenses.

## **Lack of Reliable Childcare**

It was found that a lack of child care served as a risk factor. Two participants explained that reliable childcare was difficult to find while they attended classes. Abby again, stated that:

I missed a couple of classes last semester just because either my significant other just couldn’t watch her or my parents were away. My sister switched to day-shift so the people I would like go to originally just couldn’t do it; and, all my friends are in school, too.

Four additional women identified that barriers to child care are due to the expense of it. The researcher asked participants if their college offered child care support for student mothers. Gretchen shared that “I mean, there is



**Fig. 1** Sources of financial support student mothers used to pay for childcare. Some participants marked more than one answer while others indicated they did not need or pay for childcare

daycare, but it's obviously at a full price so it's expensive." Abby stated that the child care center on campus was "not in my price range as a student." Gretchen shared that her two young children had previously been enrolled at the campus's childcare center, but it "was just so expensive." She had been paying nearly \$2000 per month for childcare when her children were attending the center.

### Stigma

Nearly a third of participants ( $n=7$ , 29.2%), identified that they felt discriminated against on campus as a student mother. Student mothers also identified feelings of judgment and stigma, but only while pregnant. These feelings were perceived and none of the participants identified that any negative actions were taken against them. This finding was evident among mothers of all ages and marital statuses. One group of findings were related to peers' perceptions of student mothers' marital status. For example, Sarah, a married woman in her mid-twenties, stated that when she was pregnant, she felt that some people on campus were thinking "oh my gosh, she's pregnant." The participant felt like "people did not really know her whole story" implying that her pregnancy was acceptable because she was married and had planned her pregnancy. Linda, a mother of two, stated that when she was pregnant, she was unsure of how others would react because she was pregnant and unmarried. To avoid the possibility of judgment, she "wore kind of bigger sweaters."

A second finding was connected to parenting and gender roles. Mary, an unmarried, 24-year-old expectant mother, stated that:

It's kind of like a stigma on campus, like you wouldn't, you don't think that expecting mothers would still be going to college or that moms are supposed to go to college. They're supposed to stay home with the kids and things like that.

Other participant comments connected to stigma included perceiving that peers gave them "weird looks" and that judgments were made about being a mother in college. These findings connected to the gender role theory in that mothers are not expected to be college students, but at home caring for the children.

Susan, a married 41-year old mother of four, described the correlation between her age and her pursuit of higher education. She felt that other students thought that she should have pursued school earlier and that "she would have been more successful because she didn't have all this stuff" (by stuff, the participant was referring to children and family responsibilities). Again, Susan's experience shows the conflict experienced when she stepped outside of her prescribed gender role of mother.

### Role Conflict

It was also discovered that feelings associated with role conflict were experienced when student mothers had to leave their children and attend class. Abby stated that "there's also kind of that guilt in there too like feeling like I'm leaving and I should be at home." In addition to the feelings of guilt when leaving their child at home, Taylor described feeling conflicted between neglecting her child and neglecting her schoolwork. She stated that:

I felt like I was being neglectful, if I wasn't spending as much time as I could have with her. And then other times I was feeling like I was neglectful toward my school because I like wasn't spending nearly as much time on that so like I do know that a lot of my assignments I didn't give my best efforts because I was torn between wanting to be a great mom and wanting to be a good student and trying to find the balance in between.

Additionally, participants identified time management as a component of role conflict. Participants described this time management as difficulty in balancing both the role of mother and student and also finding time to complete assignments. Linda reported that "my time is dedicated to them one-hundred percent. I can't just say, hey give me an hour to study." Beth identified time management as her "biggest barrier throughout college."

### Organizational Program Services

The organizational program services below were selected based on the protective and risk factors described by participants. By providing access to affordable, reliable childcare



and a network of on-campus support, protective factors will be increased and risk factors diminished, leading to better college experiences for student mothers.

### Perceived Campus Services Offered

Nearly all participants ( $n=20$ , 90.9%) perceived that the university as a whole does not offer support to student mothers. The few campus services that participants did identify were not as beneficial to student mothers as they could be because they were not tailored directly toward the needs of student mothers nor accessible in terms of affordability. None of the participants were made aware of services through a formalized structure in place at the university, but by word-of-mouth, seeing a service or knowing about it from their academic major. The perceived campus services offered included campus childcare through the family center (it was viewed as too expensive by most participants), the counseling center, and access to the elevator key in buildings with restricted access and temporary handicap parking permit for pregnant female students (only two students knew about this resource).

### Campus Services Needed

Participants identified services the University should offer to support student mothers including nursing rooms, alternative class options, such as online work or being able to Skype into a class, transportation and an information pamphlet provided to all student mothers on resources available. However, overwhelmingly, the two most identified campus services needed were access to childcare and a support group for mothers.

### Access to Childcare

Participants identified access to affordable and high quality childcare as a needed service. More specifically, this access was identified as a need for drop-in care, evening care, and access to affordable all day care. Regarding drop-in daycare, Linda shared that:

It would be nice to have a daycare system where I could drop them off for a couple of hours and have just that quiet study time so I don't have to sit up until midnight or longer to study.

Sharon, whose children were enrolled in elementary and middle school, identified the need for after-school care because her classes were during late afternoon hours. Another participant pondered the possibility of

groups of students providing child care so mothers could study.

Only one mother in this study identified having her daughter enrolled in the campus daycare center, but she felt frustrated that the center was not more accommodating to the student academic calendar. Lisa explained.

I couldn't take her out um for this break (the interview occurred during the month-long Winter Break). I could just save money, take her out of there and then put her back in for the Spring semester. But they said "no." I mean you can, but you'll lose your place. Someone else might jump in front of you and you might not get [back] in so I'll just not do that then. I'm just going to keep her in daycare.

### Mutual Aid Social Group

Student mothers also expressed the need for a mutual aid support group. Participants identified a need for an informal setting where mothers could meet monthly and share information, gain support from other students who are mothers, make connections with other parents and bring their children together for different activities. Taylor identified how she felt when she met another student mother on campus by stating that "when I got to meet another mother on campus I got to add her to my support system and I feel like that was really helpful to me." This example showed that being able to connect with another student mother offered the opportunity for the sharing of information and the realization that she was not alone.

Abby also identified the need for a support group, especially one for those student mothers of traditional age. She stated that "We're kind of in this weird spot. Where like, like there's a nontraditional student network. And we're like not quite part of that. But our college experience is really rather nontraditional."

### Discussion

In this study, the researchers were guided by the overarching research question of "How do the protective and risk factors impact the experiences of mothers in college?" The data analysis pointed to the most prevalent risk factor being a lack of financial resources while emotional and social support were the most important protective factors. More specifically, child care, largely due to the expense of it, was a risk factor, showing that a lack of financial resources prevented student mothers from accessing high quality child care services; and thereby, placing college mothers at risk

for college attrition. Limited childcare networks left college mothers with unreliable childcare options leading to missed classes, calling off from work or an internship, and even withdrawing from courses.

The results of the study connect to the theoretical perspectives of social capital theory introduced in the literature review in several ways. First, Dewey (2004) found that social capital is built by connecting to others in meaningful ways (as cited in Plagens 2011). Participants in the study noted the desire of wanting a mutual aid support group to be able to connect with other mothers, especially since most participants identified knowing very few, if any, other student mothers on their campus. Second, Alfred and Nanton (2009) noted the women are able to learn from their own experiences and the experiences of other women in a network, thus pointing again to the importance of creating a mutual aid group where women can access these networks and share experiences.

Gender role theory was also evident throughout the study. Participants identified feeling neglectful and guilty when they took time away from their role as a mother for their academic pursuits because women are socialized to be the primary caregiver of children. The study also pointed to feelings of stigma perceived by those who did not fit into the stereotype of a good mother, specifically by those participants who were pregnant and unmarried in college (Estes 2011).

### Policy Implications at the State and Federal Level

#### *Access to Childcare*

Student mothers are often on the cusp off moving out of poverty through attainment of a 4-year degree yet state and federal public policy is needed to provide temporary subsidies and grants for student parents. This is particularly relevant to public universities that are more likely restricted by funding sources. The policy implications gathered from this study include providing more substantial childcare subsidies for campus centers. This would allow for student mothers to have access to affordable, high-quality child care in order to better balance the role of student and mother. For example, at the state level, student mothers' success in college can be enhanced by amending the eligibility requirements in the current child care subsidy programs. In examining the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, part of the eligibility requirements is that a recipient must work, defined as paid employment, a minimum of 10 h a week in addition to attending an educational program 10 h a week (Pennsylvania Department of Human Services 2016).

However, this requirement can be difficult for student parents to fulfill, especially for those in majors that require full-time field practicums. For example, for students in

an accredited Bachelor of Social Work Program, they are required to complete a minimum 400 h internship (Council on Social Work Education 2015) before conferring of degree. Many social work programs require these hours to be completed in the students' last semester and social work internship placements are most often unpaid. In spite of completing a 32 h a week internship and attending at least one university course that fulfills educational requirements, it does not count as work under the childcare subsidy requirement and therefore, the 10 h a week paid work requirement for the childcare subsidy is not satisfied. The policy change recommendation for the child care subsidy program would be for full-time internships, regardless if they are unpaid, to fulfill the work requirement for two academic semesters.

There are also implications at the federal level that can have a direct impact on states. For example, The Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools (CCAMPIS) Act, which is part of the Higher Education Act of 1965, is a federal program that provides 4-year grants to colleges and universities to establish or expand upon campus-based child care services. This includes both full-day care and before/after care for school-aged children. In order for an institution to qualify for a CCAMPIS grant, the amount of Pell Grants awarded to students at the institution the previous year must be at least \$350,000. In 2016, 85 college and universities were recipients of CCAMPIS funds and the average award was \$175,000 (United States Department of Education 2016).

The amount of the appropriations for CCAMPIS funds peaked in 2001 at \$25,000,000. Unfortunately, since 2005, when appropriations decreased to roughly \$15 million, funds have remained stagnant despite the increase in student parents (United States Department of Education 2015). In March of 2016, Massachusetts Congresswoman Katharine Clark, and Illinois Congresswoman Tammy Duckworth introduced the Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools (CCAMPIS) Improvement Act of 2016, which would amend the Higher Education Act of 1965, providing greater support to students with dependents by permanently allotting \$67 million to CCAMPIS funds (Nichols 2016). The passing of this act would allow for more funding, greater stability in funding and increased access for student parents.

### University Level Implications

#### Collecting Data

In addition to the policy changes at the state and federal levels, there are changes that universities can make to better address the needs of student mothers. First, it is

recommended that data be collected on student mothers as they enroll in college. Obviously, institutions must protect student data and comply with federal and state protections. Therefore, collecting data on student parents should be voluntary and adhere to universities' data management protocol. Collecting data on the number of parents attending higher education is likely to help justify universities being a recipient of the funds coming from CCAMPIS. Even if a university is not eligible to receive CCAMPIS funding, collecting basic data on student mothers can enable institutions to develop or tailor existing programs to meet the needs of this invisible population. Data collection is critical and financially prudent to any program development initiatives. Collecting data pertaining to parenthood also allows for systemized future research on college parents across the nation .

### Mutual Aid Support Group

Another recommendation is to provide a mutual aid support group for student mothers since emotional and social support was identified as the most important factor in a mother's educational pursuits. A mutual aid support group focuses on people helping each other. There are several dynamics of mutual aid support groups that could be beneficial to student mothers including the sharing of data, discussing taboos, mutual support, individual problem-solving and the camaraderie from all in the same boat dynamic (Shulman 2012).

Sharing data allows mothers to share knowledge regarding their experiences as a mother on or off campus and offer different resources that they had accessed including financial literacy resources. For example, during an interview, Sarah shared that "having support from other people who kind of know your struggles would be beneficial." A forum to discuss taboo topics is also a benefit of a mutual aid support group. Several participants identified that as a pregnant student, they experienced stigma and judgment. A mutual aid support group encourages mothers to use their experience to problem solve with others, obtain emotional/social support and feel that they are not the only student mother on campus.

### Resource Center

Another implication of this research is the need for parent resource centers on campus. A resource center can provide information on subjects such as childcare, scholarships for student mothers, Title IX protections, such as pregnant and parenting rights and increasing financial capability. It was found that having access to financial education and engaging in financial services, can increase one's financial capability (Sherraden et al. 2011). Resource centers also provide

physical space for lactation rooms (including a refrigerator for milk storage), changing tables and lounges where mothers can hold mutual aid support group meetings and events for their children. Resource centers are particularly important for mothers who become pregnant after they start college in efforts to retain these students through graduation.

### Campus Timebanking

Another recommendation would be for the creation of a campus timebank, a concept allowing for the swapping of skills and time as opposed to money. Members involved in a timebank, earn one time credit for an hour of service that he or she provided to another member. That earned time credit can then be used to "pay for" a needed or wanted service offered through the timebank (TimeBanks n.d.). A study on the use of timebanking found that participants identified timebanking as a means to developing close friendships, getting to know more people and making their community a better place (Seyfang 2003).

The development of a campus time bank could allow for student mothers to not only access necessary services specific to them, like child care, but could offer an opportunity to bridge social capital. By bridging social capital, student mothers would no longer be viewed as an invisible population, but rather as an asset to the campus community.

### Suggestions for Future Research and Limitations

There were a few limitations to this research study. For one, the sample was homogenous when it came to race and ethnicity with approximately 92% of the survey participants identifying as non-Hispanic Caucasian. Yet when it came to accepting an invitation for the face-to-face qualitative interview, only Caucasian students accepted the invitation to interview. The percentage of sampled Caucasian participants is higher than the Caucasian population in the university's general student population, which is 77.9% (Engle 2015). While this study did not examine components to structural racism, the possible implications of structural inequities may include reduced feelings of belongingness at a predominantly Caucasian institution. Student mothers of color may be more likely to leave the university when pregnancy occurs or not return to college after giving birth.

Suggestions for future research on the topic include obtaining a larger sample size and use of comparison group; this would allow for more advanced statistical analysis and generalizable outcomes. It would also be beneficial to conduct research on student mothers who dropped out of college to understand how parenthood may have contributed to attrition. In examining the attrition of student parents from

higher education, it is imperative to further examine organization factors that lead to attrition. Future studies comparing the experiences of student mothers enrolled in “women with children programs” to universities without specialized programs are warranted. With the expansion of access to on-line programs, mothers may be navigating to this format of instruction. Therefore, there is research potential in exploring whether web-based educational endeavors buffer mothers from risks of college attrition associated with motherhood. Finally, future research on college parents must explore the needs of student fathers as approximately 1.4 million fathers are enrolled in an undergraduate program (Institute for Women’s Policy Research 2014).

## Conclusion

The interest in this topic came from the personal experience of the first author, who as a traditional-aged undergraduate college student, became a mother during her junior year. The author met other student mothers who experienced great difficulty despite appearing to have financial resources, which was found in the literature review to be important for mothers in college. By providing both financial and social/emotional resources for student mothers, the invisible village on college campuses and across the United States will cease to exist, leading to experiences of empowerment and self-sufficiency for mothers.

**Acknowledgements** The study was funded by a Graduate Research Grant (GR2015/16-09) through the Institute for Public Service at Shippensburg University.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

## References

- Alfred, M. V., & Nanton, C. R. (2009). Survival of the supported: Social capital and the finish line. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2009(122), 83–93. doi:10.1002/ace.
- Arastaman, G., & Balci, A. (2013). Investigation of high school students’ resiliency perception in terms of some variables. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice*, 13(2), 922–928.
- Bhatia, P. (2014). Mind over matter: Contributing factors of self-efficacy in Montessori teachers. *National Teacher Education Journal*, 7(3), 45–52.
- Brown, R., & Amankwaa, A. (2007). College females as mothers: Balancing the roles of student and motherhood. *ABNF Journal*, 18(1), 25–29.
- Council on Social Work Education (2015). *Educational policy and accreditation standards for baccalaureate and master’s social work programs*. Retrieved from <http://www.csw.org/File.aspx?id=81660>.
- Duquaine-Watson, J. M. (2007). “Pretty darned cold”: Single mother students and the community college climate in post-welfare reform America. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 40(3), 229–240. doi:10.1080/10665680701334785.
- Easterbrooks, M. A., Chaudhuri, J. H., Bartlett, J. D., & Copeman, A. (2011). Resilience in parenting among young mothers: Family and ecological risks and opportunities. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(1), 42–50. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.08.010.
- Engle, S. (2015). Common data set. Retrieved from [http://www.ship.edu/uploadedFiles/Ship/Institutional\\_Research/CDS\\_2015-2016\(1\).pdf](http://www.ship.edu/uploadedFiles/Ship/Institutional_Research/CDS_2015-2016(1).pdf)
- Estes, D. K. (2011). Managing the student-parent dilemma: Mothers and fathers in higher education. *Symbolic Interaction*, 34(2), 198–219. doi:10.1525/si.2011.34.2.198.
- Gizir, C. A., & Aydin, G. (2009). Protective factors contributing to the academic resilience of students living in poverty in Turkey. *Professional School Counseling*, 13(1), 38–49. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42732918>.
- Greyerbiehl, L., & Mitchell, D. J. (2014). An intersectional social capital analysis of the influence of historically Black sororities on African American women’s college experiences at a predominantly White institution. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 7(4), 282–294.
- IBM (2015). *IBM SPSS Statistics 23.0*. Armonk, NY: IBM Corporation.
- Institute for Women’s Research (2014). *Fact sheet*. Retrieved from <https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/college-students-raising-children.pdf>.
- Jensen, D. H., & Jetten, J. (2015). Bridging and bonding interactions in higher education: Social capital and students’ academic and professional identity formation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6, 126. <http://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00126>.
- Jenson, J. M., & Fraser, M. W. (2011). *Social policy for children and families: A risk and resilience perspective* (2nd edn.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Katz, S. (2013). “Give us a chance to get an education:” Single mothers’ survival narratives and strategies for pursuing higher education on welfare. *Journal of Poverty*, 17(3), 273–304. doi:10.1080/10875549.2013.804477.
- Lashley, M. M., & Ollivierre, L. (2014). Exploring the linkages of single black mothers and their college experiences. *Global Education Journal*, 2014(3), 138–155.
- Mahaffey, B. A., Hungerford, G., & Sill, S. (2015). College student mother needs at regional campuses: An exploratory study. *AURCO Journal*, 21, 105–115. Retrieved from [http://aurco.net/Journals/AURCO\\_Journal\\_2015/Mahaffey.pdf](http://aurco.net/Journals/AURCO_Journal_2015/Mahaffey.pdf).
- Morrison, G. M., Brown, M., D’Incau, B., O’Farrell, S. L., & Furlong, M. J. (2006). Understanding resilience in educational trajectories: Implications for protective possibilities. *Psychology in Schools*, 43(1), 19–31. doi:10.1002/pits.20126.
- Mottarella, K., Fritzsche, B., Whitten, S., & Bedsole, D. (2009). Exploration of “good mother” stereotypes in the college environment. *Sex Roles*, 60(3–4), 223–231. doi:10.1007/s11199-008-9519-y.

- Nichols, J. (2016). *Congresswomen introduce campus child care legislation*. Retrieved from <http://usa.childcareaware.org/2016/03/congresswomen-introduce-campus-child-care-legislation/>.
- Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (2016). *Child care works subsidized child care program*. Retrieved from <http://www.dhs.pa.gov/citizens/childcareearlylearning/childcareworkssubsidizedchildcareprogram/>.
- Plagens, G. P. (2011). Social capital and education: Implications for student and school performance. *Education & Culture*, 27(1), 40–64.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc.
- QSR International. (2012). *NVIVO version 10*. Burlington, MA: QSR International (America's) Pty Ltd.
- Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Saldaña, J. (2011). *Fundamentals of qualitative research*. New York: Oxford.
- Seyfang, G. (2003). Growing cohesive communities one favour at a time: Social exclusion, active citizenship and time banks. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27(3), 699–706.
- Sherraden, M. S., Johnson, L., Guo, B., & Elliott, W. (2011). Financial capability in children: Effects of participation in a school-based education and savings program. *Journal of Family & Economic Issues*, 32(3), 385–399. doi:10.1007/s10834-010-9220-5.
- Shulman, L. (2012). *The skills of helping individuals, families, groups and communities* (7th edn.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Solivan, A. E., Wallace, M. E., Kaplan, K. C., & Harville, E. W. (2015). Use of a resiliency framework to examine pregnancy and birth outcomes among adolescents: A qualitative study. *Families, Systems & Health: The Journal of Collaborative Family Health-care*, 33(4), 349–355. doi:10.1037/fsh0000141.
- Soria, K. K., & Stebleton, M. J. (2013). Social capital, academic engagement, and a sense of belonging among working-class college students. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 31(2), 139–153.
- TimeBanks USA (n.d.). *Timebanking basics*. Retrieved from <http://timebanks.org/timebankingabout/>.
- United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014). *Educational attainment and earnings of women*. Retrieved from [http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2014/ted\\_20140603.htm](http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2014/ted_20140603.htm).
- United States Census Bureau (2015). *Income and poverty in the United States; 2014*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p60-252.pdf>.
- United States Department of Education (2015). *Funding status*. Retrieved on from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/campisp/funding.html>.
- United States Department of Education (2016). *Fiscal year 2017 budget request*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget17/justifications/r-highered.pdf>.
- Vandsburger, E., Harrigan, M., & Biggerstaff, M. (2008). In spite of all, we make it: Themes of stress and resiliency as told by women in families living in poverty. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 11(1), 17–35. doi:10.1080/10522150802007303.
- Wilson, K. (2011). If not welfare, then what?: How single mothers finance college post-welfare reform. *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, 38(4), 51–76. Retrieved from <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol38/iss4/4>.

**Courtney Kensinger**, MSW, LSW, Assistant Circles Coordinator of Support Circles Initiative of South Central Community Action Program, Franklin County, PA. MSW received from Shippensburg University. In addition to building a research agenda on parenting while in college, Courtney works to bridge social capital between low income families and community leaders. She regularly facilitates social group work and recently developed a middle and high school youth group to increase self-confidence in creating their future story.

**Dorlisa J. Minnick**, Ph.D., MSW, Assistant Professor of Social Work & Gerontology, Shippensburg University, PA. PhD received from The Catholic University of America. Dorlisa is passionate about a wide range of issues pertaining to women. In addition to having practice experience in housing, domestic violence, and student affairs, Dorlisa has led research on child welfare responses to sex trafficking. She has published on teen pregnancy, college student stress, empowering women through community organizing, and anti-sex trafficking policy.